

Review of Jessica Johnson, *Biblical Porn: Affect, Labor, and Pastor Mark Driscoll's Evangelical Empire*.

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Jessica Johnson, an anthropologist, investigates pastor Mark Driscoll's ministry with the Seattle-based Mars Hill Church. Her approach is distinctly interdisciplinary and theoretically informed with a particular emphasis on affect theory. Affect theory, which owns no linear method or theoretical centre, revels in human embodiment, in visceral motives and experienced responses rather than discursive or linguistic systems.

Johnson writes powerfully about the phenomenological experience of participation in the Mars Hill empire (her term). She attends to the embodied experiences and responses of Mars Hill participants, not least her own experience of "conviction" and revulsion during the course of her research. Johnson does not frame Mars Hill in terms of the logical appeal of Driscoll's sermons or the church's sophisticated multimedia strategies, though sermons and media receive deep analysis. She acknowledges the business dynamics of the Mars Hill enterprise, but she does not analyse the movement through the discourse of business administration, nor does individual psychology figure prominently. Johnson describes Mars Hill in terms of how people, herself included, experienced its compelling power: how the church mobilized "affective labor" to create a bounded zone of common experience. She tracks these responses all the way from Mars Hill's emergence as a model of aggressive evangelical church planting and expansion to the institutional implosion brought about by the very personality that drove the church to great heights.

The Mars Hill story revolves around Mark Driscoll, its most prominent founder and long-term lead pastor. Based in Seattle, one of America's least-churched cities, Mars Hill held a particular attraction to young adults through its contemporary worship, cutting edge technological presentation, and Driscoll's hip, controversial, and snarky preaching style. The church grew into a multi-campus megachurch with an international network of partner congregations, and Driscoll attained national prominence as a sort of bad-boy evangelist. A series of scandals involving Driscoll's authoritarian and abusive leadership style, financial improprieties, and plagiarism charges led to Driscoll's resignation and the church's eventual closure. Driscoll's dramatic stories, involving repeated threats to his own life and family and his claims to receive visual revelations of congregants' intimate lives, also raised suspicion. Johnson's research covers approximately a decade of this process.

The book's main title, *Biblical Porn*, may initially strike some as gratuitous, but Johnson is deadly serious. Mark Driscoll's ministry distinguished itself through a persistent appeal to a hyper-sexualized, hyper-militant masculinity, a gender performance that was at once obsessed in condemning young men's engagement in pornography *and* prescribed patriarchal heterosexual marriage as a cure for society's

ills. In particular, Driscoll encouraged women to hold their husband's affections by playing out the roles of sex workers. If porn threatened the spiritual lives of men, it also challenged women to hold their husbands' attention. Driscoll claimed visionary powers that allowed him to see the sexual pasts of his congregants, particularly married women, often in graphic detail. Counselling sessions frequently led to demon trials. Driscoll's porn-infused ministry stirred up a cocktail of shame, public confession, and fear—all fuelled by the titillation of unending appeals to idealized and demonized sex. Complementing live and broadcast sermons, Mars Hill invited congregants to live-text their personal questions to the pastor during sermon sessions, provided discussion boards for talking about intimate topics, and infused small groups with curricula keyed to Driscoll's messaging. In Johnson's analysis, Mars Hill not only talked about porn, it provided it via a panoply of sophisticated technological interventions.

A heavily layered theoretical discussion leads into chapter one, which calls attention to Driscoll's militaristic rhetoric. Driscoll notoriously characterized Jesus as a tough-guy savior who could win a fistfight. Christian discipleship and mission amounted to spiritual warfare, provoking active resistance from Satan and his demons. Church strategy involved an "air war" of sermons and technological mediation and a "ground war" relying on face-to-face encounter and physical work. Johnson acutely ties this warfare mentality to the national mood pursuant to 9/11 and the economic insecurities of late capitalism. One wonders if she might have noted how recent economic dislocations have led to many women displacing men as primary breadwinners, a challenge to patriarchal masculinity.

Johnson turns her attention to the phenomenon of conviction in chapter two. In evangelical lingo, "conviction" involves the internalized sense that one is in the wrong. Mars Hill relied upon manifold technologies of conviction to enforce a submissive ecclesial system. Members confessed their sins in counselling sessions, in face to face encounters, in small groups, and even online. When the church deemed members rebellious, it called them to confess and repent. For those who did not repent adequately, a process of formal shunning ensued. Johnson emphasizes that this process did occur through top-down mechanisms of power, focusing on internalized values and sensations—affect. Shame and fear pervaded a social system characterized by a paradoxical mixture of secrecy and disclosure. These affects applied not only to one's own motives and behaviour but also to enemies outside the church *and* within: Islam, false Christians, and porn culture, not to mention demons. Predictably, given Driscoll's fixation on masculinity and pornography, this process othered women as potential sexual threats susceptible to demonic influence.

