

## Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*

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McDannell, Colleen. *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, 312 pp., 153 illus., cloth \$35, ISBN 0-300-06440-3.

Go to any annual conference of the Popular Culture Association, and you can attend at least one series of panel discussions devoted to soap operas and another to romance novels. Because these genres are characteristic and enduring features of popular culture in our society, this is hardly surprising. As interesting as the sociology of either genre itself, however, is the sociology of these events. It becomes clear very quickly that those who present papers have both scholarly and personal reasons for doing so. Explicitly, their goal is to study soap operas or romance novels. Either implicitly or explicitly, however, their goal is to *defend* them — that is, to defend themselves, both as individuals and as women, for liking these genres. After all, both are created primarily by and for women. And their artistic value has always been challenged by critics who include (but are not confined to) men).

Two points are made at one session after another: these genres should be highly valued because they serve the needs of women; even if they cannot be defined as art, moreover, they should still be valued more highly than genres created primarily by and for men. In short, discussion tends to be more polemical than scholarly. The same *tendency* is evident in Colleen McDannell's *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*, although it becomes strikingly evident only in one chapter. One of the author's main reasons for writing this book — possibly *the* main reason — is to defend artifacts that have been defined as feminine. More about that in due course. First, a brief description of the book.

This well-illustrated, well-indexed, and well-written book begins with two chapters on theory. In the first, "Material Christianity," McDannell presents the case — and it needs to be made — for studying this topic in the first place. Not many scholars, at any rate, have seen fit to discuss the function of such familiar objects as religious prints, statues, bookmarks, medals, and even bumper stickers. In the

second chapter, "Piety, Art, Fashion: The Religious Object," she presents a well-argued theory of her own. Though dismissed or even attacked as *kitsch* by both art critics and religious authorities, these objects mediate the sacred in a society that is not nearly as secular as it might otherwise seem.

In four other chapters, McDannell presents case studies. The first of these, "The Bible in the Victorian Home," is about the book — the physical object as embellished, marketed, and displayed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — not its theological content. The Bible was a revered domestic object — not only lists of births and deaths were included but also pressed flowers evoking happy events, locks of hair recalling dead children, and other memorabilia. Bibles were not merely kept, moreover, but displayed. The mere presence of a Bible testified to a family's piety, of course. But the presence of a large, elaborately illustrated, handsomely bound edition testified to the family's economic and social position as well. McDannell attributes all this to three cultural forces: the rise of sentimentalism and romanticism (focusing attention on feelings and memories associated with family Bibles); domesticity (encouraging the use of family Bibles for worship or study); and industrialization (improved printing and marketing of family Bibles as fashionable commodities).

A second case study, "The Religious Symbolism of Laurel Hill Cemetery," is about the creation of landscapes designed to express commonly shared notions of death — or, to be more precise, about immortality. Several factors were responsible for the new look in cemeteries, including the following: romanticism (the glorification of nature due to its symbolic association with both eternity and the sublime; the revival of architectural styles — such as Egyptian and Greek — associated with transcendence over time); individualism (the reaction against common graves in crowded urban churchyards); and concern over public health (the need to free cities from the "miasma" of decay).

Lay entrepreneurs convinced (wealthy) people to build private family monuments in

rural settings that encouraged the perception of purity, eternity, and harmony. Even though both the clergy and denominations lost their exclusive control over the rites of death, McDannell notes carefully, these cemeteries were very Christian — that is, generically Protestant. Among the most common symbols used were the cross (eternal life), the book (revelation), the angel (resurrection), the wreath or crown (victory over death), and so on. Cemeteries functioned as purified, sacred space. For one thing, sacred space was separated from profane space. Moreover, insiders were separated from outsiders (by excluding beggars, blacks, and other “undesirables” who might wander around).

But the dead were not separated from the living. On the contrary, monuments and landscaping were designed to foster the sense of continuity and even communication with the dead. The basic aim was to comfort people, to show in visual terms that death was merely a brief interruption of life.

