

MONIKA SAUTER, *Devoted! Frauen in der evangelikalen Populärkultur der USA* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017), 204 pp.

In *Devoted!*, American studies scholar Monika Sauter introduces the reader to an eclectic selection of contemporary published and broadcasted materials—from novels, self-help books, fitness guides, films, and documentaries to the homepage of a chastity organization—which she uses to investigate the construction of evangelical femininity. Following a particular interest in feelings, Sauter focuses on the topics of sexuality, love, body image, and patriotism. She argues that evangelical culture cannot be strictly separated from mainstream or secular culture; rather processes of cross-fertilization and overlapping meaning not only exist but explain the crossover appeal of certain evangelical products—what Sauter calls “corresponding feelings” (11). Evangelical consumer capitalism thus forges a “postfeminist” image of women as simultaneously submissive and self-assured, as caretakers of families and independent businesswomen and consumers. Sauter argues that normative evangelical femininity congeals in the image of the white, heterosexual but chaste before marriage, fit and beautiful middle-class woman with rural and patriotic sensibilities.

The book’s thesis that there is no binary division between secular and religious marketplaces is both predictable and misleading. For most of human history a division between religious and secular aspects of life was unthinkable and even contemporary believers neither necessarily aspire to nor successfully implement a compartmentalization of their lives into private-religious and public-secular realms.¹ Accordingly, there has never been a neat separation of religious and non-religious aspects of life—or commerce. Consumption is colored by desires and beliefs, including religious ones. Modern U.S.-American evangelicals, for example, skillfully used marketing strategies to sell religion, for example in the form of non-denominational Bible institutes or print products.² Following the business-turn

¹ See David Kim, David McCalman and Dan Fisher, “The Sacred/Secular Divide and the Christian Worldview,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 19.2 (August 2012): 203-08.

² See Timothy Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the*

in religious studies, scholars have emphasized the interconnectedness of money, markets, marketing, and religion.³ What seems truly surprising is not that an evangelical product like the highly successful *Left-Behind* book series made secular best-seller lists (14) but rather that secular businesses largely ignored the huge evangelical market during the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, since the turn of the century, large non-religious publishing firms such as Bertelsmann and Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation have bought evangelical publishing houses.⁴ Current scholarship on evangelical media production emphasizes the exploitation of market segmentation strategies that have replaced outdated mass-marketing strategies.⁵ Emphasizing niche-marketing strategies and highlighting the diversification of the products complicates the narrative of an evangelical consumer capitalism as told by Sauter. In her reading, evangelical popular culture can only be an “evangelical appropriation and (re-)sacralization” (my translation, 22) of different genres that are thus coded as nonreligious. In contrast to scholars like Darren Dochuk or Timothy Gloege who have shown that people could be both evangelical and business innovators, shaping U.S.-American economy, culture, and politics, Sauter implicitly frames evangelical popular culture as a reaction to trends within secular culture. This is also echoed in her thesis about evangelical femininity, which she describes as “postfeminist,” suggesting not so much an interaction and shared repertoire

Marketing of Modern Evangelicalism (Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P, 2015). On print and media cultures see Daniel Vaca’s forthcoming work on *Commercial Religion: Media, Markets, and the Spirit of Evangelicalism*.

³ See Amanda Porterfield et al. (eds.), *The Business Turn in American Religious History* (New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2017).

⁴ Evangelical imprints now constitute the religious segment of most commercial publishers, though some publishers also have distinct Catholic imprints. On Evangelicalism and mass media see: Anja-Maria Bassimir and Kathrin Kohle, “Evangelikale und Massenmedien, Strukturen in den USA,” Frederik Elwert et al. (eds.), *Handbuch Evangelikalismus* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017), 409-423.

⁵ See Daniel Vaca’s forthcoming work on *Commercial Religion: Media, Markets, and the Spirit of Evangelicalism*.

but a chronology: evangelicals react to secular culture.

Sauter's book originated from her PhD thesis in American Studies at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, and it conforms to the classical German dissertation structure: There is a thematic introduction, a thorough literature review and an elaborate theoretical treatise followed by four analytical chapters—also densely interspersed with quotes from and references to secondary literature—and, finally, a short conclusion recapitulating the main arguments. The book is written in German but, as is still common, quotes are given in English.

In her theoretical chapter, Sauter reviews a broad spectrum of theories, including affect theory, theories of implicit knowledge and presence, and theories of the public sphere. She argues that feeling is central to evangelical religiosity, making the experience of the sacred an integral part of the implicit knowledge of the world—including what it means to be a woman—and—because this “corresponds” to notions of femininity shared by secular culture—creates a “public feeling” that appeals to religious and non-religious consumers. Despite her impressive command of theories, key terms such as “evangelical” and “popular culture” remain diffuse. In both instances the author affirms that she uses the terms in their “broad” meaning. Tracing the history of white evangelicalism in the particular vein of neo-evangelicalism and the political New Christian Right, Sauter then uses “evangelical” as an umbrella term for conservative Protestants that also includes black and other ethnic evangelicals and Pentecostal Christians whose histories she does not recount. The discussion of the term “popular culture” is relegated to a footnote. Sauter reviews various definitions, including John Storey's assertion that “popular culture” is an “empty conceptual category,” concluding that she adheres to a “broad concept of culture” (my translation, 40). The insubstantiality of these terms is problematic because *Devoted!* is supposed to be a work about evangelical popular culture.

