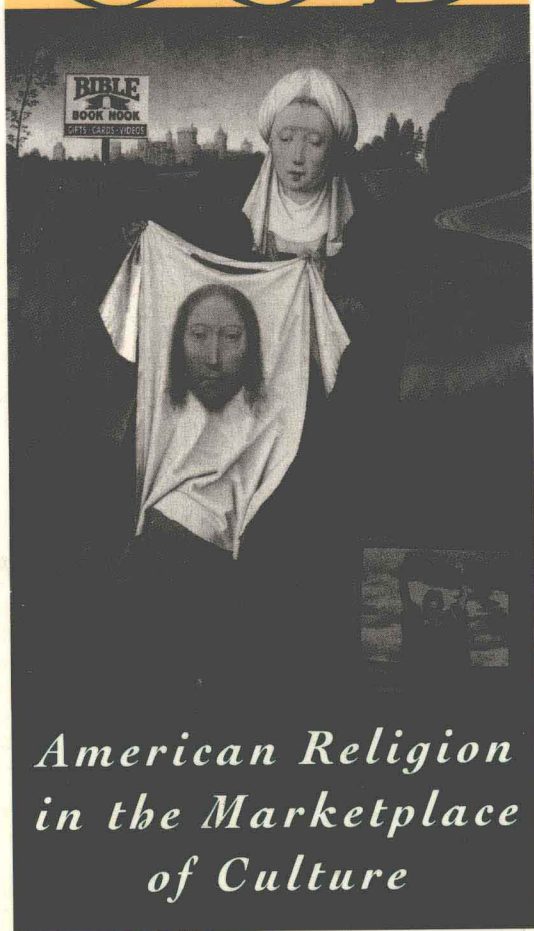


SELLING GOD



*American Religion
in the Marketplace
of Culture*

R. LAURENCE MOORE

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In the same year, an invitation from the University of Notre Dame allowed me to begin thinking about the material that is now Chapter 3 of this book. Thomas Kselman is a good questioner and generous host, who published the lecture in his edited volume *Belief in History. Innovative Approaches to European and American Religion*. Another opportunity, this time to deliver the Tanner Lecture at the annual meeting of the Mormon Historical Society, started me thinking about the problems now contained in Chapter 4.

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As for Lauris McKee, the dedication is small thanks indeed. She has made the days of writing this book joyous and serene. She is my smartest critic and my best friend.

*Lancaster, Pa.
June 1993*

R. L. M.

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SELLING GOD

Introduction

As I purposed to make a considerable stay here, it gratified me to learn that there is no longer the want of harmony between the townspeople and pilgrims. . . . Many passengers stop to take their pleasure or make their profit in the Fair, instead of going onward to the Celestial City. Indeed, such are the charms of the place, that people often affirm it to be the true and only heaven; stoutly contending that there is no other, that those who seek further are mere dreamers, and that, if the fabled brightness of the Celestial City lay but a bare mile beyond the gates of Vanity, they would not be fools enough to go thither.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Celestial Railroad"
(on entering Vanity Fair)

I follow religion with much the same exuberant spirit that many of my friends follow baseball. Readers offended by the suggestion that religion exerts an appeal analogous to that of a form of commercial entertainment might as well stop here. Much more of the same will follow. However, my intention in making the suggestion is not in the least flippant. Religion is a curious and somewhat unique national passion (in that way, quite like baseball) that demands an explanation beyond the observation that Americans are especially pious. The assertion of piety explains nothing. Moreover, it often emanates from sources that render it suspect; for example, from Madison Avenue ads invented to elect politicians who find a divine national mission easier to invoke than a set of cogent policy proposals. A lot in this book suggests that there are significant ruptures between religion and piety. That is not my primary point in drawing a connection between religion and various forms of commercial entertainment. I am trying to explain how Americans managed a formal separation of church and state while leaving religion a central component of their traditions of laicity. Besides, the connection is not my own invention.

For example, a media analysis in the *New York Times*, dated April 2, 1987, directed some rare appreciative comments at the PTL (Praise The Lord) television ministry of Jim and Tammy Bakker.¹ This was shortly after the couple had been exposed for the sexual and tax scandals that would wipe out their audience of an estimated fifteen million viewers and result in a jail term for Jim Bakker. In reflecting on their past success, the analyst John Corry gave Jim and Tammy high marks for their good-humored, relaxed programs. It was effective and sincere presentation, not fraud, that accounted for the willingness of viewers to send them money. "The evangelists will continue," Corry concluded, "because they're good at what they do." The sophistication, the slickness of "wonderful packaging," and the suspected play-acting all might constitute a degradation of religion. But the Bakkers and the other TV evangelists had moved with the times. According to the analyst, "we are a long way here from a revivalist tent show."

