

*Review Essay*

## **Objects of Faith: Rethinking Kitsch, Christianity, and Material Culture**

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MATERIAL CHRISTIANITY: Religion and Popular Culture in America. By Colleen McDannell. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1995.

Those who equate American religion with Bible study and church attendance will find many strange phenomena in Colleen McDannell's book. In the world of *Material Christianity*, Catholics eat pictures of Christ and the saints to restore and preserve health (24). Sacred undergarments unite Mormons in a community of faith and ritual (198). Evangelical Protestants invoke Christ and Coca-Cola by wearing red and white hats touting Jesus as "the real thing" (47). McDannell's examination of such practices is the result of her attempt to "look at what Christians *do* rather than at what they *think*" (4). *Material Christianity* forgoes extensive analysis of written texts in order to situate its subjects in human bodies and worlds of objects. These Christians "do" a tremendous amount, and are constantly engaged in eating, drinking, undressing, playing, buying, selling, and, finally, dying. Ranging from the obsessive decoration of the Victorian American home to the exquisite statuary at Laurel Hill Cemetery near Philadelphia to the mass-produced T-shirts and jewelry that sustain the multi-billion-dollar Christian culture industry, the book uses material culture as a window onto neglected aspects of American Christianity.

McDannell offers her work as a corrective to prevailing models of American religion and culture. She is especially critical of Emile Durkheim and his followers, who argued that religions divide the world into two mutually exclusive realms—the sacred and the profane. The sacred is a forbidden place of awe and wonder, while the profane consists of the mundane, familiar aspects of life. Such a dichotomy, McDannell claims, has greatly hampered the study of religious experience. By adopting the sacred-profane construct to explain all varieties of American Christianity, historians have imagined religion as a phenomenon “separated from home life, sexuality, economic exchange, and fashion” (6). *Material Christianity*, on the other hand, maintains that the wall between the religious and the secular is permeable and shifting, when it is not altogether illusory. Mundane objects often take on transcendent qualities, and the divine often appears in the shape of the familiar.

The construction of an impassable boundary between the sacred and the profane, McDannell contends, has served several ideological purposes for scholars of American Christianity. First, this model privileges those expressions of Protestantism that emphasize the transcendence and inscrutability of God. Catholic traditions, as well as many strains of Protestant practice, seem somehow less authentic if they allow the intermingling or fusion of divine and earthly spheres. In addition, the sacred-profane split leads critics to associate “material expressions of religion with certain types of people”—namely women, children, and other supposedly “weak” Christians (8). In McDannell’s view, the search for evidence of “strong” or “real” spirituality has led instead to an excessive focus on elite male Protestants and their writings. By dismissing “material Christianity,” scholars have ignored whole groups of Christians and whole categories of religious experience.

The use of sacred and profane spheres as an interpretive tool also lends a false credibility to theories of secularization. “When Christian activities seem too wedded to the profane,” McDannell explains, “they are typically held up as further signs of secularization and the decline of religious influence in America” (6). Complementing this view are writers such as Sut Jhally and Ray Browne, who have suggested that a world of mass-produced commodities has replaced Christianity as a religious presence in modern America (7). McDannell, however, believes that these apparent symptoms of secularization are actually products of selective vision. Religious historians who have consistently ignored the pervasive material dimension of American Christianity suddenly discover it in the contemporary world and proclaim religious decline. In a similar manner, material culture specialists disregard a wide range of Christian objects, then insist that Christianity has withered and left a void for secular commodities to replace. In short, the neglect of material things in studies of religious experience has produced a distorted conception of American Christianity.

McDannell proposes to enrich this picture by examining the objects that other scholars have overlooked or dismissed. In her view, the ubiquity of material culture poses implicit challenges to the biases of earlier scholarship:

In the hope of moving beyond the equation of Christianity with the white, Protestant middle class, I introduce evidence from people of color, from the poor, and from Catholics and Mormons. I do this not only to be inclusive but also to illustrate my view that diverse peoples use religious objects in very similar ways.

Christians of all traditions, she argues, share “the desire to own, make, manipulate, cherish, sell, and exchange religious goods” (17-18). In short, she proposes a reordering of American religious history along the lines of material culture. *Material Christianity* goes on to outline several speculative categories for understanding Christian material objects: they can function as evidences of piety, as symbols of community, as fashion, even as avant-garde art. The book then examines the uses of particular artifacts in specific communities, investigating religiosity in terms of its material expression.

