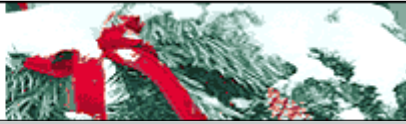


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Opinions

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A nation of spiritual shoppers

Searching for that cosmic blue light special



Douglas C. Pizac / AP file

Marketing faith: A vehicle whizzes by a billboard erected this summer in Salt Lake City, as Southern Baptists gathered for their annual convention.

By Don Lattin and Richard Cimino
SPECIAL TO MSNBC

Dec. 22 — Seventy-five years ago, Calvin Coolidge told a meeting of newspaper editors that the business of America is business. Today, at the close of the century, it often seems that the religion of America is consumerism. What mysterious power holds sway over the citizenry? Is it God, or television? Look around any town or city in America, and ask yourself, “What great temples have risen in my lifetime?” Are they churches, or shopping malls?

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American's spiritual side

SO PERHAPS IT comes as no surprise that in the twilight of the millennium, when the marketplace reigns supreme, spirituality has become just another consumer product in the great shopping mall of faith. This free market of religion flourishes in the post-denominational era, a time of declining brand-name loyalty for old labels like Lutheran, Episcopalian or Roman Catholic.

Polls show that Americans are as religious as ever — perhaps more than ever — but surveys also show the long decline of denominational loyalty. In 1958, only one person in 25 had left his or her childhood denomination.

Today, more than one out of three Americans have left or switched. And nearly half of all people raised as Presbyterians, Methodists and Episcopalians have abandoned the faith of their forefathers.

Most of them still believe in God, but fewer and fewer Americans belong to a church because their parents or grandparents were once members. Pastors and rabbis still deliver doctrine and dogma from the pulpit, but their teachings are often embraced only when they ring true with the people in the pews.

SPIRITUAL SHOPPERS

Kristi Randolph signs a hymn at the Brentwood Baptist Deaf Church in Brentwood, Tenn. Providing services to the disabled is one example of how "megachurches" try to meet the needs of consumers of religion.



Christopher Berkey / AP file

In this eclectic atmosphere, beliefs and spiritualities take on a free-floating quality. They are mixed-and-matched, repackaged to meet the needs of seekers. For

instance, the Kabbalah, a mystical Jewish practice traditionally tied to Hasidic Judaism, is no longer just for Jews. Madonna, the pop star, and other celebrity seekers claim to find enlightenment in repackaged