Reviews


Pop culture images of religion are often the visible signals of a sometimes uneasy confluence of factors. Fervour in the early months of 2006 over the publication of cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper is an example of how the visual culture of mass media can instigate public debate and highlight tensions over religious imagery, belief, and identity. *Visual Habits: Nuns, Feminism, and American Postwar Popular Culture* provides a snapshot of these sometimes fraught relationships in the ferment of social change in postwar America. During this time, from 1950 to 1971, American ideals of individualism and modernity, the emergence of the feminist movement, and changes in the institutional structure and influence of the Catholic Church in America were intersecting in intricate ways. *Visual Habits* teases apart the complex and multiple forces that shaped representations of nuns during this period through an unpacking of a variety of media, including film, television, and popular music. Films such as *The Sound of Music* and *Lilies of the Field* and television shows such as *The Flying Nun* are perhaps the most readily recalled instances of the proliferation of representations of nuns in postwar America. While it may seem incongruous that the nun—synonymous for many with chastity and virginity—became such a visible icon at the same time that feminism was calling for a sexual revolution, Rebecca Sullivan suggests that the nun was not simply a reactionary image that positioned the chaste nun as a morally superior alternative to the sexually liberated woman. Rather, images of nuns in popular culture were potent visual signifiers encoded with a host of sometimes conflicting and often fluctuating meanings.

While it is easy to assume that popular images circulating in mass media and mass entertainment are distorted representations produced at a distance from the everyday experiences and practices of religious practitioners, nuns or “women religious” were often agents in the construction of their own image. The publication of vocational material, which was meant to encourage young girls to contemplate joining a convent, was an obvious medium through which women religious were able to disseminate images of themselves and their religious practices. These women also had a hand in the literal production of their image when they acted as

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advisors to film producers seeking to create “authentic” images of nuns and convent life in movies such as *The Nun’s Story*. They were equally influential in generating images of themselves through their participation as folk musicians in the popular music scenes of the sixties, when “singing nuns” made appearances on the pop charts and on television (including the influential *Ed Sullivan Show*). The participation of women religious in the constitution of their own image allowed them to address some of the misrepresentation of their lives and practices.

Whether accurate or not, images of nuns functioned for a time as a form of “advertising” for vocational life. Sullivan’s work covers the rise and fall of the popularity of nuns not only in pop culture, but also in terms of vocations. In 1966 the number of women religious belonging to Catholic orders worldwide was at its peak before starting what some may call a precipitous decline. Sullivan argues, however, that there is no simple correlation between the popularity of images of nuns and the decrease in vocations. Both came at a time when the social roles of women were transforming from the domestic roles of wife and mother to roles securely rooted in the public spheres of the nation. Initially, vocations represented an alternative for women, allowing them to eschew the prescriptive roles of motherhood and marriage, enabling them to work (often as nurses or teachers), and providing them with the opportunity to travel via the networks of Catholic missionary ministries. However, with the advent of the feminist movement and the birth of the “modern” woman, this alternative held less sway. During this time nuns were caught between representing the tradition of the Catholic Church and the modernity of the American nation. The highly mediated image of the nun was made to do the difficult work of representing the “updating” of the Catholic religion in America.

Much has been made about the assumed schism between religion and modernity. Popular images of nuns in postwar America bridged this assumed gap, representing both the Americanism of Catholicism and the efforts of the Catholic Church to align with conceptions of modernity. Media reports of nuns during this period often explicitly sought to publicize efforts toward convent reform and to disavow a perceived public opinion that convents were “unnatural” and that the vows of chastity and homosocial relationships within them were “unhealthy” and “wasteful” (as viable women were being taken off the market, as it were). These media representations promoted an image of nuns not dissimilar from the image of the “all-American girl,” presenting nuns as playful and naïve. While this figure mediated between Catholicism and Americanism, allowing nuns to find a place in modern American culture, Sullivan points out that it also sentimentalized and feminized the religion itself. This feminization of religion, through the image of the Catholic nun, carried a powerful symbolic force that intersected with notions of modernity bound up with the ideals of postwar America.

An avenue of inquiry evoked by Sullivan’s analysis is how the depiction of nuns as playful and childlike contributed to a pervasive assumption that religion is part of the collective past of modern Western culture. As Jenny Franchot explains in “Unseemly Commemoration: Religion, Fragments, and the Icon,” “just as the past is ‘religious,’ religion itself is a sign of the quaint scaled down into a memory like our conception of childhood” (Franchot, 2001, p. 39). This distanciation of religion intersects with depictions of nuns as naïve and childlike. Even though such
depictions may have stemmed from an explicit desire by both the media and the Catholic Church to “update” the image of Catholicism in America, illustrate the processes of convent reform, and dispel stereotypes about Catholicism and convent life, childlike images of nuns—made to bear the symbolic weight of the Catholic religion—also rendered religion itself small, diminutive, and of the past. Franchot argues that “[r]eligion has become its own relic, its pastness an insignia of the inaccessible but also, as with our childhoods, of the authentic. . . . As a memento of Western childhood, religion is thus miniaturized into objects available for visual appropriation as commodity, souvenir, ornament” (Franchot, 2001, p. 40). This is in part what came to pass for the popularized images of the nun, which, as Sullivan points out, were transformed into kitsch icons.

Yet despite charting the rise and fall of the popularity of nuns in the visual culture of Western media and entertainment, Sullivan avoids memorializing her subjects in “stereotypes of lost belief.” She resists transforming the once seemingly flourishing culture of women religious into a thing of the past, something that ceded to the pressures of modernity and modernization. Instead, she places the changing symbolic weight of images of nuns on a trajectory of social change, part and parcel of the ways in which North American culture came to make sense of identity and meaning, gender and religiosity in the postwar era. As many scholars have pointed out, religion and media are not distinct cultural practices. Both are intrinsic parts of the discourses that define the limits of identity. Popular images of nuns in postwar America, Sullivan argues, came to embody tensions around notions of femininity and women’s social roles, the connection of religion with national identity, and the changing role and influence of the Catholic Church in response to discourses of modernity. Through the image of the nun, religion and media can be understood as co-producers of a set of “discursive rules” that circumscribe the limits of identity. Through analysis of both popular representations of nuns and how those representations came to be, Sullivan provides a template for understanding how popular ideas of religion are transcribed onto the female image and examines the strategies employed in the struggles for symbolic power that came to be embodied in the image of the nun.

References


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