McDannell supports her case by documenting an overwhelming variety of things religious. Though *Material Christianity* discusses items generally considered to be at the center of Christian life and devotion, such as family Bibles and tombstones, the book is most intriguing in its recovery and reanimation of things forgotten, unseen, and often rather curious. Children’s toys, for instance, encapsulate a story of Christian survival in a secular American marketplace. McDannell explains that the first board game, “Mansions of Glory,” had as its goal the attainment of heaven through the pursuit of a godly life. By the beginning of the twentieth century, “nonreligious games and toys dominated the marketplace,” but secular companies continued to produce Christian games alongside irreligious ones (53). Furthermore, by the middle of the century, Protestants, Catholics, and Mormons could choose from a variety of mass-produced children’s games, toys, and costumes that reflected their particular faith. Such apparently trivial objects, McDannell argues, helped to fuse Christian communities and initiate young people into religious traditions.

At its best, *Material Christianity* is not only a book about the consumption of religious objects, but an exploration of the ways in which the whole life of those objects connects with Christian faith and secular culture. In the case of the Mormons, the sacred and profane intersect in physical human bodies. Since the mid-nineteenth century, Mormons have worn special underwear made by the community. Brigham Young insisted that these “garments” be assembled at the Mormon Temple by specially trained women (201). Since then, Mormon garments have provided a sense of spiritual community, a feeling of divine protection, and an enforcement of modesty and sexual purity. At the same time, the clothing has changed with American fashion trends. In 1923, church leaders permitted a shorter garment for everyday wear, and in 1979 this style became universally acceptable in the sacred temple (215-16). Furthermore, many Mormons today feel free to complain about a certain sexual repression that they see

propagated by the garments. In several ways, this special clothing reveals the often uneasy balance between religious doctrine and secular culture in the Mormon experience.

More recognizable than Mormon underwear is the proliferation of “Jesus junk” that began to appear around the country after World War II. These objects, mass-produced clothing, jewelry, and art with Christian themes, lead McDannell to Christian bookstores, where faith and business interact in communities of conservative Protestants. She interrogates the *Bookstore Journal*, a trade magazine for store owners. Says one entrepreneur: “While the profit angle has to be dealt with in order to stay in business, our basic intention is to get products into as many homes and offices as possible where they will be used to draw attention to the Word of God and to the goodness of our living Lord” (254). Here is a version of salesmanship at once blatant and ambiguous.

The Christian bookstores’ approach to business produces many such paradoxes. McDannell notes that the stores have recently been moving toward an ecumenism that is both religious and commercial. Indeed, she contends throughout the book that material culture tends to obscure or transcend denominational and theological differences. Non-Catholic Americans sometimes chose (and were permitted) to use curative water from a Catholic shrine at Lourdes in the 1870s (151), while religious catalogs of the 1880s advertised Catholic and Protestant statuary side by side (58-59). In the case of the bookstores, proprietors have recently been shifting away from specific denominational affiliations to promote an inclusive “Christian” image. “Christianity” in this case generally refers to conservative Protestantism, and the blurring of some sectarian divisions does not imply indiscriminate acceptance of all religions and philosophies. A recent proposal to sell Catholic objects such as rosaries and statues has caused intense debate among bookstore owners, many of whom have openly doubted that Catholics are Christians. In addition, a number of religious groups that conservative Protestants generally view as cults (the Mormons and the Jehovah’s Witnesses are examples) remain largely outside of the Christian bookstore target market, while other world religions and philosophies are wholly ignored or roundly condemned. By downplaying divisions within Protestantism, the bookstores reach a wide and varied audience. On the other hand, by enforcing boundaries between Protestants and non-Protestants, the stores mark their products as distinctly “Christian” (260-65). The success of the industry depends on both of these maneuvers, and a major strength of *Material Christianity* lies in its interpretations of these complex interactions between faith and consumer culture.

McDannell addresses the divisive qualities of material culture more fully in “Christian Kitsch and the Rhetoric of Bad Taste,” the most provocative essay in the book. Here she describes the prevalence of *l’art Saint-Sulpice* (painted plaster statues of Christ, Mary, and the saints) and other mass-produced “catalog art” in Catholic churches during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. Though Catholic authorities had frequently criticized these objects, opposition increased with the Vatican’s 1952 denunciation of “second rate and stereotyped statues and

effigies" in churches (171). Following the lead of modernist architects as well as Rome, Catholic art critics began an assault on this popular ornamentation. As architect Le Corbusier had insisted that a house was a machine to live in, so "artist Jean Charlot emphasized that 'from God's point of view a church is a *machine to live in*, and from man's point of view, a *machine to pray in*'" (174). "Kitsch" became both morally and aesthetically reprehensible.

