Yet another book about contemporary religion and consumerism might seem, well, somewhat consumerist? But this astutely observed and welcome collection of essays is a very fine addition to the burgeoning body of literature that focuses on one of the more important theses to have emerged in recent ecclesiology. The editors’ task of convening a fine range of established and emerging scholars has been handled in an exemplary manner and they are to be congratulated on producing a fine book, in an influential series, with an excellent publisher. The premise of the book is simple. During the twentieth century, religion featured within the marketplace of modernity as much as it also shaped consumerist trends more generally. Churches and religious groups have been pressed into ‘selling’ God in order to appear more attractive to potential ‘religious consumers’. Essentially, this is the running theme of the book. Market-based competition between denominations and religions is not new, of course; it is as old as conversion itself. So is branding. The cross is the enduring symbol for Christianity: the ultimate logo that defines the brand. But what is new today, perhaps, is seeing religions and faiths as ‘brands’, with identities that can be packaged and promoted. Such identities strive to maintain their loyal customer base, but also reach potential new markets and individual consumers, who are perhaps dissatisfied with their present identity and choices. The authors in this volume ask what this approach does to religion, what it does to society, and what the consequences of the new consumerist world might be for faith groups.

Of course, the relatively recent prominence of this issue does require some collusion on the part of the reader and the scholars working in this emerging field. One wonders, for example, if Donald McGavran’s ‘homogenous unit principle’ (i.e., like attracts like) for church numerical growth – popularised in the post-war era and promoted strongly by some missionaries – is anything more than sacralised branding and marketing? McGavran’s brand of market-led missiology led many an evangelist down a well-trodden path, paved with the benefits of North American pragmatism coupled to capitalism – the latter treated like some sort of apotheosis. The likes of Dale Carnegie (How to Win Friends and Influence People, 1936) were simply the Old Testament Fathers to church leaders such as Robert Schuller – an emergent New Testament heir of ‘positive thinking’, late capitalism and post-modern branding. Schuller and his followers recruited marketization into the service of faith. But they also
recruited religion into marketization, and sought to re-define and re-brand everyday faith, so that it became contiguous with the American dream. So health, wealth and prosperity are available every believer; with guaranteed annual growth for all successful, well-run churches. In America, it is always hard to say where business ends and religion begins. The two are not so much joined at the hip as genetically spliced. As Gibson Winter (1961) observed, America’s churches are in a kind of ‘suburban captivity’ – individualist, aspirational, capitalist and success-seeking. To speak of ‘markets’ and faith, is simply to describe what any visitor can encounter, on countless billboards strewn across any freeway, or any advertisement on TV or radio. In the USA, religion is branded and sold, like any other commodity.

This volume suggests that, as religion has been commodified, it is now adapted to appeal to consumer behaviours, and is therefore subject to market forces. The essays all repay careful reading, but of particular note are those from Thomas Wagner, Markus Hero, Haytham Siala, Roger Finke and Christopher Scheitle. The Introduction from David Voas is, as you would expect, outstanding, if all-too brief. Voas’ careful and nuanced insights are always worthwhile, and shed fresh light on familiar topics. Yet for this reviewer – who worked in marketing before ordination and taking up further academic research – there are puzzles and conundrums that still nag, even after reading this volume. For example, it is a mystery why some brands, that are manifestly dated and poorly run, nonetheless persist and appear to flourish – or at least survive. Business analysts who might, say, look at Aberdeen Angus Steakhouses in London, would wonder why they were not put out of business years ago. No meat-lover in their right mind would ever eat there. Even the tourists in London’s West End seem to have read the reviews, and give the chain of restaurants a wide berth. Yet there they are, year after year, in London’s prime locations, and open for business. Can anyone explain it? It is an enigma, wrapped in a mystery.

Similarly, it is a mystery why so many evangelical churches – which often pride themselves on preaching and being ‘biblical’ – actually serve up fairly a fairly tawdry quality of sermon Sunday by Sunday. Indeed, many such churches seldom have any format that does rich hermeneutical justice to the range, depth and subtlety of the Scriptures that are unfolded week by week, such that the claim to be ‘biblical’ might seem appropriate. Many claim to be ‘teaching churches’ too, but the content and pedagogy is often informal and pitifully poor. It is not easy to explain why believers accept such poor service, whilst continually being told it is the best there is. But perhaps the semi-structuredness of intimacy in fellowship and other dimensions – ‘home-groups’, and the like – provide a deeper implicit value than the apparently explicit. Many evangelicals