

Sensational Devotion: Evangelical Performance in Twenty-First-Century America

Jill Stevenson

Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013. 328 pages. \$50.00

Reading Jill Stevenson's rich descriptions of evangelical piety and performance in *Sensational Devotion* is not unlike having dinner for the first time with the new love interest of a childhood friend. At first, I had some trepidation. How would Stevenson, a scholar of theater and performance, treat my own disciplinary home, the study of religious practices in North America? As a friend, I had been there for the bad haircuts and the painful relationships in years past and did not want to see my old friend exploited or misunderstood.

Fortunately, my worry was for naught. Stevenson commences by positioning her work within both the field of religious studies in general and the study of evangelicalism in particular. Indeed, from the introduction through each of her case studies, Stevenson lays the groundwork for a compelling and intriguing study of evangelical amusement parks, museums, and the ensuing cultural practices that derive from, what many might call, Christian kitsch, which is analyzed from the framework of performance studies.

The first, and perhaps the most captivating, chapter introduces Stevenson's notion of the "evangelical dramaturgy," a term she coins to highlight "performative tactics designed to manipulate the physical, rhythmic encounter between user and medium" by evangelical Christians in order to generate and underscore embodied belief in response to very particular devotional and theological priorities (24). In so doing, Stevenson departs from where her previous work on medieval Christian devotional culture left off by charting points of contact between beliefs, material objects, and the physical and affective relationships they produce.¹ Stevenson is clear with her readers that her plan is to consider often overlooked examples of live evangelical performance—those which fall into the realm of popular religiosity. As such, her premise resonates with studies of 'lived religion' that continues to shape the study of religion in North America.

The evangelical dramaturgy is shaped by belief and by ways of being evangelical. Of particular interest to Stevenson is the ways that evangelical identity itself is framed temporally by the expectations of apocalypticism that are commodified through the *Left Behind* franchise. Stevenson follows the lead of other scholars who claim that this focus on the end of time positions evangelicals intimately into a larger temporal narrative in which they must seek to create spiritual experiences that serve to verify one's own place on the right side of the rapture. The evangelical dramaturgy is a response or venue in which evangelicals might physically enact their personal salvation through what Stevenson calls "engaged orthodoxy." This is accomplished through interactions with spaces that are simultaneously material and spiritual—museums, amusement parks, and institutional settings that resemble their secular counterparts but also allow the adherent to posit her ontological stance as somehow transcending them. According to Stevenson, these experiences are ones that point towards and reinforce a Christian collectivity while also nurturing a strikingly intimate and individualized encounter.

The subsequent chapters walk the reader through case studies that highlight the strategies found within the evangelical dramaturgy. Stevenson's case studies are a well-chosen sample of popular evangelical landscapes. While each chapter builds upon the analysis of previous ones, the chapters can be read and assigned separately as individual case studies for courses examining religion and contemporary society.

Chapter Two introduces the reader to the Holy Land Experience (HLE), a Christian theme-park in Orlando, Florida. The HLE's location in Orlando enables evangelicals to enact an alternative religiously-infused tourism that stands in contrast to a visit to Disney World. Stevenson discusses the park as a whole but focuses her analysis on one particular exhibition, the Last Supper Communion, which is a 20 minute performance where audience members join actors playing Jesus and his disciples in a re-enactment of the Last Supper. This re-enactment is simultaneously a scripted play, religious ritual, worship experience, and historical reconstruction—members of the audience interact with the exhibit by praying aloud, sobbing emotionally, and telling the actor playing Jesus that they love him. Stevenson's analysis draws upon theories on actor-spectator dynamics that point to enactment as the organizing logic or strategy in the Last Supper Communion. She returns to her earlier point about temporality to explain that both the scripted language of the performance and the personal expectations of the audience around the figure of Jesus collapse past, present, and future in a way that "shifts the perceptual event from reenactment to (decentralized and particularized) reexperience" (63).

Chapter Three explores the effects on contemporary evangelical Passion plays, which Stevenson calls, in reference to Mel Gibson's film, "the Gibson Affect." Stevenson's overarching argument is that while we might expect that such performances would steer clear of any suggestion of divine impersonation, the merging of entertainment and devotional acts in Passion plays actually encourages the audience to access the divine vis-à-vis their own physical proximity to

the actors. In her analysis, Stevenson returns to the HLE to analyze its Passion Play by drawing on scholarship from cognitive sciences about mimetic communication processes. Perhaps the most interesting component of this chapter is Stevenson's concluding discussion of the fact that, unlike other Passion plays, the HLE allows its audience to film or photograph the performance. Stevenson argues that the practice of watching the film through the lens of a camera screen, "a self-imposed intermediality," individualizes and strengthens the intimate and immediate experience of the Passion (95-96).