This fuzziness of definition is intensified by the fact that Sauter does not reveal her criteria for the selection of the materials she analyzes. She chose heterogeneous print and broadcast materials that include works of fiction as well as advertisement and documentaries. Since Sauter talks about popular culture and cross-over appeal, I assume that these are

products that are consumed by a large number of Americans, but in the book I found few numbers to substantiate that guess. Are these works the most popular in a given category? Footnotes, for example in the chapter on chick and sistah literature, conversely show that the selected novels were a choice among many possibilities (97). Do these works best illustrate her arguments? The analysis of black sistah literature and the affirmation that this genre appeals to and creates a distinct black female identity (111) complicates Sauter's claim of whiteness as part of normative evangelical identity. Do these works showcase ideals of evangelical femininity? At least in the case of the documentary *Fire from the Heartland*, directed by former Breitbart News' Steve Bannon, a devout Catholic, the focus is on political conservative activism rather than religion and the protagonists include evangelicals but also Catholics like Phyllis Schlafly and conservative activists whose religious ties are not well known, like political commentator Ann Coulter, whose religion is described as nondenominational, or TV host S.E. Cupp, an alleged atheist. Do these products have a unique appeal for evangelical women? The book does not talk about reception. Were these works created by devout evangelicals or according to a certain strategy of marketing to evangelicals? The book does not discuss authorship, the process of product development, or marketing. In the case of the TV show *Preachers' Daughters*, Sauter herself wonders whether this is a fitting example, admitting that the show cannot be read exclusively as an evangelical discourse (81). In several cases, it is unclear what the object of analysis is. For example, *True Love Waits* is a company that sells paraphernalia for purity rituals where girls promise their fathers to remain chaste until marriage. Sauter recounts the history of the company, cites the company's instructions for purity balls and purity prayers, and analyzes customer reviews for purity rings posted on the company's website. Where exactly does she locate the “evangelical construction of femininity” (my translation). With the company, the product, the event, the consumer, or the customer reviews? It is not evident why these materials permit an analysis of evangelical popular culture.

In the first analytical chapter, Sauter investigates the online presence of the organization *True Love Waits* (founded in 1993), the first series of the TV reality show *Preachers'*

Daughters (Lifetime, 2013), and the novel *The Last Days of California* (Mary Miller, 2014). She traces the arguments for why women should remain “pure” and examines how purity is construed as a predominantly white privilege. The chapter works without the labored references to the concept of “presence” and is strongest in showing the conflation of marriage and purity rituals as well as the diversion of women’s desire away from sexuality and towards market consumption. In the following chapter, Sauter examines the notion of romantic love in the (white) chick literature novel *The Whitney Chronicles* (Judy Baer, 2004) and the (black) sistah literature novel *He’s Fine But Is He Saved?* (Kimberley Brooks, 2004). Adhering to established patterns of romance literature, the protagonists in both novels are searching for the perfect man. Sauter shows that in the context of these novels a perfect man is synonymous with a godly, Christian man. Furthermore, both novels follow a “postfeminist” logic of simultaneous empowerment and domestication by portraying the female protagonists as strong, independent characters who want to become good wives. The normative evangelical beauty standard is that of a slim, white woman, Sauter argues in the next chapter; yet, given that the analysis is based on an inspection of evangelical fitness guides, the emphasis on a fit body comes as no surprise. Finally, the last analytical chapter looks at conservative political activism, focusing on the narrative of a former Planned Parenthood director turned pro-life activist in the autobiography *Unplanned* (Abby Johnson, 2010), and on female conservatives like former vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin, author Deneen Borelli, and Tea

Party Patriots co-founder Jenny Beth Martin portrayed in the documentary *Fire from the Heartland* (2010). Sauter argues that appeals to the experience of or potential for motherhood became effective emotional tools in the repertoire of conservative political activists.

Sauter claims that evangelical constructions of femininity draw upon implicit knowledge that affirm evangelical identity and function as a bridge into secular culture; she writes: “Constructions of evangelical femininity make present implicit knowledge, which not only affirm a distinct evangelical identity, but provide an intracultural ideological coherence between nominally evangelical and nominally secular culture” (my translation, 177). Since believers’ self-identification, theological distinctions, or differences in religious practice are disregarded, it appears that “evangelicalism” in this book is not a religious category. Instead, Sauter’s study appears to follow a certain unstated logic that refers to all moral and political conservatives as evangelicals. In this respect, Sauter is in good company. Long-time political observers Ted Jelen and Kenneth Wald lament that pollsters and journalists have dismissed religious differences to the extent that “evangelicalism” is now a political designation.⁶ With the disclaimer that the book has little to say about religion and despite the fact that the “construction of femininity” remains a strangely authorless concept because the process of construction is never addressed, the book presents an interesting exploration of a particular image of conservative femininity in the contemporary United States.

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⁶ Ted G. Jelen and Kenneth D. Wald, “Evangelicals and President Trump: The Not So Odd Couple,” Mark J. Rozell and Clyde Wilcox (eds.), *God at the Grassroots 2016: The Christian Right in American Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), 28.