How often we have heard (either in praise or lament) of the demise of religion in the twenty-first century, particularly in the industrialized West. With increasing evidence of declining church attendance and the rise of radicalized religious extremists, it seems that the post-mortem for “old time religion” has begun.

“Not so fast,” says religious scholar Dell deChant in his book The Sacred Santa: Religious Dimension of Consumer Culture. DeChant claims that we neither live in a thoroughly secular world nor a post-religious world, but instead through a religious orientation that is deeply engrained in our culture and our psyches.

DeChant argues that the religion that dominates the United States is a one that permeates nearly all facets of our everyday life. This ‘new’ religion is one where salvation is offered through the economic cycle of buying, using, disposing, and replacing. It is in consuming that we realize the fullness of our humanity for which we are created. DeChant then continues by identifying our sacred stories (found in the pervasive culture of advertising and celebrity around us) and sacred spaces (physical and virtual shopping centers). So saturated in this religious orientation are we that deChant has charted the “liturgical calendar” of our consumption, with the holiest of days being Christmas—that is the celebration of Santa and gifts, not Jesus and Incarnation.

DeChant’s conclusion does not ask whether or not Christianity can get Christmas back from Santa, but whether any traditional religion can compete with the economic religious complex that is our consumer culture. The Sacred Santa is a bracing but crucial read for those who want a clearer picture of the challenges of religion in the new millennium.

About the Reviewer

Todd E. Johnson (PhD Theology, University of Notre Dame) has been an institutional chaplain, parish pastor, and urban minister with youth and families. Todd is currently the Theological Director of the Brehm Center for Worship, Theology and the Arts at Fuller Theological Seminary and holds the Brehm Chair in Fuller’s School of Theology. He contributed this title and more to the Grace Farms Library collection.