Book Review


In *Biblical Porn: Affect, Labor, and Pastor Mark Driscoll’s Evangelical Empire*, Jessica Johnson examines the production of gendered and religious subjectivity, collective religious identity, conviction and repentance in a discerning yet sensitive analysis of the—now dissolved—American Evangelical mega-church, Mars Hill, under the leadership of Pastor Mark Driscoll.

Johnson’s study is drawn from a decade of ethnographic research including two years of fieldwork in which Johnson was immersed in the church culture, attending ‘not only sermons but also gospel classes required for membership; seminars on how to embody biblical gender and sexuality; a women’s “training day” called “Christian Womanhood in a Feminist Culture”; and Film and Technology nights’ (p. 13). *Biblical Porn* seamlessly crosses between studies of religion, anthropology, cultural, and gender studies as Johnson focuses on the uses of affect, digital media, surveillance and voluntary labour as a means of creating and protecting collective identity, and of aligning, disciplining and controlling individual Christians within a church community. Johnson considers Mars Hill an ‘affective ecology’ or Evangelical Empire, producing and marketing ‘biblical porn’, eliciting loyalty and church sanctioned sexual behaviours from congregants through their affective responses, confession, accountability and voluntary labour.

Johnson uses the term ‘biblical porn’ to refer to ‘the affective labor of mediating, branding, and embodying Driscoll’s teaching on “biblical” masculinity, femininity and sexuality as a social imaginary, marketing strategy, and biopolitical instrument’ (p. 7), and compares the production of biblical porn with conventional porn, arguing that both serve to shape a person’s understanding of what constitutes normative gender and sexuality.

In chapter 1, Johnson details the use of affect, particularly in militarised and sexualised discourse, at Mars Hill as a means to align
church members with the message and mission of the church. In chapter 2, Johnson explores religious conviction, suggesting that as church discipline brought together church authority and scriptural authority, whereby ideological dissent becomes a matter of faith and sin, a sense of religious conviction was produced as negative affect; fear, guilt, shame and self-doubt are re-narrativised as lack of faith or sinning. The required response is confession, repentance and submitting to authority.

In chapter 3, Johnson focuses on The Peasant Princess, Driscoll’s sermon series on the Song of Songs, and how this was used to promote correct performances of ‘biblical’ gender and sexuality. Members were encouraged to conform through practices of confession and the promise that within (heterosexual) marriage virtually all sexual acts were permissible; in this way church controlled sexuality was masked as sexual freedom.

Building on her analysis of Driscoll’s anti-porn but sex-positive rhetoric, in chapter 4 Johnson moves to discuss how the branding, marketing and publishing strategies employed at Mars Hill mimic the strategies of mainstream porn and reality television. Following criticism from popular evangelical bloggers and authors, Johnson’s discussion focuses on the buying of ‘best seller’ status and the myth of the inherently charismatic and successful celebrity preacher, likening the working of the evangelical publishing industry to the military industrial complex. Noting how baptisms were used as a metric for numeric growth, Johnson highlights the amenability of capitalist and evangelical interests.

Johnson begins chapter 5 by considering what it is to be duped, which leads into discussion of spiritual abuse and deception. This discussion focuses on Mars Hill’s Campaigns material—collections of sermons, study guides and audio-visual material, as well as an ebook, Campaigns—which worked to create a Mars Hill brand by aligning staff and congregants (and potentially other churches) with the church mission. Johnson also explores the accounts of those who failed to align, who became affective, spiritual and physical outsiders, as congregants and staff walked away or were asked to leave.

Johnson demonstrates throughout Biblical Porn that gendered, sexual and Christian identity are entwined, and that embodying ‘correct’ gendered and sexual behaviour becomes a form of spiritually serving and protecting the church; for women at Mars Hill, being sexually available within marriage was a way to strengthen the faith of their husbands, and by extension, the whole church community. However, it is Johnson’s analysis of the church as an affective ecology that is both captivating and insightful, as Johnson challenges the reader to reconsider religious
conviction and church involvement not so much as an individual choice or action, but as an experience that is firmly enmeshed within an affectively networked community.

As Mars Hill dissolved, questions of spiritual abuse, misogyny, bullying and financial mismanagement surfaced. Johnson’s study of the rapid growth and eventual dissolution of Mars Hill requires us to look beyond the simple explanations of congregants being ‘duped’ or ‘brainwashed’, or understanding the abuse of authority as falling to the actions of a few—or even just one—charismatic but misguided individuals. If, as Johnson suggests, conviction and conversion happen within an affective ecology, then religion is public, not private, communal not individual.

Johnson’s analysis speaks to both religious and secular institutions, as it asks us to consider the intersection of discipline, emotion and power. If we understand communities, churches, institutions or nations as affective ecologies, it follows that the circulation of affect allows community leaders and members to invoke fear, guilt and shame, as a means to encourage and elicit loyalty, conformity, labour and service. Though focused on the experiences of those at Mars Hill, Johnson’s thorough and highly readable research makes Biblical Porn a valuable and relevant text not only for students and scholars of religion and gender studies, but also for members of the public who are, or have been, members and leaders of Evangelical church communities.

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