

are certainly of interest but point to a mode of argument that is less than promising in terms of the attempt to revive the tradition of natural-law thinking.

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Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture. By **Vincent J. Miller.** New York: Continuum, 2003.
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We are awash in talk about the ethics of consumption. From the “eat local” movement to student activists decrying sweatshop sneakers to organizations such as the Center for a New American Dream and Climate Counts advocating smarter—and generally less—consumption, we are witnessing a profound reexamination of what had been, at least since World War II, a nearly uncontested American truism: buying more stuff is good. Americans have been told, again and again—from Vice President Richard Nixon’s “kitchen debate” with Nikita Khrushchev at the height of the Cold War to President Bush, in the wake of 9/11, encouraging Americans to return to the mall—that consuming not only satisfies private desires (a debatable proposition itself) but also serves a public good. While advertisers continue to find ever more clever ways to insinuate their propaganda into every nook and cranny of our minds, the chorus of voices questioning what historian Lizabeth Cohen calls the “Consumers’ Republic” continues to grow louder. Though far from an equal in this struggle, the anti-consumerist forces are at least now being heard.

And yet, the most disturbing message of Vincent J. Miller’s *Consuming Religion* is the imperviousness of consumerism to dissent. In a society such as ours, Miller tells us, all forms of culture, including ideologies of resistance, become commodified and repackaged as innocuous objects of desire; products embellished with the patina of dissent, in fact, appear all the more desirable for the aura of “cool” this faux resistance provides. (A poster of Che Guevara on a dorm room wall comes to mind.) This observation forms the basis of Miller’s important work. Religion, according to Miller, offers perhaps the most comprehensive alternative to our totalizing ethic of consumerism, and yet religion, too, like all ideological rivals to consumerism, is also easily disarmed through commodification. Indeed, the greatest threat of consumerism for Miller, even more than straightforward material excess and its myriad costs, is the way a consumerist orientation

to things trains us to “engage culture and religion as abstract objects of consumption” (184).

What, then, is to be done? Miller, a Roman Catholic associate professor of theology at Georgetown, draws on his own religious heritage to offer a series of constructive suggestions. His account of contemporary American life is often rather bleak, yet Miller’s Catholic tradition contains the most developed body of Christian thinking on economics and the social order, and he uses these resources to offer both observations and hopeful prescriptions. His most significant observation is to recognize points of contact between Christian faith and consumerist sensibilities, especially on the matter of desire, a deeply Christian and deeply consumerist drive. This similarity, Miller contends, is what allows consumerism so easily to co-opt religious fervor.

Miller’s remedy for the problem of commodified religion is to fight back “on the level of practices and structures rather than meanings and beliefs” since these are too readily dissipated into harmless abstraction (180). Pick an object—a banana or cell phone, say—and research its entire course from raw materials to point of purchase. Or learn a craft and come to appreciate the skill, and the limits, of non-industrial production. Miller links these ways of countering commodity abstraction to the concreteness of Catholic sacramentality, which, as he explains, forges a connection between “the mundane material of a sacramental sign and the theological realities it signifies” (190). Most significantly, Miller calls for “re-embedding” doctrines and practices within communities of faith, not to enhance the power of ecclesial hierarchies but to provide the laity with a richer set of religious building blocks than can be found on the open market of faith. In this way, his account manages to value both tradition and popular religious agency.

Aside from these religious prescriptions, both the greatest strength and greatest weakness of Miller’s account is his extensive reliance on sociological and cultural studies theory. Indeed, the majority of the text concerns the debates of theorists. I can think of few books that offer clearer summaries of major thinkers, from Marx and Gramsci to Lefebvre, Debord, Beaudrillard, and Jameson, on the question of consumer culture. I know I will return to this book when I need a refresher on these theorists; his exposition of de Certeau and Bourdieu on *bricolage* proved particularly helpful. Yet much of the theory, in the end, seems extraneous. In a number of instances, for example, ideas are discussed for pages only to be dismissed ultimately as inadequate to the question at hand. This is fine for an introduction to theory but bothersome in a narrative with its own larger agenda. Nevertheless, from this base in theory, Miller easily moves into an array of concrete examples. We are treated to discussions of the suburban single-family home and the family life it contains; advertising; popular film,

television, and music; the production and transport of food; and church architecture, among many other matters. As a historian, I found these frequent excursions into the mundane a delightful respite from French profundity.

Few generalizations more aptly describe American society, past and present, than these: we are a nation of consumers, and we are a nation of believers. For more than a decade, historians of religion such as R. Laurence Moore and Leigh Eric Schmidt have chronicled the myriad ways religious faith and practice have intermingled with the habits of behavior and mind known as consumerism. To these historical accounts Miller has added a subtle sociological and theological account that deserves a permanent place in the literature on postmodern American society. The book is rich with insights of use to the professional theologian and the person of faith, but also treads lightly enough, and is accessible enough, that it can productively be read by a wide range of scholars in the humanities interested in the pervasive, shaping influence of consumerism. Global capitalism isn't going away, but with Miller's help we can at least understand it better, and maybe even live within it a bit more authentically.

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