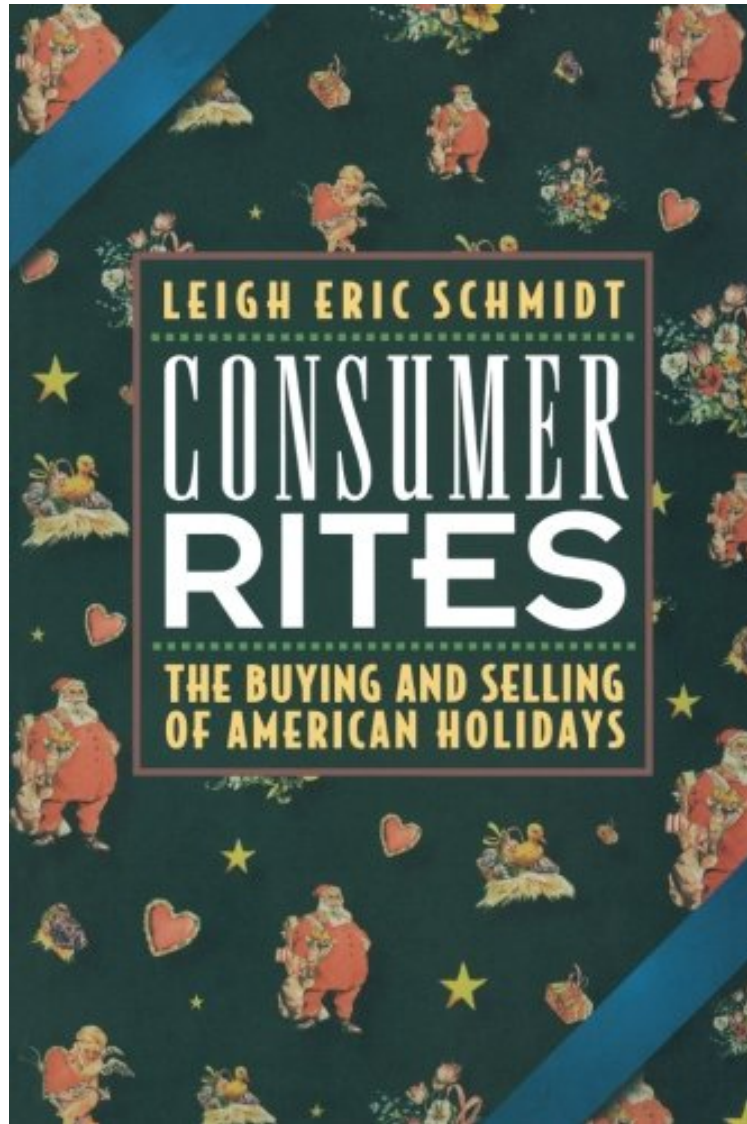


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Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays

Leigh Eric Schmidt

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Leigh Eric Schmidt : Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A FASCINATING SURVEY OF THE "COMMERCIALIZATION" OF AMERICAN HOLIDAYS By Steven H Propp At the time of writing this 1995 book, Leigh Eric Schmidt was an Associate Professor in the Department of Religion at Princeton University. He is also the author of books such as Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment, Holy Fairs: Scotland and the Making of

American Revivalism, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, and others. He writes in the Introduction, "This book is a historical explanation of how these now taken-for-granted connections in American culture between commerce and celebration were forged. It examines the evolving relationships ... between America's religious culture and its consumer culture, between holidays and the market. In a word, it is a history of that old bugbear, commercialization. The book focuses on St. Valentine's day, Christmas, Easter, and Mother's Day ... but also roams more widely across the American calendar, pausing to scrutinize other events such as New Year's, the Fourth of July, and Father's Day. It explores the widening influence of the commercial culture on the way Americans celebrate, on the gifts they exchange, on the holiday rituals and liturgies they enact." Here are some other quotations from the book: "Only in 1970 would major department stores such as Macy's begin to integrate their crew of Santa Clauses." (Pg. 134) "The movement to 'put Christ back in Christmas' ultimately underscored how deeply the modern Christmas was enmeshed in the commercial culture and how easily criticism of the consumer-oriented holiday was translated into a merchandising idiom." (Pg. 189) "The African American festival Kwanzaa is increasingly exhibiting this same predicament of resistance and co-optation." (Pg. 300) 1 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Packed full of irony and interest. By R. Cannata I read this in 1997, but am just now realizing I never reviewed it. It is beyond my imagination that anyone would not be riveted by this book. It traces the 19th and early 20th cent. evolution of a number of holidays with churchly roots that were co-opted by Hallmark and the dept. stores, often with the zealous cooperation of hapless Christians. Schmidt can tell a story with balance, accuracy, humor, and action.

