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Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are With What We Buy

Tom Beaudoin
Sheed & Ward Publishing, 2003
\$19.95, 119 pages

Reviewed by Erin Luby

The emphasis placed on brand names and logos, Tom Beaudoin posits in *Consuming Faith*, is reflective of a dangerously uncritical economic culture that has developed in today's society. This branding culture has led consumers to adopt purchasing patterns that are not consistent with what they often claim to believe. The author calls consumers to consider not only the identity, or "brand personality" they adopt by purchasing a certain brand, but also the ethical issues surrounding that purchase. Development of this "consuming faith" is not easy, but it will increase one's spiritual maturity about branding culture and "consum[ing]...past beliefs and practices" (p. 107).

A person with a consuming faith "constantly questions uncritical faith in consumption" (p. 107). The author uses Scripture to illustrate the importance of thoughtful purchasing, with the understanding that economic choices are direct reflections of one's spirituality. To develop this economic spirituality, consumers must make judicious decisions about their purchases. What consumers purchase should be consistent with their words and beliefs.

Many companies take advantage of consumer indifference by establishing sweatshops that take away workers' basic human rights, *Consuming Faith* reminds its readers. When consumers purchase trusted brands, they often do not consider the genesis of these goods. This brand economy has masked sweatshop labor for years, but the author is calling buyers to be critical in what they purchase and consume. The author succinctly states that "human life does not exist to serve the brand economy. The brand economy should serve human life and flourishing. Wherever it fails to do so, this provocation to people of faith and goodwill demands a response" (p. 67).

This necessary response should be made by using both indirect and direct approaches, Beaudoin advocates. Indirectly, economic spirituality can be cultivated by a general reflection on human dignity, by questioning where money

and clothing come from, by undertaking fasts from the media, and by encouraging the Church to sponsor the arts. Economic spirituality can be fostered directly by practicing discernment about economic decisions, or by drawing up “declarations of spiritual freedom,” or practical commitments that can be undertaken one step at a time.

Many of the indirect and direct approaches espoused are very practical tools for integrating values into purchasing patterns. The sample “declaration of spiritual freedom” in the final chapter, for example, lists 10 commitments that could be applied easily to various ministries. The first commitment listed, a commitment to dignity, suggests that one will honor basic human dignity by protecting human life. This preservation of dignity implies that one must consider the labor conditions of sweatshops, and therefore, integrate that judgment into buying decisions. The third commitment, a commitment to solidarity, states that “we will allow the impact of our spending on the poorest and most disadvantaged members of society to influence strongly our purchasing habits” (p. 103). This commitment goes on to require the advocacy for just wages and working conditions. The ninth commitment, a commitment to discernment, invites a mindful attentiveness to the presence of God. Inherent to this commitment is a pledge to “make moral judgments through an informed conscience” (p. 104). These moral judgments should direct a consumer’s purchasing patterns as well.

This argument becomes more compelling when Beaudoin distinguishes the reflection on economic spirituality in *Consuming Faith* from moralizing. Moralizing makes people feel guilty by emphasizing their failure to live up to certain standards. Without adopting this moralizing tone, the author encourages readers to think carefully about their purchasing patterns. Beaudoin states this purpose at the outset: “I want to risk thinking through why our brand economy has such power to organize our lives, to do identity work for us...so as to make judicious moral judgments about it all” (p. 42). This disarming tone is reflective of the author’s desire to champion critical consumerism without lapsing into moralizing.

However insightful and practical, *Consuming Faith* at times reads more like a series of reflections than a unified appeal to the reader’s sense of justice. In some places, the organization of the book seems disconnected, as the short vignettes are only loosely tied to the author’s invitation to readers to become critical consumers. Smoother transitions between sub sections would create an even more persuasive appeal. Regardless, *Consuming Faith* provides a compelling call for its readers to integrate their spirituality into their purchasing patterns. It calls its readers to be critical consumers, developing the economic spirituality that Jesus set forth with his example. What people buy

should be propelled by their respect for the unalienable dignity of all people. In fact, Beaudoin asserts, what people buy is reflective of who they are, as their actions, rather than words, show others what they truly believe.

Erin Luby teaches high school English at Saint Ignatius College Prep in Chicago, Illinois.

Is This English? Race, Language, and Culture in the Classroom

Bob Fecho
 Teachers College Press, 2004
 \$21.95, 173 pages

Reviewed by Meagan M. Carlevato

In *Is This English? Race, Language, and Culture in the Classroom*, Fecho takes readers on an experiential and educational journey of inquiry-based learning in an urban English classroom. In order for this journey to find meaning, both the teacher and the student must take risks, cross cultural boundaries, and engage in self-discovery. This book provides a thorough overview of inquiry-based learning and how it has shaped Fecho's teaching strategies.

Inquiry-based learning is based on the construction and process of learning through active involvement and questioning. Students are more focused on developing information processing and problem solving skills. Fecho describes inquiry-based learning as "learning that required us to analyze, synthesize, categorize, and otherwise process or make sense of information" (p. 18). This allows the student to come to content understanding on his or her own terms and discovery through dialogue within the classroom with both the teacher and classmates. Fecho finds this strategy of self-discovery to be more beneficial than traditional classroom teaching. However, this strategy involves risk and stepping outside of one's comfort zone. Fecho reminds the reader that teachers must ask questions and delve into the diverse perspectives of the students in order for students to gain higher-order thinking skills. It is a much more student-centered classroom.