Are we indeed? Lying behind the analysis of the Bakkers in the *New York Times*, as well as the more usual hostile reaction to their work, is a notion about the growing worldliness of religion. For Corry the TV evangelists had simply learned rules about how to appeal to a television audience from successful talk-show hosts, especially Johnny Carson. Carson had demonstrated just how far "sheer amiability" could go in producing income both for himself and for his sponsors. Folding up their revival tents forever, the Bakkers, Jimmy Swaggart, Robert Schuller, Rex Humbard, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson revamped their format in careful imitation of the entertainment media. With evidence of this sort

of shameless clerical capitulation to worldly fame and fortune, never mind the sexual misbehavior and high living, who could doubt that we live in a secular age?

Yet leaving aside the Bakkers and their former associates, some of whom fell by the wayside, we need to think carefully about what we mean when we use the word "secular" to differentiate contemporary religious life in the United States from what preceded it. Was religious life in the United States ever demonstrably less "worldly" than what one now finds on TV? Maybe, depending on what you mean by the terms. But equivalents to televangelism are easy to find and were always widespread and popular. The road to the PTL cable network was a long time in the making. Anyone wishing to affirm the reality of a present-day secular world has more to do than point to the gulf separating Jonathan Edwards from Oral Roberts.

In 1991, 90 percent of all Americans identified themselves as religious.² Most Americans go to church—in percentage terms as many as a hundred years ago and vastly more than most contemporary Europeans. National leaders lace their public statements with religious sentiments with a frequency surpassed perhaps only in Middle Eastern countries. Religious symbols and references crowd into our marketplaces, our commercial media, our sporting arenas, and our places of entertainment. Even our public schools, now supposedly denuded of every trace of formal religion, remain embroiled in religious controversy.

However, if secularization inadequately describes contemporary culture and society in the United States, the mere statistical counter-assertion that organized religion remains important obscures much that has happened over time. Most students of the American past, trained to spot what has changed, view claims about the lessening importance of religion as generally valid. Some important things are not the same as they once were. For example, there is measurable truth to the proposition that organized churches lost much of their power to enforce moral sanctions during the course of the nineteenth century, even against their own members. Many Americans, especially well-educated Americans, do not go to church these days and suffer no social stigma as a result. For a long time the most privileged part of being Protestant in the United States was the freedom to walk away from that identification without becoming socially lost. Now many American Catholics and Jews are equally privileged. Religious controversy, something that once provided young children with their first taste of intellectual argument and debate and furnished the chief rationale for "higher" education, no longer plays a necessary part in stimulating academic curiosity and growth. The history of the changing curriculum offered by American universities since the middle of the nineteenth century tells this tale sufficiently. As an

influence over what is deemed "acceptable" in the public life of the nation, individual religious denominations exercise clout in ways that are not very different from the ways of local PTAs, Rotary clubs, or the Modern Language Association.

Yet, I insist, religion is pervasive, even if it is also compartmentalized and in some contexts marginalized. A major thesis of this book is that much of what we usually mean by speaking of secularization has to do not with the disappearance of religion but its commodification, the ways in which churches have grown by participation in the market, or more specifically how religious influences established themselves in the forms of commercial culture that emerged in the nineteenth century, turning the United States into a flowering Eden of leisure industries by the middle of the twentieth. This is not a history of the fortunes of individual denominations. It is a study of religious influence in determining the taste of people who were learning to purchase "culture" as a means of self-improvement and relaxation.

"Commercial culture" (or comparable terms such as "marketplace of culture" and "culture industry") is a problematic concept, but it has, I think, a reasonably clear meaning in this book. One way to define it is by setting it against other uses of the word "culture." To Matthew Arnold and to many other aesthetically minded people in the nineteenth century, culture was a quality of being, the attainment of elevated taste and refinement that came with proper breeding and education. It was most certainly not something that one purchased. The idea of commercial or marketed culture also differs from the meaning that anthropologists assign to culture. Their view of culture as the sum total of humanly created symbol systems, artifacts, ideologies, and behavior codes through which people order and understand their world is a relevant concept herein. I often use the word culture in the anthropological sense. But the particular term "commercial culture" denotes something narrower, a more restricted arena.

