
It is important to realize what this book is not. There have been several studies of the consumer culture and how Christianity needs to oppose such a phenomenon in the name of justice for the poor, or for the sake of a proper quest for values and ideals which reflect a true authenticity. Several such works (often from a broad evangelical stable spanning Anglo-American culture) offer a compelling description of contemporary Western culture as the old civilization familiar to those who defended it in the Second World War fades imperceptibly away. It has been poignant to hear the veterans of D-Day ask why this civilization they sacrificed so much for has disappeared quite so quickly. But this book is rather different. It is about the transmutation of the Christian faith into commodities, and more especially our relationship to cultural and religious traditions in a way that disarms their power to inform our daily practice of discipleship. It was always the case that Christianity could be distorted by many political factors from Western colonialism to the Papal struggle in the nineteenth century to preserve its own power. All these are ideological distortions of the faith. What Miller contends is that the primary distortion today is different from the past. He argues that the very practices of Christianity are easily subsumed into the culture of consumer desire, the entertainment of the media and the ersatz therapeutic practices offered to individuals who are lost and do not know what to say. We think we see a Papal denunciation of the ‘culture of death’ but in fact the attributes both of the messenger and of the message are only a manifestation of the same disease. However, the leaders of the Christian faith, from whatever denomination, are often blind to this irony.

This is a book, then, about the disordering of our desire. It quotes Gregory of Nyssa and Mick Jagger in a dialectical opposition. Gregory wrote that never to reach satiety of desiring is truly to see God, whereas (in a rather more well-known phrase) young Mick sang ‘I can’t get no … satisfaction’. Miller is a Catholic theologian at Georgetown University who explores how consumer culture transforms religious belief and practice. There have, of course, been attempts in English theology to address this issue such as Graham Ward’s well-known *Cities of God* and my own book on the market economy and consumerism. The philosophical narrative is that of French post-modernism.

Miller is very well read and is indebted to Baudrillard, Debord and Jameson for the cultural logic of advanced capitalism which provides him a fairly astringent analysis of the fate of religion in the age of mass consumerism. In brief, Miller believes that the ‘set of habits and interpretation’ which makes up consumer culture renders the content of beliefs and values less important. Some years ago Tim Gorringe analysed the subtle interplay of theories of the atonement and attitudes
to punishment: there was, he believed, a symbiosis in the great age of feudalism and medieval theology which has continued ever since. Miller has a similar but slightly different understanding of the symbiosis between Catholic ecclesiology and consumer culture. Consumerism provides a commodification of culture in which objects become possessed of self-evident value. This enables objects to be seen in a way that abstracts from their conditions of production and shorn of their interrelation with other symbols, beliefs and practices that would previously have determined their meaning and function in a traditional culture.

However, advanced capitalism does not simply present objects such as cars or clothes in this light. All cultural practices, including of course religion, can be treated in this way. Everything can be transformed into what can be sold and consumed. At the same time whatever resists this exchange is hollowed out: protest songs against oppression, heavy metal rock bands and Gregorian chant can be combined into a pastiche that can be served up by the music industry for niche markets. This hollowing out gives Miller his clue. Theology has been here before in the search for ‘the essence of Christianity’, as Tillich’s Christ-event shows. There have long been criticisms of Tillich, John Hick and many others for their move into abstraction. But it is not only theologians who have played this game. The way in which religion can be seen as spiritual therapy demonstrates the mutation of Christianity into self-help, while assimilating the tenets of the faith into the needs of the consumer. However, his own denomination has been corrupted in a similar manner. The Pope is a former actor and there are uncomfortable echoes of Debord’s description of late modernity as the era of the spectacle when Miller describes a Papal mass in a baseball stadium before an adoring crowd. The media celebrity of the present Pope also resonates, despite all their many differences, with the cults of the Dalai Lama and Mother Theresa. Miller’s acute analysis shows the similarities between media celebrity and the enormous spiritual authority of John Paul II. There is a certain abstraction in his appeal to the dignity of women while allowing very few concrete changes. Likewise, media presentations often lack concreteness despite their evocation of distant lands and cultures. There is an enormous centralization as well in the entertainment industry and the papal use of the media.

At the centre of Miller’s argument is a theology of desire. Augustine’s anthropology guides the manner in which consumer desire derails the nature of hope and the concern for justice. The self has no centre but is an endless task of self-construction. This is driven by two dynamics which are those of seduction and misdirection. Seduction offers a whole variety of dispersed pleasures with a vast undifferentiated range of potential fulfilments. Eros classically is a reaching out for what we lack, and consumer desire can always find something novel to awaken our erotic search for satisfaction. ‘I can’t get no satisfaction’ becomes the watchword of our times. Misdirection describes the systematic association of needs and desires with apparently unrelated objects and practices. Miller offers a brilliant comparison