
In *American Possessions*, Sean McCloud develops two main arguments. First, he claims that the Third Wave evangelical “imaginary”—that is, that collection of theology, rituals, and other elements that comprise the tradition’s *raisons d’être*—is best characterized by the themes of “the consumerist, the haunted, and the therapeutic” (3, 12), and, more importantly, that these attendant emphases are indicative of American religious culture more broadly. McCloud does not propose that these are the only—or even necessarily the best—but only helpful, lenses through which to analyze American religious culture (12–13). Personally, I believe that he sells himself short by minimizing the critical importance that consumerism, interest in the supernatural and paranormal, and therapeutic individualism, have in understanding American religious culture, given that a growing body of research in both the United States and throughout the Western world corroborate the centrality that these three themes occupy within late modern religion. McCloud’s second main argument is that Third Wave evangelicalism—again, symptomatic of wider American religious culture—directly engages with neoliberal discourses on agency, economics, history, and politics. McCloud deftly demonstrates how Third Wave evangelicalism both complements and contests neoliberal ideology, suggesting that American religious culture—particularly its more conservative expressions—has a much more complex relationship with broader cultural, economic, and political debates than may have previously been assumed.

Although there are certainly more, below I describe three particular aspects of McCloud’s book that might be of special interest to readers of this journal. First—which will interest those who study the classification of Pentecostalism—is his decision to use Peter C. Wagner’s term “Third Wave” rather than the broader terms “Charismatic,” “neo-Pentecostal,” or even simply “Pentecostal” in order to describe the complex of individuals and organizations that practice the type of spiritual warfare that he discusses in his book (6–9, 110). Second is his fascinating discussion of Third Wave evangelicalism’s seemingly inconsistent use in its own religious literature of the same “grimoires”—especially knowledge disseminated in horror films and the literature of various malignant new religious
movements—that this same religious literature itself abhors and prohibits (20–44). Finally, some may find instructive McCloud’s discussion of the close relationship between Third Wave evangelicals and the Republican Party, which somewhat anticipated the rather dramatic bifurcation of the American voting public along religious lines that was observed during the recent 2016 Presidential election (6, 9, 12, 30–34, 43, 88, 114–15).

As interesting as such a book might be, Sean McCloud’s American Possessions is not simply an examination of exorcism rituals among contemporary American evangelicals. Unlike the title might initially suggest, McCloud’s book is both a careful and convincing explanation of Third Wave evangelical subculture that uses the movement’s theology and rituals surrounding spiritual warfare as a kind of Rosetta Stone that can open the door to a more complete understanding of this influential, growing, and global religious movement. More than a set of beliefs and practices, McCloud explains that the Third Wave imaginary should more accurately be viewed as a framework that provides practitioners with a particular lens through which to understand both the world and their place in that world.

What constitutes appropriate behaviour? What elements of culture and society—both foreign and domestic—are non-polluting? Conversely, what components of culture and society are helpful for constructing and displaying an acceptable version of “self” to both coreligionists and others? What places—homes, businesses, public spaces, cities, even entire countries—are safe to inhabit or visit? What is the correct political party or position? How does one recover from the consequences of addiction, trauma, and the circumstances of one’s family history? These—McCloud argues—are questions that Third Wave evangelicals need not concern themselves with. For those willing to sublimate their opinions regarding these and related questions to the Third Wave imaginary, the movement promises to remove—or at least significantly ameliorate—a great deal of the uncertainty that is, perhaps, late modernity’s most defining characteristic. Third Wave evangelicals, then, can be seen as another expression of the larger Pentecostal tradition’s uncanny ability to make sense of the modern world, which is—it could be argued—the great genius of Pentecostalism. If this skillful analysis of one of America’s most important contemporary religious movements is not enough, McCloud pushes his analysis a step
further by applying his insights to the discussion of the broader relationship between consumerism, identity, individualism, agency, neoliberalism, and American religion.

This book is required reading for all students and scholars of Pentecostalism, American religion, and the relationship between religion and consumerism.

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