"Commercial culture" sits awkwardly between the meanings of culture used by Arnold and by anthropologists. On the side nearest to Arnold, it designates a number of commodities that are marketed with the promise of their being helpful, indeed essential, to any person wishing to attain "culture." To consume them in large quantities is a way to indicate that one is "cultured." Such commodities include art, opera, ballet, legitimate theater, and the "Five-Foot Shelf of Harvard Classics." "Aids" to culture were sold before the nineteenth century, but for various reasons industrialization vastly expanded the market for them. More important, in the United States the expansion of the marketplace of culture in the nineteenth century entailed a significant democratization that brought commercial culture and popular culture into close proximity. The cultural

commodities just mentioned were directed mainly at people of wealth and education. A larger market for culture (the vast majority of it related to what we now call the entertainment and leisure industry) grew up to meet the consuming tastes of ordinary folk. In pre-industrial societies, popular culture rested on traditional folkways that were only marginally related to buying and selling. That was no longer the case after large industries grew up to sell cheap fiction, newspapers, melodrama, minstrel shows, baseball, and movies to the democratic masses. In this sense mass culture is commercial culture carried to the largest possible number of consumers.

Religion's role "in the marketplace of culture" began in the nineteenth century as an effort to influence and in some cases to ban altogether the commodities being offered for sale. Protestants had special problems with markets that existed to make various forms of leisure and entertainment attractive. Religious leaders were not themselves selling anything. Their censorship efforts and prescriptive commentary were intended to exert an independent control over what sorts of items and activities became available for consumption. In these endeavors they extended the hand of cooperation to all laypeople who shared their values and their view that just because people might be willing to pay to do something did not mean that they ought to be able to.

However, the work of religious leaders and moralists in the marketplace of culture was immediately entangled in a related but distinguishable enterprise. Rather than remaining aloof, they entered their own inventive contributions into the market. Initially these were restricted to the market for reading material, but their cultural production diversified. Religious leaders even sponsored "non-profit" organizations with moral and reform goals that competed with the appeal of popular entertainments. By degrees, religion itself took on the shape of a commodity. Supposedly an item that promoted culture in Arnold's sense, religion looked for ways to appeal to all consumers, using the techniques of advertising and publicity employed by other merchants. Many religious leaders tried to stay on the high road of elevated taste. However, America's boom market in religion operated most effectively at the popular end of the market in cultural commodities.

Since I have mentioned Jim Bakker, it may seem disingenuous to say that I am not writing a tale of declension. The narrative does suggest a trend in which religion's initial role "in the marketplace," its acting as an independent influence, gives way to its second role, its cooperation in making itself a competitive item for sale. However, both roles are relevant at the beginning and at the end of the story. Most often they complement each other. Readers who are interested in my judgmental voice will have to wait until the epilogue. At this point, I will offer only a few more observations and disclaimers.

The argument is not that religion has only recently found it necessary to embrace techniques of commercial expansion to get ahead. Commercial aspects of religion are traceable in any century. Markets once flourished in cathedral towns, and the Church shared the profits. Martin Luther complained about the sale of indulgences. Protestants made their crucial conquests in Europe among urban merchants. To say that religion is involved in market trade is not to pose a unique problem of modernity. In fact, the years I intend to cover, a relatively brief and parochial moment in the long course of developing religious traditions in the West, only about two centuries of America's past, is misleading like all chronological frames. The general historical problem about the worldly and commodity aspects of religion would take us back to the origins of Christendom and the organization of religion in Europe.

I will not go back so far, because I am persuaded that transformations of market societies in the nineteenth century as they affected the United States did transform the issues, changing the whole texture and meaning of activities labeled "spiritual." Clearly the First Amendment was a major factor in accelerating the process of religious commodification. Even before it was enacted, as Harry Stout has demonstrated in his work on the eighteenth century, religious leaders, in order to "make religion popular," understood that they had "to compete in a morally neutral and voluntaristic marketplace environment alongside all the goods and services of this world."³ The environment of competition among denominations created by the First Amendment's ban on religious establishment simply accelerated the market rationale. The logic carried a long way. Peter Berger has observed: "The pluralistic situation is above all a market situation. In it religious institutions become consumer commodities. And . . . a good deal of religious activity comes to be dominated by the logic of market economies."⁴ I do not think it perverse to suggest that contemporary religion operates in the marketplace of culture under the purest rules of *laissez-faire* left extant in our "modern" state. Government regulators and tax people put it in a separate category and try to ignore it. No one dares suggest that neon signs blinking the message that "Jesus Saves" may be false advertising.