*Material Christianity* shows this enforcement of good taste to be inseparable from the issues of sexuality and gender identity that have characterized historians' understanding of the "feminization of religion"—that is, the association of religious values and practices with those coded by society as feminine. In mid-twentieth-century Catholicism, for instance, realistic pictures and statues of the Virgin Mary had to balance beauty and chastity. Critics charged that representing the mother of Christ as an attractive woman was likely to provoke illicit sexual desire in viewers. Depictions of Christ Himself posed another set of problems. Catholic writers excoriated popular art for portraying what was, in their view, a sentimentalized and feminized Christ. In a 1983 article, one commentator went so far as to compare the "hip-to-one-side pose of the dead body of Christ" that was common in church art with "that pose so teasingly taken by seated women with short skirts who place their hands over their knees" (182). In this discussion, McDannell persuasively argues that the construction of a war between "art" and "kitsch" provided a language to express contempt for the perceived femininity of modern Catholicism. The art/kitsch binary stood for dichotomies between masculinity and femininity, as well as for the supposed threat to the former by the latter.

This power struggle is easier to demonstrate in the Catholic than in the Protestant case; Protestants have neither a centralized hierarchy nor a history of thinking about liturgical images. Nonetheless, McDannell argues that they engaged in similar battles. In analyzing the art and thought of Warner Sallman, whose *Head of Christ* became a Protestant icon in the mid-twentieth century, she again finds the steadfast determination to produce a masculine image of Jesus. Both in the *Head of Christ* and its revisions in the 1960s, we see Sallman working to avoid a feminized representation. His conscientiousness was not sufficient for some observers, who still insisted that the painting was unmanly. In 1958, one especially vicious writer contended: "In Sallman's *Head of Christ*, we have a pretty picture of a woman with a curling beard who has just come from the beauty parlor with a Halo shampoo, but we do not have the Lord who died and rose again" (189). Similar attacks targeted all manner of "sentimental" church culture, from greeting cards to grandmothers' favorite hymns. As McDannell goes on to explain, these cultural battles resulted from the real crisis of masculinity caused by the changing perceptions and roles of women in postwar America. The story of those changes is a familiar one, but the diverse elements in "Christian Kitsch" work together to produce fresh readings of the cultural constructions of gender and Christianity.

The “Christian Kitsch” essay shows *Material Christianity* at its most subtle and inventive. McDannell weaves disparate elements into her arguments and recognizes multiple layers of cultural conflicts and power struggles. She notes affinities between Christian and secular trends, and considers both the connections and the disjunctions between Catholic and Protestant Christianity. Other essays are less successful. Most neglected are the uses of material culture to enforce group boundaries other than the divide between Christians and non-Christians. McDannell recognizes the exclusionary power of material culture practices. “Religious goods and landscapes,” she notes, “can tell Christians that they belong to a particular community or family, but material culture can also be used symbolically to exclude the ‘unworthy’” (272). Yet *Material Christianity* focuses too often on the cultures of unified communities of “ordinary” Christians. McDannell positions herself quite deliberately on the side of a strain of lay religion whose goal it is “to see, hear, and touch God” (1). Her subjects sacralize elements of the profane world, sometimes over the objections and proscriptions of denominational authorities, but in ways that invariably produce rich and revitalizing spiritualities. Unfortunately, in her commendable efforts to save lay Christian practice from scholarly condescension, she sometimes overlooks the power struggles that have been so important in the development of American religion.

In this regard, her work would benefit from the kinds of analysis that R. Laurence Moore employed in his 1994 book *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*.<sup>1</sup> Though Moore concentrates on entertainment and mass media rather than material objects, he, like McDannell, argues that Christianity has always mingled with an apparently secular popular culture. At the same time, *Selling God* spends considerable time discussing the ways in which Christians attempted to exercise authority by modifying, regulating, or destroying aspects of popular activities and amusements. Rather than focusing on the devotional or community-building possibilities of consumerism, Moore emphasizes the tremendous political and social power available to those groups who could participate in or control the American “marketplace of culture.” In contrast, McDannell foregrounds the faith-affirming interactions between lay Christians and material things, and thus downplays popular religiosity as a space in which diverse groups compete for legitimacy. In her analysis of Victorian America, for instance, she pays insufficient attention to middle-class material culture in its role as a barrier and a weapon against the new American working class, which often held quite different notions of religion and respectability. McDannell does address the religion of immigrants and workers in other places, but she seldom brings competing groups into proximity with one another. Objects build and reinforce diverse religious communities, but in *Material Christianity* those communities are too seldom in dialogue or conflict. As a result, her version of American religion can seem deceptively benign.