A third case study, “Lourdes Water and American Catholicism,” is about the dense complex of structures — spiritual, social, economic, and architectural — involved in a Catholic “economy of the holy” in late nineteenth-century America. McDannell’s point in this chapter — the best, in my opinion, of all — is that “water was manufactured into a miraculous object.” The latter both intensified and expanded the community. Lourdes water was available not in department stores, after all, but through an international network of intermediaries (produced in France; shipped to a customs agent in New York; stored in a warehouse; bottled and shipped on to Notre Dame, Indiana; divided into small vials there by Father Alexis Granger; mailed by him to correspondents; and often distributed by the latter to ailing friends, relatives, or even acquaintances).

The water’s holiness was accessible through a network of intercessors both on earth and in heaven (requests being made by worried spouses, parents, siblings, or friends; transmitted by Father Granger and associates of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart to Mary and ultimately to Jesus). In these ways, McDannell argues, the commerce in holy water paralleled that in relics at earlier times, albeit less formally.

Then, too, all of this forged new links between hostile religious communities. Whatever they might have thought of the Catholic church, suffering Protestants were perfectly willing to try Catholic cures; their

benefactors, of course, often assumed that a miraculous cure would result in conversion to the true faith. Catholics expressed their gratitude in letters that could be described as formulaic or even ritualistic: first, they described the illness (anything from problem pregnancies and blindness to recurring nose bleeds); then, they told the story of receiving the holy water, distributing it to others in need, how they used it (either drinking it or placing it on an afflicted part of the body), and the immediate recovery; finally, they gave thanks (not only to Father Granger, who was expected to continue praying for them, but to God and the Blessed Virgin Mary) and asked for more holy water (requests usually accompanied by contributions for the shrine at Notre Dame). McDannell points out many parallels between these verbal artifacts and traditional *ex votos* images (visual expressions of gratitude displayed in churches or at shrines); both were public acts, for example, the letters being “displayed” in newspapers and magazines.

Finally, McDannell discusses the sacred architecture associated with Lourdes water: a replica of the grotto, which functioned as a pilgrimage centre (obliterating secular notions of space and time). In view of what McDannell says elsewhere about gender, by the way, it is worth noting what she says here: this phenomenon was not associated primarily with women; the letters represent as many men as women, men who clearly took their responsibility for nurturing both relatives and friends seriously.

Before concluding with a chapter on “Christian Retailing,” in which she focuses attention on the specialized bookstores that are now the main purveyors of religious artifacts, McDannell discusses a fourth case study: “Mormon Garments: Sacred Clothing and the Body.” By “garments,” Mormons refer to specially designed underwear prescribed by the Church of Latter-Day Saints. Although Mormons are told that these garments were part of the revelation received by Joseph Smith and that they were originally associated specifically with temple ritual, there is no fully articulated “origin myth.” In any case, official theologians assume a uniform interpretation. But this means that lay people, “silent theologians” by default, are left free to interpret garments any way they choose.

With that in mind, McDannell interviewed thirty-seven “liberal,” white Mormons in Utah. She found that garments function primarily to express communal identity. Being unique to

the Mormon world, moreover, wearing them (or not) is almost by definition a private statement about attitudes to tradition (especially in connection with the body). In addition, it can be a statement to other Mormons or non-Mormons (especially in the context of intimate relations). In addition, McDannell found that Mormon folklore ascribes a magical quality to these garments: whatever their personal beliefs, informants told McDannell that garments are said to protect wearers from both physical and spiritual dangers.

McDannell points out correctly that both academics and clerics have adopted orientations that prevent them from taking seriously the religious art (or artifacts) valued by millions of ordinary Catholics and Protestants. Academics have accepted the avant-garde definition of art and thus succumbed to elitism: art is good if it challenges and subverts but bad if it comforts and supports. And clerics, except those of very traditional religious communities, have agreed with them: both art *and religion* are good if they challenge and subvert but bad if they comfort and support.

McDannell explains this in connection with a dualistic tendency of our society. Because the sacred is routinely assumed to be isolated from the profane, she argues, religion is assumed to be isolated from commerce — that is, from the production, selling, and buying of religious objects. This is clearly true. The argument is muddled, unfortunately, by her failure to distinguish adequately between the words *profane* and *secular*. It might have seemed obvious to Emile Durkheim, as she says, that religious people divide the world into two autonomous and mutually hostile realms: what he called the sacred and the profane. But Durkheim referred to what I would call the *secular*, not the profane. That was probably because he himself was secular — by definition, someone who acknowledges the existence of *neither* the sacred *nor* the profane.

