

Leader's Insight: From Christ's Church to iChurch

How consumerism undermines our faith and community.

by Skye Jethani, Leadership contributing editor

A recent article in *The New York Times* reported the opening of the first Indian megatemple (the Hindu equivalent of the American megachurch). The enormous building is designed to attract and entertain the un-templed with a large-format movie screen, an indoor boat ride, and even a hall of animatronic characters. The temple's public relation's director proudly admits, "There is no doubt about it—we have taken the concept from Disneyland."

Similarly, *Times* writer Laurie Goodstein has reported on the struggle of American Muslim clerics to protect their faith from the influence of materialism and consumerism. Indications are that over time American Hindu and Muslim leaders will follow Christians in succumbing to the siren song of consumerism.

Christian critiques of consumerism usually focus on the dangers of idolatry—the temptation to make material goods the center of life rather than God. This, however, misses the real threat consumerism poses. My concern is not materialism, strictly speaking, or even the consumption of goods—as contingent beings, we must consume resources to survive. The problem is not consuming to live, but rather living to consume.

We find ourselves in a culture that defines our relationships and actions primarily through a matrix of consumption. As the philosopher Baudrillard explains, "Consumption is a system of meaning." We assign value to ourselves and others based on the goods we purchase. One's identity is now constructed by the clothes you wear, the vehicle you drive, and the music on your iPod.

In short, you are what you consume.

This explains why shopping is the number one leisure activity of Americans. It occupies a role in society that once belonged only to religion—the power to give meaning and construct identity. Consumerism, as Pete Ward correctly concludes, "represents an alternative source of meaning to the Christian gospel." No longer merely an economic system, consumerism has become the American worldview—the framework through which we interpret everything else, including God, the gospel, and church.

When we approach Christianity as consumers rather than seeing it as a comprehensive way of life, an interpretive set of beliefs and values, Christianity becomes just one more brand we consume along with Gap, Apple, and Starbucks to express identity. And the demotion of Jesus Christ from Lord to label means to live as a Christian no longer carries an expectation of obedience and good works, but rather the perpetual consumption of Christian merchandise and experiences—music, books, t-shirts, conferences, and jewelry.

Approaching Christianity as a brand (rather than a worldview) explains why the majority of people who identify themselves as born-again Christians live no differently than other Americans. According to George Barna, most churchgoers have not adopted a biblical worldview, they have simply added a Jesus fish on the bumper of their unregenerate consumer identities. As Mark Riddle observes, "Conversion in the U.S. seems to mean we've exchanged some of our shopping at Wal-Mart, Blockbuster, and Borders for the Christian bookstore down the street. We've taken our lack of purchasing control to God's store, where we buy our office supplies in Jesus name."

Ultimately we shouldn't be surprised that American Christianity has succumbed to the pervasive power of consumerism. Alan Wolf, a leading sociologist and the director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Pub-

lic Life, has concluded that, “In the United States culture has transformed Christ, as well as all other religions found within these shores. In every aspect of the religious life, American faith has met American culture—and American culture has triumphed.”

Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, co-authors of *The Churching of America, 1776-1990*, argue that ministry in the U.S. is modeled primarily on capitalism with pastors functioning as a church’s sales force, and evangelism as its marketing strategy. Our willing indoctrination into this economic view of ministry is so complete that most pastors never question its validity or recognize how unprecedented it is within Christian history.

According to Finke and Stark, the American church adopted a consumer-driven model because the First Amendment prohibited state-sanctioned religion. Therefore, faith, like the buying of material goods, became a matter of individual choice and self-expression. And “where religious affiliation is a matter of choice, religious organizations must compete for members and ... the ‘invisible hand’ of the marketplace is as unforgiving of ineffective religious firms as it is of their commercial counterparts.”

This explains why corporate models, marketing strategies, and secular business values are pervasive in American ministry—we are in competition with other churches, and other providers of identity and meaning, for survival. To appeal to religious consumers we must commodify our congregations—slapping our church’s logo on shirts, coffee mugs, and Bible covers. And we strive to convince a sustainable segment of the religious marketplace that their church is “relevant,” “comfortable,” or “exciting.”

As a result, choosing a church today isn’t merely about finding a community to learn and live out the Christian faith. It’s about “church shopping” to find the congregation that best expresses my identity. This drives Christian leaders to differentiate their church by providing more of the features and services people want.

After all, in a consumer culture the customer, not Christ, is king.