

NORTH AMERICAN CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

- Topic: Panel Discussion on *Consuming Religion* by Vincent Miller
Convener: John J. Markey, Oblate School of Theology
Moderator: Cara Anthony, University of St. Thomas
Panelists: Christine Firer Hinze, Marquette University
Patrick McCormick, Gonzaga University
Thomas Massaro, Weston Jesuit School of Theology
Respondent: Vincent Miller, Georgetown University

Christine Firer Hinze began the discussion by broadly summarizing the book along three main points. First of all, commodification itself constitutes a *habitus* in the U.S. culture not unlike the “commodity fetish” that Marx predicted of all capitalist cultures. By this Miller means that there is an “unquenchable restlessness” (somewhat like Augustine’s desire for God) to translate everything in our lives from objects to ideas to broader categories of meaning and purpose into discreet quantities of value that can be bought and sold, acquired and dispersed. Secondly, Miller argues that religion has been invaded by this *habitus*. Finally, Miller suggests that preaching must use a dialectic strategic model to oppose the subversive power of this commodification tendency. Firer Hinze finds Miller’s book to be a very dense and complex undertaking, but also totally appropriate for today’s middle class whom she fears has been quite overtaken by the commodification process that Miller describes. The questions that she raises are whether there is any way out of this complex entangling process, whether the Catholic community itself can offer communities of nonconformity to consumerist practices, and the extent to which the rise of the single family home is the context or fruit of the process that Miller describes.

Patrick McCormick observed that most analyses of consumerism are Manichean: there are the pure people who refuse to participate in the evils of consumerism, and then there are the evil people who are steeped in the glamour and vices of materialism and its worldly splendors. McCormick believes that Miller’s much more sophisticated account of consumerism is helpful because by examining the habits and beliefs that create consumerism he demonstrates that virtually everyone who participates in American culture participates in it to some extent. Miller shows that even many religions by reducing ideas to warm experiences or that remove them from their context and tradition and allow them to be used for ideological purposes is commodifying them. This misuse of religion tames and uses religion to “sell” it to people who will find it meets their needs. McCormick then offered a remarkable analysis of how the Catholic bishops in the last twenty years have collaborated in this process by being more interested in “brand loyalty” than in genuine fealty to the traditions of the Church and integrity of thought.

Thomas Massaro talked about how eager he is as a teacher to integrate critiques of consumerism into his classes and how he not only sees consumerism in his students, but that they also see it in themselves. So his main concern in reading the

book was how well could this be used as a graduate textbook. Unfortunately, Massaro found that the book was too complex and analytical for graduate students to use and he recommended that Miller write a more readable book. Miller responded to this by pointing out that he used it with his undergraduates at Georgetown and that the key to the book was taking it slowly and working through the theory with plenty of examples drawn from everyday life.

In his response, Miller talked mainly about the origins of the book in his reading of Frederick Jameson on Postmodernism. This gave him a language to talk about the radical disconnect that was going on in our lives which is often called hypocrisy or relativism when, in fact, it is the culture itself that is not connected properly so that to be utterly consistent would be irrational or immoral. This in turn led him to a broader social critique of how religion itself is being used and misused within a radically consumer culture as a mere commodity to negate the genuine power of religion to challenge and overthrow coercive and unjust social forces. Also, by mimicking the heart's restless desire to know and be known, to love and be loved, the commodification *habitus* creates passive consumers of a tradition that can never be spiritually fulfilled. Genuine religion creates active agents who seek that which truly knows and loves them and which they can know and love in return. For these reasons, Miller rightly believes that the trance of consumerism has to be broken in our culture for the gospel to flourish and for the Church to thrive. Consumerism in the sense that Miller understands it presents the real evangelical challenge of the twenty-first century in North America.

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