A great part of our analytical problem lies in the slipperiness of the meanings we attach to terms. A short historical perspective tempts us to imagine that the word "spiritual" only became problematic when Thoreau heard the railroad whistle echo through the woods around Walden Pond. In fact, the categories "religious" and "secular" are social constructions that do not have steady historical meanings. Neither do their binary equivalents like "worldly" and "otherworldly," or "mundane" and "spiritual." "Secular" as a category for understanding historical experience depends for its meaning on the existence of something

called "religion," and vice versa. At a formal level we are stuck with a dialectic that can produce any number of historically different syntheses.

It is even more complicated because for most people in the past the distinctions that elites found useful to settle jurisdictional disputes between church and state were meaningless. In Protestant lands and Catholic lands ordinary people went about their lives, working and worshipping and playing, without drawing impermeable boundaries between the spirit and the flesh. The habit has not vanished. Contemporary American Protestants may take offense when they see, as they certainly do in southern Europe and in Latin America, images of the crucified Christ and the grieving Virgin hanging between political posters and cheesecake calendars. But they have their own special ways to blur boundaries. They are the ones who gave sacred significance to the counting house. Protestants have zealously pledged themselves to God's business. However much we conceptualize with binary minds, however much bureaucratization encourages us to differentiate functions, reality remains hybrid.

My own historical perspective is, for all that, a secular one. It seems axiomatic to me that religion as a system of belief is not inherently different from any other system of belief. It is a construction of human invention and assumes social forms that are both reflective and productive of class, gender, and politics in various historical contexts. The fact that religion is usually bound up with claims about extra-worldly and non-material realities provides it with special content, but not content distinct in its social and cultural production from other ideologies that give direction and meaning to human lives. It does not take much cleverness to see that in all past epochs, despite the distinguishing postures assumed by the church and by the state, each regarding the other as a potential enemy or usurper, the religious and the secular, understood in the least problematic ways, freely intermingled and confronted each other on the same very earthly soil.

I am aware that my analysis does not pay much attention to the intricate appeal and complexity of religious ideas. In privileging a secular understanding of spiritual claims, it opens itself to the charge of functionalism or, worse, reductionism. That possibility worries me only a little bit since one of the most egregious forms of reductionism is to place special boundaries around the concept of religion. The history of religion in the United States has suffered from being placed in a category separate from the general issue of understanding culture. On the other hand, I do not want to seem insensitive to the autonomous power of ideas, a power that can never be fully explained by stretching ideas over a grid of socio-economic factors. The human mind is not open-endedly inventive, and what it can know and believe is always conditioned by specifiable historical circumstances. However, I am a soft, not a hard, determinist. What

makes history fascinating is not our undoubted ability to entrap human behavior in circumstances but our surprise in seeing humans outwit circumstances. Every now and again they accomplish something that takes our breath away by its sheer nobility. The people in my narrative do not do that, but they are not pawns.

I do not deny that when people call something "religion," it makes a difference in how they respond. Religion, even conceived as a very earth-bound cultural construction, yields a different sort of allegiance than most other things, whatever the close analogues. Yet one benefit of treating religion in most ways like other ideologies is that you equalize blame. Religion is not, as some would have it, uniquely responsible for all the crimes of a divided humanity or for the problems of American capitalism. I may even be arguing something comforting to religious people—to wit, that religion is not clearly worse off or less "spiritual" than it once was. After all, if religion is to be culturally central, it must learn to work with other things that are also central. Previously that might have been feudalism, kings, or Platonic philosophy. More recently it has been market capitalism responsive to consumers with spare time and a bit of money to spend. If contemporary religion in America seems to lack anything suggesting transcendence, it may be because it has not had much to work with. Religion by itself never made any age great.

In fact, I discount "golden ages" of any kind, and perhaps especially a religious "golden age" of New England Puritanism when everyone went to church, feared God and ministers, trembled before a still mystified universe, and tested notions about God with an intellectual rigor that reduced all other interests to insignificance. By anybody's reckoning, the account that follows is not a Whiggish one. But it is an effort to redress a balance. American history was once cheerfully written with the assumption that Americans were a religious people. They were because God wanted them to be. Even Perry Miller, an atheist impressed not with God but with the ideas of godly men, managed to leave that impression. As a breed, political historians have been more nervous than intellectual historians in assigning a positive role to religion. Religion either leads people to overmoralize issues that demand rational analysis and compromise or prompts them to vote blindly in affirmation of group identity rather than in accord with economic self-interest. Many narratives of American history firmly consign religion to the private sphere, something occasionally interesting when supportive of a progressive social philosophy but otherwise best left out of the account. In my opinion no centrally important cultural component of American life is more regularly neglected in synthetic accounts of American history than religion.

