In the early 1980s, the People for the American Way ran a television commercial in which actors were made to say how they preferred their eggs--e.g., scrambled, poached or fried. Everyone should be free, the ad implied, to choose as he wishes: That's the American way. The punch line, Richard John Neuhaus wrote in "The Naked Public Square" (1984), was aimed at moral majoritarians "who allegedly would impose one way on everybody." But of course, as Mr. Neuhaus noted, the matters over which the moral majority felt strongly--e.g., abortion and the death penalty--were not exactly comparable to breakfast fare. The ad amounted to a "fatuous trivialization" of moral concerns.

In "Shopping for God," James B. Twitchell resurrects the spirit of the egg analogy to make an even broader claim. Choosing a religion, he argues, is much like choosing any other product--from breakfast food to beer. He sets out to determine why the "spiritual marketplace" in the U.S. seems so hot right now, and, more pointedly, why evangelical megachurches have become, well, so mega. His theme can be summed up in one of the book's smug chapter titles: "Christian Consumers Are Consumers First."

Sociologists have long noted that religiously tolerant societies actually inspire greater religious allegiance than societies in which piety is imposed by government fiat. But "Shopping for God" adds a twist: "In a highly competitive market, suppliers have to stay on their toes. . . . Coke sells more going up against Pepsi. McDonald's needs Burger King. When markets are supplying interchangeable products, selling can become frantic. Brand war! The complacent get killed." The "complacent" are the mainline churches, according to Mr. Twitchell; they have basically dropped out of the competition. The evangelical churches, by contrast, are competing wildly and thriving even if, like Coke and Pepsi, they are offering similar "products."

But what is it about the evangelical "product" that makes it so desirable? Any number of scholars have noted that, in recent years, it has been the churches that demand the most of people--tithing, bowing to firm doctrines, observing strict rules of conduct--that have grown the fastest. There seems to be something in our nature that requires from religion not just feel-good spirituality but strong moral direction. We are willing to make sacrifices to live by the dictates of a religiously grounded truth.

Mr. Twitchell manages to reduce this profound idea to the dictates of basic consumer theory. Sacrifice, he says--not least, tithing--signifies value. The more you sacrifice, the more you visibly value the product for which you are giving something up, and the more you show other people that you value it, too. "Why do true believers sometimes puncture themselves, walk on their knees until they bleed, fast until they are skeletal or join a monastery and go mum?" Mr. Twitchell asks. "Brand allegiance."

Oddly, this sacrificial principle doesn't easily apply to megachurches. As Mr. Twitchell acknowledges, most don't have "high barriers to entry"--that is, they don't demand a lot of their congregants. They're often referred to as "seeker" churches because they appeal to nonbelievers--and not always successfully. It's easy to get in; but it's also easy to get out.

So "pastorpreneurs," as Mr. Twitchell calls them, face a challenge: How do you get more people to join than quit? One way is by having current members proselytize. The fastest-growing denominations, Mr. Twitchell says, are
“selling, selling, selling.” They are “foregrounding growth as a sign of value.” As he explains: “Missionary zeal is at the heart of their attraction not only because showing the Way to others is a source of jubilation but because it means that you yourself must have found your way. The value of the next sale (the convert) proves the value of the previous sale (yours).” It all comes down to a kind of narcissism, apparently, like taking pride in your Prius.

Another key to product success, Mr. Twitchell argues, is "innovations in supply." Thus megachurches offer playgrounds, coffee shops and a mall's worth of services. But megachurches have also, crucially, found ways of attracting men. Just as department stores put men's products near the entrance because they know that men are the hardest customers to draw into a retail space, so megachurches, Mr. Twitchell says, have catered to men's interests.

Citing Bill Hybels, the pastor of Willow Creek Church in Chicago, Mr. Twitchell explains: "Men are the crucial adopters in religion. If they go over the tipping point, women follow, children in tow." So now megachurches sponsor sports ministries and groups whose members ride motorcycles together. The language of prayers and sermons has moved away from a condescending lecture tone and taken up sports metaphors instead, asking congregants, for instance, to step up to the plate and help the team. In such a way are men induced to buy the megachurch product.

If you can find a way of seeing religion primarily as a form of consumerism--skipping the (how to put it?) faith and truth part of religious belief--then Mr. Twitchell's analysis makes some sense. And in fact there are churches out there self-consciously engaged in marketing. They hire consultants and public-relations experts to "grow" their flock, and they obey a market discipline. Mr. Twitchell notices a sign hanging in Mr. Hybels's megachurch office that quotes Peter Drucker, the business guru.

But consultants can only do so much, and the point of church outreach surely has less to do with improving "brands" than with saving souls. Mr. Twitchell concludes by noting that, "in the Land of Plentitude, the customer is king." Thus he asks: "Why should religion be different?" The answer to that question comes from another book.


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