Other pioneers in the academic study of religion, however, saw the relation between the sacred and the profane in much more nuanced terms. Mircea Eliade (whom she mentions without indicating that his approach differed from Durkheim's) understood the relation in terms of *dialectic*, not dualism: the profane is the *venue* of the sacred, not its negation. It is separated from the sacred, to be sure, but not isolated from it.<sup>1</sup>

Even so, McDannell has a point. Protestant theologians (and, more recently, some Catholic ones as well) really have failed to distinguish

between the sacred/profane and the secular. By undermining the foundation of incarnational theology, they have unwittingly promoted secularism itself. Her main argument, however, is more interesting: that most *laypeople* have *continued* to understand the sacred/profane in *traditional* (dialectical, not dualistic) terms. Hence the continuing desire for religious merchandise *in spite of* what ecclesiastical leaders and cultural gurus tell them. And that is the whole point of her book. "It is not surprising," she writes, "that historians and sociologists assume that the American landscape and consumer culture are devoid of religious forms since specialists in religion fail to note the material dimension of explicitly religious culture" (p. 7).

According to McDannell, dualism is not the only problem for those trying to understand Christian material culture. The other problem, she argues, is sexism (although she does not use that word). In a very problematic chapter, "Christian Kitsch and the Rhetoric of Bad Taste," McDannell argues that the public debate over Christian material culture is based primarily on neither aesthetics nor theology but on sexism.

For many Christian theologians, especially Protestant ones, acknowledging the need for art of any kind — let alone for the objects often denounced as bad art — has been motivated by condescension. The strong, they claim, require no images at all to focus or support their faith; only the weak do. The former are literate and intellectual, in other words, the latter illiterate and emotional — which is to say, argues McDannell, primarily women and children.

It is true that she refrains from merely reversing this hierarchy by arguing that those considered weak (women) are actually better in some way than those considered strong (men). In fact, she argues that the dichotomy is an illusion. "It is inevitable that a book on material Christianity will include the activities of women, children, and lay men. However, my intention is also to discredit the impression that educated men do not form relationships with pious art, use healing water, or wear religious garments. Lay men and clergy typically hold key positions in the production and distribution of religious goods and the construction of Christian landscapes...Material Christianity is a means by which both elite and non-elite Christians express their relationship to God and the supernatural, articulate ideas about life after death, and form religious communities. To gloss over, ignore, or

condemn material Christianity because of its association with 'marginal' Christians is to misunderstand who uses the tangible and sexual in religion" (pp. 12–13). Elsewhere, though, McDannell's interest in "gender" (women) causes more problems than it solves.

Her claim is based on the conspiracy theory of history (although she does not use that term either). "The masculinization of the Christian arts is part of a subtle strategy, dating from the mid-nineteenth century, to continue Christianity's patriarchal nature by making the church a comfortable place for men (whether ministers and priests knew what made 'men' comfortable is another question). Churches filled with women were not enough. 'Honest' religion had to appeal to the normative human being: man" (p. 195).

At first glance, this argument seems merely superficial. The problem was primarily one of theology, after all, not aesthetics. Many theologians began to realize that the reaction against Calvinism — a religion based heavily on cognitive assent to doctrine — had gone too far in the direction of emotional self-indulgence and passive reliance on divine rewards in the hereafter. For whatever reason, the former was taken seriously by men (and women) but not the latter.

McDannell's conclusion is uncharitable, therefore, to say the least. On what conceivable grounds could church leaders have remained indifferent to the potential loss of half their flock? How could they possibly have discarded the hope of attracting more men? (The opposite problem is perceived today, it is worth noting, even though the women who attend church *still* outnumber the men.) This had little or nothing to do with notions of a "normative human being." It had to do with common sense (filling the pews) and basic theology (offering salvation to everyone).

By referring to this "normative human being," of course, McDannell herself acknowledges a problem underlying any superficial rhetoric in the debate over church art. In fact, that is her main point. For her, though, what underlies the rhetoric is misogyny. "As long as any cultural expression is perceived as positive," writes McDannell, "it is accorded either neutral or masculine characteristics. When something needs to be devalued, one rhetorical device available is to call it effeminate. Another device is to accuse it of contradicting 'natural boundaries'" (p. 194). To illustrate this double standard, she observes that a "feminized statue of Christ is seen as perverse, but St Joan of Arc

dressed in battle gear is heroic" (p. 195). But her analogy is flawed. The fact is that Joan *did* dress and act like a man, but Jesus did *not* dress or act like a woman. To the best of our knowledge, at any rate, none of his contemporaries claimed that Jesus was effeminate; nor would anyone today consider his behaviour effeminate.

