

Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture
by Vincent J. Miller (New York: Continuum, 2003, 208 pp., \$16.47).

Vincent J. Miller's *Consuming Religion* is a densely packed examination of the possibilities for religion in a commercially saturated postmodern world. Miller's central argument that the relationship between religious belief and religious practice is moderated by consumer culture makes his book immediately relevant to consumer behavior and marketing scholars. A person might be forgiven for assuming that such a book would be in the form of a condemnation of consumer culture. However, it is not that kind of book. Rather, Miller is concerned with how religious belief can survive in an advertising-saturated world.

The book is relevant for marketers on several levels. First, it addresses the issue of how people "consume" religious belief and practice. This discussion alone should make the book a compelling read for people, churches, and the industry that supplies the faith "industry" (McKee 2003). Second, and perhaps more important, the book explores the complex interactions between market values and religious values in postmodern culture.

In his critique of the market system, Yale economist Charles Lindblom (2001, p. 206) queries whether "it is prudent and not unethical for the executive to misrepresent what the enterprise offers, to play cynically on customers' emotions, to disparage what other enterprises offer, or to rattle customers' minds with irrelevancies that will attract them." In a similar vein, University of Michigan economist Rebecca Blank (Blank and McGurn 2004) points to an apparent conflict between the market system ethic of self-interest and the Christian ethic of community, other-interest, and concern for the poor.

This point of conflict between the market ethic and Christian ethics has led "a number of influential voices in Christian ethics ... [to] view contemporary economic life as essentially foreign to the faith, an exercise in uncontrolled greed" (Stackhouse 2001, p. 229). Miller's answer is not that work and commerce conflict with Christian ethics but that commercial work is a form of service to others and folds neatly into Christianity and other major religious belief systems.

Miller's argument is that postmodern society "commodifies" culture in a "process in which the habits and disposi-

tions learned in the consumption of literal commodities spread into our relationship to culture" (p. 32). In this post-modern consumer culture, practices that at one time had their own rules and standards (e.g., religion, friendship, art) are instead subsumed under the rules and standards of consumption. This consumption approach to all practices assumes a seed of dissatisfaction with the present and a continuing search for something better.

Miller attributes the consumer culture to several influences, including a capitalist-induced acquisitiveness, advertising, a self-centered therapeutic culture, alienation from work, and isolation of single-family housing. Aggregated supply requires corresponding aggregate demand. Sales and advertising that was initially developed to provide reliable demand and to reduce risk to capital has become institutionalized and accentuated, fostering a cultural trait of acquisitiveness.

Indeed, Miller suggests that consumption of advertising has become a practice in itself. In this view, perusing advertisements involves a regular meditative review in terms of their potential meaning for a person's own life and situational shortcomings. The "'practice of advertising' is every bit as formative of our desires as more traditional religious disciplines and practices such as saying the rosary or sitting in meditation," notes Miller (p. 125). He goes on to argue that this "practice of advertising," with its emphasis on materiality and possession, contributes to social insecurity. Furthermore, by co-opting cultural symbols (e.g., the cross of Christianity, the yin-yang symbol of Taoism), commercial use diminishes the depth of meaning these forms have in their original contexts.

According to Miller, a self-centered therapeutic culture has been created from a variety of movements that fed into consumerism. Outsourcing of production rather than home-crafting products and services reduces consumers to "passive spectators" (p. 60). Drawing on ethicist Peter Sedgwick, Miller argues that consumerism grounds its moral justification in eighteenth-century Romanticism, which emphasizes self-creation and the importance of display for the maintenance of social identity. The result, he claims (p. 85), is "a fragmenting narcissism that transforms everything, including religion, into a self-centered, therapeutic exercise."

Alienation from work, a vestige of Marxist theory, is also rooted in the move from home-crafting products to specialization of labor. The argument is that by engaging in mind-numbing work for hire, people are alienated from their creative capabilities and, instead, seek a sense of iden-

tity in consumption. Moreover, isolation of people into single-family housing could diminish intergenerational influences. Instead of receiving traditions and values handed down from grandparents in the home, children receive their ethical training from television.

According to Miller, this collective ensemble of relatively new cultural factors encourages a shallow engagement with reality. For example, a purchased piece of furniture is not appreciated in terms of its origins. The materials (e.g., the type of trees that produced the wood) and labor (e.g., the skills and time of the worker) receive little consideration. More tellingly, this same shallow engagement is extended in postmodern culture to include people's approach to friendships, civic involvement, and religion.

Instead of being morally committed to a spiritual belief system and community of believers, Miller suggests that "consumers" of religion pick and choose from a menu of spiritual offerings and that a "society where we are so free to choose our adult identities inevitably produces seekers who move from tradition to tradition and lift elements willy-nilly without commitment to the overarching goals of any one tradition" (p. 139). Moreover, after the "buzz of novelty wears off, and we are left with the daily monotony of saying the rosary and sitting in meditation, we move on;... we are trained to seek, search, and choose, but not to follow through" (pp. 141–42).

Miller offers a variety of potential remedies. For example, he suggests developing awareness of the origins of products and the tactics used to sell them, purchasing farm produce grown locally, developing a practice of handcrafts, "sacramentalizing" the profane as a way to experience the sacred in the everyday, setting limits on personal consumption, treating cultural objects seriously (e.g., deciding not to use religious or sacred symbols from other cultures ornamentally), locating in small communities that share the same religious beliefs, and so on.

This book makes a thoughtful contribution to marketing scholars and practitioners. For scholars, it may broaden their perspectives on the discipline, perhaps contributing to improved theory and teaching. Although most people recog-

nize that marketing practice contributes to development and distribution of an ever-expanding array of helpful goods and services, marketing is a professional practice that is responsible for its own improvement. Those who articulate the theory behind the practice and those who also teach (future) practitioners have an ethical responsibility to develop and disseminate information on culturally responsible practice. The book should have particular importance for marketing scholars who are interested in the emerging area of religion and marketing. Best and Kellner's (1991) *Postmodern Theory* is a useful complement to reading Miller's book. Although not necessary to understanding Miller's book, this critically acclaimed book helps organize postmodern theory and clarify its limitations.

For practitioners, *Consuming Religion* may help develop sensitivity to the potential for offending broad communities of believers through misuse of symbols that others hold sacred. Although the book is not light reading, it should offer any reader insights into how consumer culture affects religious faith and practice.

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