On the other hand, McDannell’s understanding of the gendered character of popular culture usefully complicates Moore’s analysis of power and consumer-

ism. In “Christian Kitsch,” she emphasizes that religious battles over mass culture, so central in *Selling God*, can also be ways of asserting masculine control over religious expression. She notes a related contradiction that underlies the Christian bookstore: “While ‘feminism’ might still be considered suspect [among conservative Christians], the power of women as consumers is deeply felt” (268). Again, she spends too many pages describing objects and too few elaborating on the ways in which this “consumer power” might affect more traditional, and more masculine, religious authority. However, the presence of these stores suggests implicitly the power of feminine-gendered material culture in Christian communities.

Though Moore and McDannell would benefit from a more explicit dialogue between them, both *Selling God* and *Material Christianity* underestimate the power of racial hierarchies in the American religious experience. To her credit, McDannell does explore the much-neglected Italian, Irish, and Hispanic communities within American Catholicism. Early in the book, for instance, she offers a brief but promising discussion of the commercial appropriation of Hispanic Catholic art and iconography, noting the complicated, syncretic qualities of racial and religious representation in modern America (61-62). In general, however, she obscures the construction of racial differences in American Christianity by proposing functions of Christian material culture that are common across group boundaries. This problem appears most clearly in the photographs that fill the book. To its credit, *Material Christianity* employs illustrations whose richness and variety invite alternative readings and multiple interpretations. That said, McDannell does not take full advantage of her visual material, particularly those items that involve conceptions of race. In her description of an arresting picture of a young black child in a coffin, McDannell explains that photographing the dead was formerly a common practice among Christians. She uses the picture to augment a discussion of nostalgia and material culture, but neglects to expand on the painting, superimposed above the deceased child, of a white Christ blessing a group of white children. The suggestion that the black child will ascend to a white heaven seems indisputable. Yet this picture was commissioned by a middle-class Harlem family in 1933 (40). Did race matter here? How did it matter? McDannell begs these and other questions but never explicitly asks them.

This selective inattention to race continues throughout most of McDannell’s discussions of art and iconography. In her examinations of the ideas and practices that surround representations of Christ and Mary, she seldom considers race and ethnicity. Christ may be “feminized,” but his racialized aspects are usually ignored. The art that appears in *Material Christianity* always depicts the Savior of the world as a man of European descent. Oddly, in a book that is so self-consciously eclectic and wide-ranging, McDannell is usually indifferent to the effectiveness of such a depiction in perpetuating racial hierarchies. On one level, *Material Christianity*’s neglect of racial constructions is a reflection of the concerns of its subjects. Notwithstanding its attention to Catholicism, much of the

book focuses on such phenomena as the Victorian home, the Mormon tradition, and the contemporary Christian culture industry, thereby privileging overwhelmingly “white” and sometimes overtly racist strains of American Christianity. *Material Christianity* tends to discuss such groups on their own terms, without probing the hidden structures of racism so often encoded in popular culture. This focus on “white” Christianity is not inherently unsatisfactory, and McDannell’s subjects are certainly worthy of study. Perhaps an adequate exploration of the intersections of race and “material Christianity” would require another book. Nonetheless, her neglect of such issues represents a serious weakness.

The avoidance of racial issues is particularly frustrating because it is not a *complete* avoidance. Throughout the book we glimpse tantalizing hints of what could have been accomplished by addressing the racial dichotomies revealed and produced by Christian material culture. For instance, a survey of Christian bookstore customers showed that they were predominantly female, and even more predominantly white. African Americans accounted for only four percent of patrons. The white female majority in the survey raises interesting questions. How do non-white Christians’ material culture practices differ from white consumption of Christian bookstore merchandise? How does Christian material culture reinforce the boundaries of America’s segregated churches? Given the stark racial divide suggested in this survey, the importance of material culture in constructing “white” and “black” versions of Christianity should be an important part of McDannell’s analysis. Instead, she notes that the most remarkable defining characteristic of Christian bookstore patrons proved to be “their church-going” (256). She then moves to a discussion of denominationalism and ecumenism. Again, McDannell downplays clear racial and ethnic fissures between Christian communities in order to emphasize unity and harmony.

The inconsistent attention to cultural conflict and the lack of racial and ethnic dimensions in *Material Christianity* suggest that the uses of material culture by diverse groups may not be as similar as McDannell claims. In the end, she does not fully substantiate her ambitious argument. At the same time, it is clear that American “material Christianity” *does* redraw and transcend many boundaries in important ways, and this creative reordering of American religion through its material culture gives the book a unique and valuable perspective. Ultimately, the most important barrier that it addresses is that between the realms of the sacred and the profane. In presenting a kind of sacred pawn shop of neglected artifacts, McDannell offers a multitude of new sources and a variety of creative approaches to the study of religion. By insisting on the importance of objects in popular religious faith and practice, *Material Christianity* sharpens and complicates our understanding of both religious and secular culture in America.

## Notes

1. R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York, 1994).