

# Critical Reflections on Visual and Material Religion

*Louis P. Nelson*

This joint edition of *MAVCOR Journal* and the *Journal of Southern Religion* has focused needed attention on the ways that visual and material cultures have played and continue to play a critical role in shaping religious belief and practice in the American South. The very kind offer by the editors to write an editorial introduction to the edition encouraged me to reflect a bit more deeply on the trajectories of recent scholarship and some of the holes I see in the current historiography. I have chosen to do this by building out four thematic reflections, one inspired by each of the four essays. These frameworks—Landscapes of the Everyday, Visual and Material Cultures, Religion and Popular Culture, and the Politics of Material Religion—are, I think, important to understanding how religion has shaped Southern cultures. But there are many other ways of opening up this conversation. It is my hope, of course, that these frameworks prove useful to readers of both journals.

## Landscapes of the Everyday

It will come as no surprise to some readers that I'd like to begin by discussing vernacular architecture and the landscapes of the everyday. As the recent past president of the Vernacular Architecture Forum and a former co-editor of *Buildings and Landscapes*, I have a clear predilection to the common and unremarkable. I take this view because I'm particularly interested in the broad conditions that mark American life. The remarkable and the extraordinary are by definition exceptional and therefore atypical.

Samuel Stella's article in this collection explores the contexts around an incredibly common building type: the nineteenth-century gable ended church. Small in footprint and often with only three windows on each long side of the building, the nineteenth century gable-ended church is so common across America so as not to even warrant notice. Stella's article turns a critical lens on these buildings in a particular landscape—Missouri—and interprets them as the product of their historical genesis: The Second Great Awakening. His article does great work situating these buildings as the product of both the material circumstances of early nineteenth-century Missouri, but even more importantly of the socio-theological climate of that moment's evangelical fervor. That season left a lasting imprint on the American landscape legible even today in these entirely unremarkable buildings. His article reminds us of the importance of attending to the normative, the everyday, and the vernacular.

Gretchen Buggeln's recent volume *The Suburban Church: Modernism and Community in Postwar America* (University of Minnesota, 2015) is a model for this kind of work among American churches. Drawing case studies largely from the Midwest, Buggeln examines oft-ridiculed mid-century modern churches to understand better what congregations were thinking—literally—when they chose to build a modern and often suburban church. Her methods are careful, balancing interviews with multiple constituents and reviewing a wide array of manuscript sources. Her tone also rejects the

ridicule and takes these congregations seriously as communities of faith with thoughtful intentions. The South—where religion is at least as important as it is in the Midwest—would benefit enormously from studies that take this same approach. We know very little about the world of everyday churches in the American South, especially in the century or more after the Civil War. How do small town Southern churches expand to accommodate social services during the Depression, for example? What does the architecture of the urban Black church tell us about the aspirations of African Americans before the Great Migration? How can we take seriously the architecture and landscapes of the highway megachurch?

## Visual and Material Cultures

The 1995 publication of Colleen McDannell's *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Yale, 1995) marked a watershed in scholarship on the visual and material culture of American religion by crafting serious argument out of the seeming detritus of American religious culture. She took religious kitsch and family bibles as evidence in the writing of American belief. Very soon thereafter art historians and scholars of religion David Morgan and Sally Promey added to this shift a theoretical framework for understanding the visual culture of images among American religions, and—a claim surprising to scholars of religions who privilege institutions and theologies—especially among Protestants. Edward Blum's essay on the visual and material culture of Uncle Tom's Bibles in this volume follows in that vein. Looking closely at the object of the Bible in many of the various iterations of Stowe's famous novel, the author situates this reading in the various modes of engaging with the bible as an object and as a political commentary not only on slavery but also on race and religion well past the Civil War. In this way, Blum exhibits a dependence on the scholarly methods of the mass-production favored by visual culture methodologies and less on the thicker contextualization of material culture. Two scholars, one senior and one just emerging, offer fantastic examples of contextual analysis for scholars of twentieth-century Southern religion. Joseph Sciorra's *Built with Faith: Italian American Imagination and Catholic Material Culture in New York City* (Tennessee, 2015) and Gabrielle Berlinger's *Framing Sukkot: Tradition and Transformation in Jewish Vernacular Architecture* (Indiana, 2017) are both works that center material culture as evidence in the interpretation of lived religion and congregational religious practice. Sciorra's many years of field work open up for readers a rich world of yard shrines, home displays, and urban processions as objects and actions central to Italian-American religious belief and practice. Berlinger's nuanced reading of a shared religious form in disparate contexts is a model study of cross-cultural analysis. There might well be a lesson learned that both volumes draw heavily from the fields of ethnography and folklore. Our interpretation of Southern religion would benefit greatly from similar close attention to material culture and the careful contextualization of material practices. The immediate objection that Southern religion is overly Protestant and thereby allergic to the visual and material fails on two counts. Such a scholar has spent very little time in the homes of either suburban evangelicals or rural fundamentalists. And there are plenty of places—Miami and New Orleans come immediately to mind but so do the increasingly Hispanic suburbs of many Southern cities—where non-Protestants have an

important footprint.

