Consuming Faith: Integrating Who We Are with What We Buy. By Tom Beaudoin. Sheed & Ward, 2003. 121 pages. $19.95.

Consuming Faith is best read not as a self-contained book, but as an addendum to an earlier work. Its author is Tom Beaudoin—born in 1976, a self-described "GenX theologian"—and this, his second book, was inspired by the public reception brought on by his first.

In *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (Jossey-Bass, 1998), Beaudoin had begun articulating, on behalf his own generation, a quest that reflects GenXers' irreverence toward social institutions, which typically fail to address dimensions of their own experience (especially suffering). This is a generation who passed through childhood playing in the sandbox of cyberspace, and in his first book Beaudoin had been impressed by a kind of spiritual autonomy that prevails there—where a webpage of Scripture can be hypertextually enriched to transform its readers into self-conscious co-authors, moving by will and by whim among the various linked sites.

The complication, however, is that for GenXers all this occurs within a framework of instability regarding both their own self-identity and the meanings of the cultural elements. For GenXers, this has the effect of collapsing their real identity into what Beaudoin calls "virtual identity." In hyperspace they never move beyond Baudrillard's simulacra; likewise, as real life consumers they adorn themselves with the significance of brand items and take on the virtual identities these various logos personify.

Most significantly perhaps, these instabilities seem so pervasive that speech itself is affected: various forms of ironic discourse seem the only way of capturing one's situation within the layered "Matrix" of cultural appearances.

Now the occasion for this new book, as Beaudoin tells it (xi–xii), was an unexpected moment on the lecture circuit, where he was, as it were, called back into the real world. A persistent critic, one Tom Chittick, a Luthern pastor from Cambridge, Massachusetts, got Beaudoin to begin seeing how this total immersion

Journal of the American Academy of Religion June 2005, Vol. 73, No. 2, pp. 521–594
© The Author 2005. Published by Oxford University Press, on behalf of the American Academy of Religion. All rights reserved. For permissions, please e-mail: journals.permissions@oupjournals.org

in the semiotics of cyberspace and advertising had missed "a whole economic analysis" (xi–xii). Our brand economy is entirely dependent upon the exploitation of local workers. This is a fact that corporations can choose to ignore because they deal directly only with independent contractors, and these are the ones who manage the plight of the workers, at a distance politically and psychologically safe for corporate executives. If these workers were actually paid a living wage (increasing the product's price), citizens of the North Atlantic could not afford to consume as much as we do. In that case, perhaps voluntary simplicity (more than virtual identity) would be the next wave of the spiritual future.

Notice here that there is nothing deeply ironic about this part of Beaudoin's story. The only way to speak Chittick's (and, lately, Beaudoin's) language is in the prophetic mode, which casts one's own lot—really, not virtually—within the larger forces of history and within a larger moral assessment as to what role we have ourselves been playing. And without a real sense that history were moving in the direction of social justice, there would be no real reason to act on its behalf—except perhaps as a romantic exercise in self-immolation or as an ironic simulation of a deconstructed eschatological image. After that critical public moment Beaudoin had the integrity not to lapse into this latter postmodern hyperism, despite the temptation to do.

Branding (as Foucault might say) works as an incitement to the body, and this occurs through the imagination. One of the interesting aspects of Beaudoin's work is that it suggests what is involved here at the level of the young American consumer. When "the identity associated with the brand becomes more important than the quality of the product itself" (9), and when the consumer takes seriously "the promise of a new identity through the brand" (57), then it is easy to see how identity formation is likely to omit serious self-reflection upon one's own life. One *becomes* a personification of the brand (or, rather, a convergence of various "chosen" brand affiliations) through its work upon the body itself. Ironically, this plays out on the dedicated consumer rather like some of the spiritual exercises of Ignatius Loyola (whom Beaudoin rather deftly works in as a point of comparison).

Beaudoin notes that it would take another entire volume to do justice to the relation of Ignatius to all this. It would be a welcome event if Beaudoin were the one to write such a book, especially if he addresses, with all the boldness it deserves, a lurking ambiguity over the term "spirit." In this respect, this new book is a significant advance over the earlier one, because it begins to make some crucial distinctions. It is one thing to say that all social meanings (including brands) have "spiritual" implications of some kind or other, and another to say that we can discover our own spirituality entirely at the level of brand semiotics. To say that there are dangers in drawing simplistic distinctions is not to say that all distinctions to be drawn are simplistic ones, nor is it to say that trusting in the various logos of the brand economy is equivalent to trusting in the Logos of one's faith.

Perhaps this ambiguity in talking about "spirit" accounts for what feels so unsettling in Beaudoin's claim that the brand economy is a "spiritual force to be reckoned with" (xiii). For what can "spirituality" really be for a GenXer, anyway? Is spirituality itself nothing but one particular brand of social discourse, one

more deployment of anonymous power? Though Beaudoin is aware of the "dangers and superficialities" inherent in the brand economy (58), he has yet to take up the full task of laying out the alternative. This may be because Beaudoin at times betrays his own generation's deep suspicion that no real alternative may be accessible. He feels chastened by "my own temptation to overdraw a simplistic separation between a 'true' or freeing spiritual discipline and a 'false' or manipulative one" (59). For Rorty, cruelty is the worst thing one can do. For many in Beaudoin's generation, the appearance of hegemonic moralism seems every bit as bad.

Beaudoin knows that the discussion has to go beyond his generation's allergy to moralism. After preparing his reader with some interesting exegesis of Luke 16:19–31, he calls for his generation to become "more mature spiritually," and this involves "spiritual responsibility" when it comes to spending habits (60). This is the heart of the book, where its author writes like a postmodern-day Amos, to warn against sacrificing the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of Nike sandals.

Beaudoin seems to be finding his own true voice in some of these pages. Prophetic speaking like this does more than signify something else in culture. It always does that as well, but no prophetic speaking occurs if it does no more than that. It must also refer to something real, real enough to get its listeners to act in a self-"consuming" way, because the social justice they advocate "is *necessarily* anchored in something" (21, original italics). Real enough for Beaudoin himself to have endured "six months of unreturned messages" (10) in an effort to track down the economic exploitation that underpins the brand economy. Real enough to be called, in Beaudoin's most homiletically eloquent pages, "a force in our lives . . . a power" (20).

But then how *does* one make any significant point about "spirit" without lapsing into a moralizing posture that de-authenticates it? This points to the challenge and the promise involved in Beaudoin's still incomplete project, which must address the tension between the prophetic and the ironic that is evident in these pages.

The best projects outrun the conscious intentions of their authors, and Beaudoin's own work may turn out to be a case in point. The point of the Chittick revelation, for Beaudoin, seems to be that spiritually consumed people ought to be working for a fair distribution of global resources. If so, then the economic basis for the brand economy itself may be passing away, and with it the younger generation's tendency to see "a more fulfilled self and community" as very much caught up in all-consuming "desires for an identifiable set of products" (52).

And after all, Generation X is about over as a cultural phenomenon. It's been twenty-five years since the last Xer was even born, and Beaudoin himself, in *Consuming Faith*, has moved closer to the baby boomers. He is beginning to sound like a liberal humanist, advocating universal access to "the basics of human flourishing" (67). Beaudoin's emerging maturity is now apparent, and it takes engaged, informed, and creative work like his to make clear just what, for the GenXers, such maturity might be.

doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfi046

D. Seiple
Union Theological Seminary, New York