That is because most American historians since World War II have not only become secularists, as I classify myself, but have accepted Weberian

assumptions that a secularization finally destructive of religion is an inevitable tendency of modernization. In the long run, the final-solution secularists may be right. But at the moment the intriguing question is why they have proved to be so dead wrong. The answer that I spin out in this book is that religion, with the various ways it has entered the cultural marketplace, has been more inventive than its detractors imagined. As an independent influence, it won some important victories. And as a commodity, it satisfied many buyers.

In the most objectively measurable terms, the great age of religion in the United States was not the seventeenth century, however remarkable the theological inventiveness of the Puritans, but the nineteenth century. Christianity was carried in all of its forms, including some newly invented ones, across an expanding nation. The people in the South, both black and white, went from being the least religious folk in the nation, to arguably the most religious. Everywhere, church membership rose from a small plurality of people to a majority. Non-Christian religious traditions, especially Judaism but also Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, began building institutional structures in the United States. Elaborate church architecture was a visible sign of "worldly success."

The quotation marks are meant to remind us that we are always talking about significant fictions. Commercial culture in America developed new forms of "worldliness." At the same time, it developed new ways to be "religious." As usual, what was worldly and what was religious did several things at once, engaging in angry confrontation, somehow co-existing, commonly intermingling. The sheer diversity of ethnic cultures in the United States made the patterns intricate and unpredictable. Almost any generalization can be contradicted. However, it is always the pattern of the religious and secular, not the assumed eclipse of one by the other, that is interesting.

In one respect I will concede declension because I can think of no neutral way to talk about it. Religious ideas are not as philosophically powerful as they once were. Although I cannot prove that average religious Americans are less theologically sophisticated than their forebears, I can nonetheless assert without any hesitation that they are no more so. They can buy and read vast numbers of religious books, yet survey after survey suggests that they are stupefyingly dumb about what they are supposed to believe. When religion began to sell itself in earnest, it contributed to a process of democratization that did not yield impressive enlightenment. Maybe that is the point. American religious leaders cannot expect everything. If they had clung to their best religious ideas and compromised nothing, their churches would be as empty as they are in many European countries, and lay people would expect them to keep

their mouths shut in public places outside of ecclesiastical boundaries.

For that very reason we need to be careful about what we dismiss as unworthy of serious attention. We may sneer at TV evangelism. But religion has always been most popular in its intellectually debased forms, even in eras when cardinals worked for kings and theologians were better philosophers than now. Again, the interesting historical story is about the changed ways in which religion learned to exert its influence in the United States. In telling this story, I have tried to rein in my urges to “deconstruct” claims about what was or was not religion, and what was or was not secular. I do not enter the debate about whether a church-sponsored raffle empties a church of religion; nor does my argument proceed by trying to demonstrate that everything suggestive of what psychologists call “peak experiences” can be called religion, however blatantly secular its purport. This is not to say that there will not be confusions. Wait until we get to the New Age.

Let us begin, keeping always in mind that something important happened in the United States when religion could no longer be defined by legal privilege. It had to sell itself not only in the competitive church market but also in a general market of other cultural commodities that were trying in many cases to break free of religious disapproval rooted mainly in Protestant animosities. Culture became an industry, related both to Arnold’s high-minded aspirations and to less high-minded leisure activities that soon defined popular culture. Technology, industrialization, class and gender formation, urbanization, immigration—all these things created bewildering complexities that demanded adjustments. The wonder is not that under the circumstances religion sometimes pandered to mass audiences, that one group of people used it to exert social control over another group of people, that the prophetic voice of religion was a minor key, or that churches in a broad sense became profit conscious. The wonder is the skill with which religious leaders negotiated the new circumstances, indeed the aggressively leading role that religion played in shaping society and culture.

We will eventually get back to Jim Bakker and his set. There is a long story to unfold first, one in which leaders of all shades of religious opinion played a role. I completed the final chapter and revisions of this book in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where the Amish have struggled to show what religion might look like if left untouched by the processes of commodification. Yet anyone who has traveled east from Lancaster on Route 30 and viewed the manufactured Amish attractions that draw tourists by the thousands to the area will recognize the futility of attempted isolation. If you do not commodify your religion yourself, someone will do it for you. That fact also plays a significant part in my analysis.