## Religion and Popular Culture

“Horseshoe Crosses and Muddy Boots: Material Culture and Rural Masculinity in Cowboy Churches” spans from visual and material culture to popular culture. This essay is a remarkably interesting journey into the world of cowboy evangelism in rural—and hyper-masculine—Texas. The author grounds this essay in the close analysis of real churches but also in the context of the cowboy as a popular culture trope. Using rustic materials and rodeo-like programs, these churches offer a faith practice framework that appeals to men who center their identity in “Western” heritage, self-reliance, and masculinity, and for whom traditional church settings are overly emotive and to their mind feminine. In this way, it echoes the early twentieth-century Muscular Christianity that eventually gave birth to the YMCA.

The intersection of popular culture and landscapes of faith stands at the center of Margaret Grubiak’s forthcoming *Monumental Jesus: Landscapes of Faith and Doubt in Modern America* (UVA Press, 2020). The book takes its title inspiration from the 65-foot pure white *Christ of the Ozarks* statue erected in 1966 in Eureka Springs, Arkansas. Gerald L.K. Smith, the statue’s builder, would also open very nearby a Jerusalem-inspired amphitheater that staged a nightly passion play. He next developed an expansive New Holy Land Tour with a replica of the Sea of Galilee and finally opened the Christ Only Art Gallery. All of these “sacred projects” as Smith called them were explicitly evangelical in nature. But Grubiak’s telling steps quickly past the easy opportunities for ridicule and engages immediately the complexities of their interpretation. From the 1930s Smith, who edited and published *The Cross and the Flag*, was explicitly anti-Semitic and racist and otherwise deeply involved in far-right political causes. In the years and decades following its construction, observers interpreted the pure white statue in the context of Smith’s racial politics, a critique that had dimmed until Grubiak began her research. But even more importantly, Grubiak situates this and all of her case studies in the tensions between faith and doubt, asking how objects function to affirm the faith of some and simultaneously cast doubt for others. She extends those questions by also asking about the constant slippage between the author’s (or the designer’s or architect’s) intent and the often more long-standing interpretations of re-inscription woven by viewers and users. Throughout the examples, she situates objects in multiple frames of meaning simultaneously. It is not a surprise to me, but maybe it is to the author, that her story is a decidedly Southern one. While Grubiak does not frame her work as a Southern study, four of her five case studies appear in Southern contexts and in this way she offers, I think, an important new work explicating the complexities of materiality and Southern religion in the twentieth century.

## The Politics of Material Religion

Emily Wright’s compelling essay on the role of women—white and black—in the shaping of antebellum churches in the Gulf South unseats the longstanding view that women

played little role in church construction. By foregrounding the importance of women's charitable societies and the role of sewing societies in making fittings and material trappings for their churches, Wright excavates women from their traditional place in the antebellum home to find them shaping the architecture of the public square. Her attention to the roles played by women of color—enslaved and free—expands her work even further. For Wright, the politics of gender and race are both critical to understanding a fuller picture of antebellum Southern religion.

By extension, one might expect here an assessment of—and call for more work on—the role of the visual and material culture of the black church in the South. While there has been a lot of historical work on Southern black religion in recent decades, the role of the visual and material in that field is thin; *Kongo Across the Waters* (Florida, 2013) and *Embodiment and Black Religion* (Equinox, 2017) are important exceptions. But I want to conclude by spotlighting the role of Southern religion in amplifying—often through images and objects—American white supremacy. Edward Blum's and Paul Harvey's *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (UNC Press, 2012) is an excellent entrée to the critical role visual religion has played in the justification of white supremacy. The authors expose how Americans used a white Jesus in the shifting politics of whiteness in America: as white purity in the context of lynching and racial violence, as non-Semitic in light of immigration, and then as white in full color through Hollywood cinema. Their story is one of power visualized and enacted on both whites and blacks in America through the body of Jesus. Bodies also stand at the center of Katherine Lennard's work on the material and visual culture of the Ku Klux Klan. Depending primarily on her 2017 dissertation, "Uniform Threat: Manufacturing the Ku Klux Klan's Visible Empire, 1866-1931," Lennard has published a number of articles that explore the mass manufacturing of robes, the roles of women's sewing clubs, and the visualizations of robes in *Birth of a Nation* to create a unified visual presence across the South's landscape of racial violence. Slightly earlier, Lynn Neal's article, "Christianizing the Klan; Alma White, Branford Clark, and the Art of Religious Intolerance," in *Church History* (2009) offers an excellent introduction to the ways images played a critical role in communicating the intersection of Klan ideology, American nationalism, and Christian belief. In an era when white supremacy resurfaces with increasing confidence—most poignantly in my hometown—understanding the dependence of the Klan and other organizations of white supremacy on Christian thought is ever important. But even more, understanding the subtler ways that "whiteness" shapes Christian thought, especially in the South, is an important step toward fostering dialogue in America that can ultimately dispense not only with explicit white supremacy but also the less visible systems of structural racism that have marked the performance of religion in the Southern landscape since at least the seventeenth century.

In conclusion, I'd like to highlight just a few threads that run through these reflections. The first is the importance of scholarship that is situated in place. The powerful meanings of religion and especially of religion and material practices is inextricably bound up with the context in which they are produced and used. As a result I find myself regularly advocating for scholarship that takes context seriously. The second is an intellectual commitment to the ordinary. If religion is a powerful force that is to be

better understood in our present moment, studying ordinary religious practice is in my view the most effective avenue. And lastly, any study of the South must take seriously the politics of race and the practices of racism, in my view the region's differentiating characteristic. When we ignore the continuing legacies of slavery, we do neither justice nor democracy any favors.

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