Slogans such as "Let's put Christ back into Christmas" or "Jesus is the Reason for the Season" hold an appeal to Christians who oppose the commercializing of events they hold sacred. However, through a close look at the rise of holidays in the United States, Leigh Schmidt shows us that commercial appropriations of these occasions were as religious in form as they were secular. The rituals of America's holiday bazaar that emerged in the nineteenth century offered a luxuriant merger of the holy and the profane--a heady blend of fashion and faith, merchandising and gift-giving, profits and sentiments, all celebrations of a devout consumption. In this richly illustrated book, which captures both the blessings and ballyhoo of American holiday observances for the mid-eighteenth century through the twentieth, the author offers a reassessment of the "consumer rites" that various social critics have long decried for their spiritual emptiness and banal sentimentality. Schmidt tells the story of how holiday celebrations were almost banished by Puritans and other religious reformers in the colonies but went on to be romanticized and reinvented in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Merchants and advertisers were crucial for the reimagining of the holidays, promoting them in a grand, carnivalesque manner, which could include gargantuan fruit cakes, masked Santa Clauses, and exploding valentines. Along the way Schmidt uses everything from diaries to manuals on church decoration and window display to show in bright detail the ways in which people have prepared for and celebrated specific holidays--such as going Christmas shopping, making love tokens, choosing Easter bonnets, sending flowers to Mom, buying ties for Dad. He demonstrates in particular how women took the lead as holiday consumers, shaping warm-hearted celebrations of home and family through their intricate engagement with the marketplace. Bringing together the history of business, religion, and gender, this book offers a fascinating cultural history of an endlessly debated marvel--the commercialization of the American holidays.

From Publishers Weekly In this scholarly account, Schmidt (*Holy Fairs*) traces how the union of commerce and religion in the celebration of U.S. holidays was established. Early Protestant reformers frowned on festive observances, and it was not until the mid-1800s that holidays became associated with feasting and gift-giving by the new culture of merchandising. Advertisers transformed the medieval celebration of St. Valentine's Day into a modern explosion of cards and candy. Commercialization of Christmas, New Year's Day and Easter soon followed. Schmidt limits his carefully researched study to Christian holidays and acknowledges that he is sympathetic to the mix of the sacred and the secular. Taking issue with critics who assail holidays as devoid of meaning, Schmidt argues that commercialization includes deeply felt religious elements and that modern celebrations were ritualized by women who welcomed an area of power in domestic life. Photos not seen by PW. Copyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc. Honorable Mention for the 1996 Ray and Pat Browne Award for Best Book in Popular Culture "Conceptually sophisticated, wide ranging; [Schmidt] treats Valentine's Day, Easter, and Mother's Day as well as Christmas all within a delicately balanced framework of tensions between market rationality and romantic sentiment. . . . [A] fresh and timely alternative to contemporary academic fashion."--Jackson Lears, *The New Republic* "Filled with interesting facts and nascent ideas."--Fred Miller Robinson, *The New York Times Book* "[A] richly documented, smoothly narrated, and lavishly illustrated [study] by a cultural historian who knows his stuff and tells it with panache. *Consumer Rites* is good history and good reading. . . . A brilliant chronicle of the American tale where domesticated remnants of Protestant religion, not nationalist identity alone, drove developments, and where capitalist expansion was in the driver's seat."--Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Cross Currents* "It's that time of year again: holiday shopping, and lots of it. Ever wonder how this American tradition got started? In this enlightening book, Leigh Eric Schmidt looks at holidays in our country and how they've evolved over the past 150 years into highly commercialized events. . . . *Consumer Rites* is

without question a true holiday gift, and it makes for fascinating reading."--Washington Post Book World"Consumer Rites is good history and good reading. . . . a terrific story terrifically told. . . . richly documented, smoothly narrated, and lavishly illustrated by a cultural historian who knows his stuff and tells it with panache. . . . Give it as a gift next Christmas, Mother's Day or Father's Day! It's the American thing to do."--Cross Currents From the Inside Flap"The real merit of this book lies in its complex sympathies: it is at once a major contribution to American religious history and to cultural history."--David D. Hall, Harvard University