

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Colleen McDannell.** *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America.* New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995. x + 312 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-06440-7.

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McDannell's concern in this book is with physical and material expressions of religion, expressions that she believes have been largely overlooked in scholarly discussion of American Christianity. The contours of her argument are succinctly presented in the first chapter, which, like the whole book, is titled "Material Christianity." This chapter is an informative and thoroughly documented review of contemporary research in material culture that attends to "religious" dimensions of "secular" practice. Though the review is generally appreciative, McDannell is critical of a too easy acceptance of a secularization hypothesis that shifts attention from material dimensions of religion to "religious" dimensions of secular material culture.

She identifies this secularization hypothesis with "protestant" separation of sacred and profane that is thoroughly entangled with distrust of both the material and the masses. The separation and the mistrust are reflected in Protestant emphasis on "word" that has sometimes led scholars and church officials to emphasize written texts at the expense of unwritten practice. Less obviously, they are reflected in a critical tradition associated with the Frankfurt school that understands mass culture largely as manipulation made possible by the "weak egos and submissive psyches" of the masses. Though the Frankfurt School's Marxist roots incline toward appreciation of the material, they are also "protestant" enough to associate criticism with the words of a revolutionary elite that rises above the material practice of the masses.

To her credit, McDannell is not interested in "rising above" that practice. She is interested in examining it seriously and appreciatively as an important expression of culture. She is also interested in examining material practice in explicitly religious settings, and this is what drives the book.

One of the most interesting aspects of McDannell's argument is her insistence that the scrambling of sacred and profane is not a "postmodern" phenomenon. The attempt to rigidly separate the two is a symptom of the

"protestant" tilt of American religious history and scholarship. In practice, the separation has never been clear: everyday objects and everyday practices have been invested with spiritual significance, and "sacred" objects (including texts) have routinely entered into everyday practice. This allies her with popular culture studies that emphasize material culture, but it also enables her shift of attention in both historical and contemporary terms to objects and practices identified as religious.

She does this in a series of case studies, beginning with Roman Catholic sacramentals and continuing through an examination of the Bible in the Victorian home, the rural cemetery movement—with particular emphasis on Laurel Hill Cemetery in Philadelphia, Lourdes water and American Catholicism, Christian "kitsch," sacred clothing and the body—with particular attention to Mormon garments, and Christian retailing. Each case study includes an historical account to support the claim that the scrambling of sacred and profane is not a contemporary development. By examining contemporary material practices in Christianity, each also supports McDannell's claim that material spirituality is not an exclusively Roman Catholic phenomenon. The case studies also provide evidence that Protestant material spirituality violates denominational boundaries (including the boundary between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism). Documentation of boundary violations is an important contribution to the understanding of American religious practice, including distinctively "American" dimensions of Roman Catholicism in the United States. It is also a significant contribution to understanding group behavior generically identified as "Christian" in both business and politics, particularly to the extent that it challenges an ahistorical assessment of such behavior as having emerged out of nowhere within the past two decades.

That there is much to argue with here in terms of Marxism, the Frankfurt school, art criticism, and the theological significance of both "word" and "work" is evi-

dence of the significant scholarly contribution McDannell has made in this book. Clear invitations to carefully constructed argument are, unfortunately, all too rare; that makes this one particularly welcome. The case studies are informative in themselves. The thorough references are invaluable. The careful intertwining of theory and practice in historically informed case studies will prove exemplary for scholars and others with a specific interest in material Christianity as well as those with a

more general interest in material culture and the making of meaning.

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