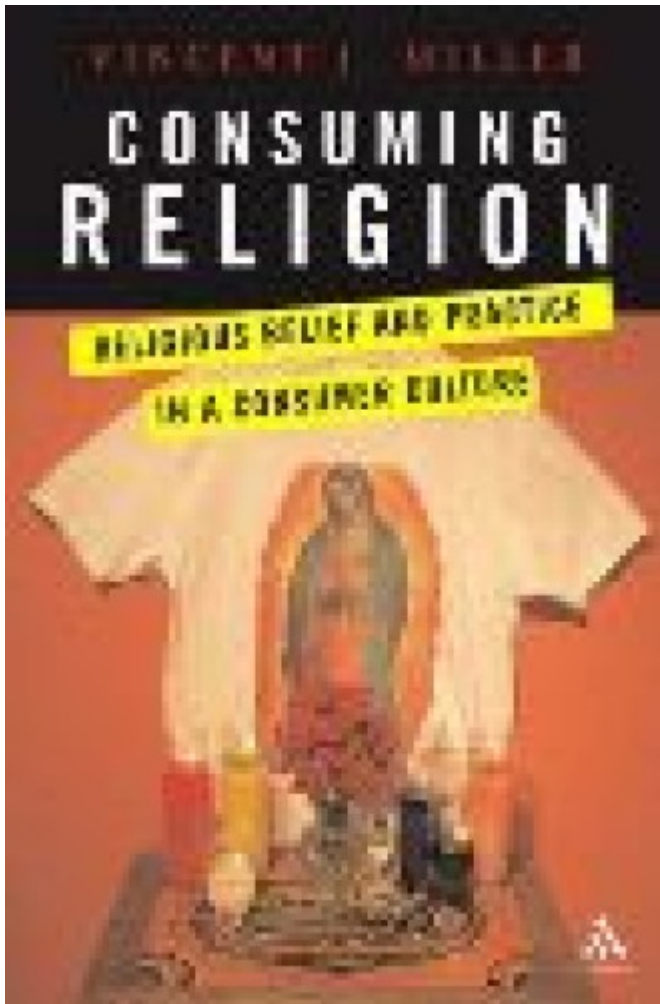


Store-bought faith

By [Lloyd H. Steffen](#) in the [September 21, 2004](#) issue

In Review



Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture

Vincent J. Miller
Continuum



Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are with What We Buy

Tom Beaudoin
Sheed & Ward

Two books exploring the dynamics of consumerism in the context of Christian faith are enlivening the marketplace of ideas. In an accessible style sure to have wide appeal, Tom Beaudoin argues for an economic spirituality. Vincent J. Miller's thicker analysis invokes social theorists like Guy Dubord, Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau to contend that commodification is so pervasive it has co-opted even the products of religion. He thus provokes theological questions about the effect of consumption on religion's ability to inform a way of life.

Both books focus on the theological implications of consumer behavior, exploring how the dynamics of consumption affect identity, the meaning of faith and the practice of religion. Beaudoin and Miller are young Roman Catholic theologians, hip

and eager to engage popular culture (be it hip-hop music or the youthful attachment to brands); both approach the realities of consumer behavior critically, yet without self-righteous moralizing. Their books do far more than merely confront the destructive side of globalization and decry the deleterious effects of consumerism. Each articulates the spiritual quest that inevitably manifests itself in consumer cultures, and uses consumer behaviors and the culture of consumption to explicate our contemporary religious situation. Both put consumerism on the theological agenda and try to help people of faith adopt consumer behaviors that sponsor faithful religious practices.

Beaudoin, a bass guitarist in a Boston-area rock band as well as a theologian, previously wrote *Virtual Faith*, a theological appreciation of material culture. The genesis of his present attempt to develop an economic spirituality lies in a question put to him after a talk. He had been speaking about the role of popular culture in the spiritual lives of young people when someone asked him what part advertising and the economic dynamics that drive popular culture play in those spiritual lives. Beaudoin began to consider the connection between pop culture and economics and settled on the topic at the center of *Consuming Faith*: the phenomenon of corporate product “branding.”

Beaudoin argues that branding plays a spiritually significant role in young lives, providing the ordering functions and the identity-producing, loyalty-eliciting behaviors that once flourished in traditional spiritual disciplines. His investigation of the economics-spirituality connection reclaims past traditions. A marvelous interpretation of Jesus’ parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus is one of the highlights of his book, as is a reconsideration of St. Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises*. Through such interpretations, Beaudoin helps us to understand how the modern economy shapes our imaginations and elicits our commitments. He traces the economic realities of global product development through uncovering the history of his favorite brand of shoes. That history reveals our hidden connection “to powers and peoples we did not create and without whom we cannot live.”

Beaudoin compares corporate branding to a spiritual discipline that commands a worldview. He focuses attention on the body as a locus for branding, and calls not only for spiritual resistance to the depreciation of the faraway bodies expended in the production of consumables, but for an effort to “love those who make our branded goods.” He challenges individuals and church communities to engage in practices that attend to the spiritual dimension of economic realities—such practices

as media fests and a discernment process for making everyday economic decisions. An economic spirituality, he argues, will lead us to a more balanced and humble economic life, while encouraging us to build solidarity with those hidden and exploited in the production of consumer goods. Beaudoin calls on Christians to question the details of production, asking where products come from, who has made them, under what conditions they were made and whether those who produced them were fairly paid.

Miller, a theology professor at Georgetown, explores the deep cultural dynamics of a consumer culture formed around commodification. Applied to religion, commodification—the process of objectifying products for exchange—points to the way beliefs and practices are abstracted from traditional contexts, thus weakening their ability to “impact the concrete practice of life.” In a wide-ranging discussion that draws on Karl Marx and Karl Rahner, cultural analysts Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard and musicians Moby and Madonna, Miller offers a critical analysis of consumer culture, not in order to condemn it as spiritually vacuous, but to discern possibilities for spiritual transformation.

His central concern, the disconnection between belief and practice, makes him sympathize with people who struggle with the spiritual paradox of consumerism: that people of faith can intend to act in ways not subservient to consumer domination, yet not follow through. The issue, more simply, is hypocrisy—and how to avoid it. Miller asks how affluent religious people can immerse themselves in consumer culture, yet also take seriously the demands of a religious life that stands against injustice and cares for the poor and exploited.

Excessive consumption arises from the dynamics of commodification, Miller argues, which sponsors the quest for the new and exotic. His analysis of the single family home is insightful, as is his take on modern spirituality, which he interprets as the extracting of symbols and beliefs from the cultural contexts and religious traditions that give them coherence. Miller urges us to “connect symbols and values with their contexts” and offers practical suggestions for doing so—from celebrating the pluralism internal to traditions to encouraging active local involvements in religious practice, even if it takes the form of “bad art.” He confronts passive consumption in the religious realm by calling for greater awareness of the effects of commodification. And he urges an active, tactical and transformative engagement with symbols, beliefs and practices in the complexity of their connection to people’s lives in community. Such engagement resists the consumer tendency to resolve

conflicts, problems and even political tensions by opting for even more consumption.

By affirming the potential of religious traditions to subvert the politics of the status quo and hold open a transformative option in contemporary culture, Miller's *Consuming Religion* is not only provocative but hopeful. Both Beaudoin and Miller embrace consumer society as a vital context for contemporary theological reflection and analysis. Their books may play a critical role in helping to shape the theological agenda.