There really is something perverse, it seems to me, about distorting information available to anyone who actually reads the gospels. As for contradicting natural boundaries, it is true that Christian churches have always been gendered (in spite of what St Paul said about there being "neither male nor female" in the Kingdom of God). So far, though, every human society has been gendered (some more thoroughly than others). It is fine to argue that gender itself is evil — that no distinction between the sexes should be acknowledged — as long as you provide a solution to the problem that would inevitably be generated by this experiment. I will explain.

McDannell acknowledges the widespread belief among American men after the Civil War that Christianity had been feminized. (Men were alienated by pictures of Jesus, for example, that depicted him as a "bearded woman.") Consequently, they deserted the churches and flocked instead to fraternal lodges. This much has been well documented by historians.<sup>2</sup> But McDannell implies that men had no *good reason* for believing that Christianity had been thoroughly or even extensively feminized. They came to that conclusion, she argues, only because they had been culturally conditioned to identify sentimentality not only as feminine but as inferior and intellectuality not only as masculine but as superior.

Understood this way, the problem was simply one of power: to attain greater moral and spiritual power than women (or to maintain moral and spiritual power over women), men had to ridicule the feminine Jesus and "construct" a more masculine one. Actually, the problem was (and still is) much more complex.

At issue for men by the mid-nineteenth century was not so much power (which McDannell defines in purely economic and political terms) as *identity*. Men complained with *good reason* about their confusion. Consider this in the specific context of religion. At church and at home (presided over by mothers who had become "household angels"), boys were told to love their enemies, turn the other cheek, and lie passively in the "bosom" of Jesus. At school and everywhere

else, they were told to compete aggressively or even ruthlessly in the world of business, take up arms if necessary in support of national causes, and be independent at all costs. How could they admire a saviour described as "meek and mild"? To imitate that version of Jesus meant to imitate women.

In itself, that might not have been a bad idea; both sexes, in fact, should be able to learn something useful from the other. In the end, though, the fact remained that men were not women. And if the churches could not tell men what distinctive and necessary contribution they could make to society *specifically as men*, maybe other institutions could. For a while, it seemed as if fatherhood might serve this need. Fathers were once portrayed carefully reading and explaining the Bible to their families. But, as McDannell herself points out, the image of motherhood soon trumped that of fatherhood. Then it seemed as if the business world or even the military world (no matter how destructive for society and self-destructive for men) might serve this need. Neither has been able to do so, of course, in a society that believes women can do everything men can do (but not the reverse).

Consequently, the situation has remained just as pathological as it ever was. "While the men of the 1950s had firm control over business and politics," notes McDannell, "they feared the moral and nurturing power of their wives just as men had done in the previous century" (p. 195). Quite so. And nothing has changed in the past half century.

My point here is that it is just as tendentious for McDannell to trivialize the needs of men as it has been for the academics and clerics she attacks to trivialize those of women. Not everything that McDannell says about gender is wrong. The problem is that she pays attention only to notions of gender that have presumably been established by men — theologians, popes, art critics — and in the interest of men. She ignores the fact that women have always had their own ideas about gender, ideas that paralleled or even contradicted those of men.

Among those who argued most persistently for the innate moral and spiritual *superiority of women*, for example, were many of the early feminists — those who were active at the very moment in American history discussed by McDannell. And ironically, considering McDannell's theory, these feminists claimed that it was precisely their *emotional* proclivities that gave women their superiority — and their justification for leading moral and social crusades such as the temperance movement.

They *agreed* with the essentialist theory that women were governed by emotion and men by intellect; they just disagreed (as women had for centuries) over the *value* assigned to each. The same dualism that McDannell attacks, in other words, was — and still is in some feminist circles — propagated by women.