Stevenson continues her discussion of the effects of Passion plays in Chapter Four by moving to the embroiled territory of Eureka Springs, Arkansas, which she describes as "part Portland, Oregon, part cozy New England town, part Old West" (123). Eureka Springs—a tourist locale promoted to gay couples, motorcycle gangs, and several counter cultures—serves as an ideal venue for conservative evangelicals to yearn for an imagined Christian landscape of patriotism and nationalism that responds to and engulfs their larger religious and cultural identities. While most of this chapter discusses Eureka Springs' "Great Passion Play," which is significant for its large size and longevity, the highlight of this chapter is her discussion of a dinner theater production that precedes the Passion play. In this section, Stevenson notes the conjoining of evangelicalism to a particular brand of American patriotism that is explicitly heteronormative, militaristic, and conservative. In a particularly moving passage, Stevenson describes her own fear as a gay person during the penultimate song, which lumps together homosexuality with a number of "abominations," including guns in school, drug addictions, and restrictions of religious practices in public settings. The song garnered an enthusiastic—and for Stevenson, a frightening—response from the audience, which Stevenson argues prepares the audience to then interpret the Passion narrative to be implicitly tied with perceived evangelical disenfranchisement.

In Chapter Four, Stevenson moves to another embattled ground in the evangelical imagination: debates between science and biblical literalism. To do so, she analyzes the infamous Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky. In this chapter, Stevenson argues that the ideology of the museum seeks to reverse preconceived assumptions about evangelicals as close-minded and rigid, and rather reveals that it is evolutionists who possess a stringent mindset. In particular, Stevenson explores the ways that the Creation Museum encourages a communal identity for evangelicals while simultaneously supporting intimacy on the individualized level, which is necessitated by the same characteristics of personal reexperience that animate the evangelical dramaturgy.

Stevenson's final chapter, which constitutes upwards of one fourth of the book's text, almost reads like a second section or sequel to her earlier chapters by expanding and extending her arguments about the production and effects of the evangelical dramaturgy to an analysis of several well-known American mega-churches. In so doing, Stevenson analyzes the buildings, the services, and the institutional structure of mega-churches.

At some points, *Sensation Devotion* contains too much telling, rather than showing. Stevenson has clearly done excellent research: she carefully documents her sources and explains the works of

those theorists and scholars whose research she utilizes. A more ethnographically-minded reader may find her extensive discussion of other people's scholarship takes away from Stevenson's own case studies and analysis.

In addition, I found myself resistant to the normative model of evangelical identity and presence that Stevenson assumes. At times, her framing of evangelicals reflects popular images of eschatologically-minded nuclear families with the bible in one hand and the American flag in the other. Her discussion of audience participation—shouting Hallelujah during the Last Supper Communion and the enthusiastic applause at the dinner theatre in Eureka Springs—appears to paint all evangelicals with the same brush. Surely, I thought, some of the participants lack the homogenous earnestness that Stevenson sees enacted in evangelical dramaturgy. How many of the participants at the Holy Land Experience, seemingly moved by the Last Supper Communion, are actually engaged with mundane thoughts? Did they use the time set aside for worship to calculate the distance to the closest Chick-Fil-A or wonder whether they remember to turn off their sprinkler systems back home? Surely, there were others at the Eureka Springs performance who did not share the political exuberance that Stevenson noted. I am reminded that Matthew Engelke and Matt Tomlinson have called us to consider not only those instances of meaning-making that achieve prescribed aims but also those instances in which performative and communicative practices fail.² A task which, when done properly, not only enriches our understanding of the lived experiences of our subjects of study but also exposes the fault-lines of our own disciplinary frameworks.

Along with an interesting and informative analysis of evangelical performance practices, Stevenson's book also offers the scholar of North American religions insight into the ways that our own discipline is interpreted by scholars in other fields. Of particular interest to the readers of *Practical Matters*, this book serves as a guide and point of departure for future collaborations in the field of theater and performance studies. So, to pick up the dinner date analogy with which I began, while I am not sure that Stevenson is "the one" for my old friend, I am eager to make plans for next weekend. I happen to know that a church in my city offers rapture ready workshops that I hope that we can check one out and grab a cup of coffee afterwards to continue to get to know each other.

Rebekka King
Middle Tennessee State University

Notes

¹ Jill Stevenson, *Performance, Cognitive Theory, and Devotional Culture: Sensual Piety in Late Medieval York* (New York: Palgrave, 2010).

² Matthew Engelke and Matt Tomlinson (eds.), *The Limits of Meaning: Case Studies in the Anthropology of Christianity* (New York: Berghahn, 2006).