Before concluding, I should note one other problem. Discussing church art in the post-modern period, McDannell argues that clerical leaders have maintained the distinction between the avant-garde and kitsch — that is, between art and non-art, or good art and bad art, or simply "masculine art" and "feminine art." The former is serious and the latter is not. According to McDannell, "clergy do not place art in their churches that blurs the boundaries between seriousness and humor, consumerism and Christianity, art and kitsch. Irony is not a religious value. Religious art, even more than secular art, has to be aesthetically pure and theologically proper" (p. 167).

That is an oversimplification. Liberal theologians have long championed the idea that irony *does* have religious value in the form of parable.<sup>3</sup> From this, it follows that both secular *and* religious art should "challenge" and "subvert" the established social, economic, and even ecclesiastical order. The films of Ingmar Bergman, for example, do nothing if not question conventional forms of piety — and these films have been very well received by liberal theologians.

Films, of course, are not used to decorate church interiors. Neither are the esoteric "installations" that appear in museums. But the artifacts that *are* used to decorate modern churches would seldom be considered "aesthetically pure" or even "theologically proper" (unless pop psychology is considered theology). Very often, in fact, they could hardly be considered art at all. But the reason has nothing to do with style.

Consider the banners now carried around in so many church processions and the wall hangings that adorn so many church naves. These are usually made by members of the parish. The *purpose* of these artifacts (along with the liturgy itself) is not so much to edify worshippers as to "empower" them through self-expression or to engage them in "community building" or some other form of individual or group therapy. What matters is "active participation" in the production of these artifacts, not the content — which often amounts to nothing more than the most banal

slogans surrounded by the most common symbols.

Church decoration extends far beyond the sanctuary, moreover. Corridors, meeting rooms, and offices are almost invariably adorned with posters. Some of these have uplifting slogans (if not from the Bible, then from Kahlil Gibran) superimposed on hazy but colourful photographs of children playing sweetly and innocently in meadows, mountains glowing dramatically in the light of sunrise, and tropical fish swimming near the surface of a tranquil sea. Others have moralistic slogans (if not from the Bible, then from Che Guevara) superimposed on black-and-white photographs of children starving on the streets of Calcutta, freedom fighters behind bars in El Salvador, or protest marches in Beijing.

In functional terms, none of this stuff is art in the avant-garde sense; messages are too explicit and clear. In stylistic terms, though, none of it is art in the other sense; forms are too simple and uncluttered. Somehow, these artifacts do not quite fit the binary classification system that McDannell has used throughout the book. Attention to this recent phenomenon, therefore, would have improved her discussion (in the concluding chapter) of Christian retailing in our own time.

In spite of my misgivings over the ideological subtext of one chapter, I recommend this book very highly as a much-needed supplement to the standard works on both American art and American religion.

#### NOTES

1. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1957. Reprint. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1959).
2. Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 1977) and *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977); Mark C. Carnes, *Meanings for Manhood: Constructions of Masculinity in Victorian America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
3. John Dominic Crossan: *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Niles, Ill.: Argus Communications, 1975). Crossan did not invent the idea that

parables are stories that undermine or subvert world views. That much had always been obvious. He called attention, however, to the idea that parables lie at the opposite end of the (oral or) literary continuum from myths — which support or sustain world views. In doing so, he greatly (but implicitly) strengthened what had long been the liberal position: that the parabolic utterances of Jesus were more important than the mythic traditions in which they were embedded (including not only those of the ancient Israelites but those of the nascent church as well).

## Robert Elgood, *The Arms and Armour of Arabia in the Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*

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Elgood, Robert. *The Arms and Armour of Arabia in the Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Aldershot, England: Scolar Press, 1994, 138 pp., illus., appendices, glossary, index, cloth, US \$99.50, ISBN 0-85967-972-1. In North America, Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 1994.

This is a book of significant physical and technical scope. With pages measuring 9-1/4 inches by 12-1/2 inches, it contains numerous photographs, many in color, of museum quality weaponry as well as black-and-white period photographs of their users. *Arms and Armour*

addresses all types of weapons and armour used by the indigenous warriors of the Arabian Peninsula in the last three centuries by synthesizing a number of factors and disciplines. Moreover, Elgood writes in an engaging and lively prose with an ease indicating familiarity with the topic.

The book is divided into ten chapters covering the area and its people; swords; clubs, axes and maces; firearms and accoutrements; Arab gunpowder; cannon; modern firearms and ammunitions; lances and spears; daggers and knives; and defensive arms. Although the chapters are of vastly uneven length, each is thor-