Mars Hill's porn-infused culture blended titillation, confession, and surveillance, not to mention bullying (chapter three). Driscoll's sexually assertive message provided a critical marketing technique, as he positioned himself as both a traditionalist and a progressive, an advocate for both patriarchy and sexual freedom in marriage. Johnson characterizes the members who shared their experiences and questions, whether publicly or anonymously, as both producers and consumers of sexualized content. As a former evangelical, I couldn't help but recall Charles Finney's "new measures," nineteenth-century psychological technologies that promoted revival and conversion. For her part, Johnson calls attention to members

who figured out that Driscoll's message was shaped more by pornography than by the Bible.

Mars Hill's marketing campaigns shape chapter four. Although church doctrine rejected the practice of rebaptism, its practices inevitably led to rebaptisms. Mars Hill promoted baptismal statistics as an index of success. Church locations streamed baptisms for public consumption and drew large viewing audiences. An Easter worship service in Seattle's Qwest Field, home of the NFL Seahawks, featured a mass baptism. A similar misalignment accompanied marketing campaigns that promised "free" material only to point to web sites that offered the material in return for "donations." One scandal involved paying a marketing firm (possibly on the church's dime) to secure Driscoll's book *Real Marriage* a place on bestseller lists. The chapter's most helpful section involves a discussion of what Johnson calls "neuromarketing," Mars Hill's application of technology to appeal to people at visceral, rather than cognitive, levels. Lighting, musical chords and rhythms, video filters and pacing, and the juxtaposition of images all worked at a neurological level. Even the reality TV technologies of confession and interrogation sparked the neurons that draw people to identify with a movement.

The book's final chapter focuses on the "Campaigns" project, a multi-pronged initiative to expand Mars Hill's influence and relationships. Financial abuse emerged as part of this process, which oversold the church's contributions to global partners. The Campaigns project opens the path for Johnson to discuss the shaming, bullying, and ostracism that happened to members and staff persons who registered complaints against the church. Again, Johnson elevates the "affective labor" required for these processes. Mars Hill members were not passive victims but active contributors to these processes, even when those systems worked against them.

In her concluding reflections, Johnson speculates as to which virtue possesses greater potential for "political mobilization and resistance": love or vulnerability. In light of the Mars Hill experience, Johnson elevates vulnerability. In sharing the harm they had experienced, people found inner and communal strength sufficient to call the church to account and to build spaces of healing for themselves.

Heavy on both theory and jargon, this book isn't easy to read. I often wondered whether Johnson could have simplified things in order to help readers along; I'm not sure that's the case. Content tends to blur from one chapter to another. The book is also hard to put down, as Johnson offers one jaw-dropping case study after another. The church streamed women's intimate confessions online. Driscoll demanded that, even when they don't feel desire, wives make themselves sexually accessible to their husbands. Confidential questions texted in for discussion during worship empowered pastors to follow up on members by tracking their phone numbers. Johnson's acute analysis, buttressed by such vivid mini-narratives, make the book well worth the effort – but it is an effort.

Adopting the concept of affective labor, I ask: What products result from Johnson's appropriation of affect theory? How does affect theory make this book different than it otherwise would have been?

First, Johnson's own experience contributes to her scholarship. She not only attended church services, she also participated in protests. The book begins with a

reflection on Johnson’s own desire to believe Driscoll’s rationalizations for his behaviour, a desire that occurs even though Johnson “knows” better.

Second, concepts like biopolitics and neuromarketing correct the trend in religious scholarship to focus upon discourse and symbol. Instead, we should think—and experience—more like advertising producers, turning our attention to our animal rhythms, to pleasure and resentment, to aversion and desire.

Third, affect theory empowers Johnson to locate the people of Mars Hill and their movement in a particular context: an economically and nationally fearful post-9/11 United States. Militarism and commercialism blended in frighteningly productive ways during this period, and still do today, with an understandable turn toward violence as an index of masculinity. Affect requires context.

Fourth, Johnson refuses to settle for narratives of individual and linear victimization. Her insight may derive in part from reflection on her own participation in the movement and her responses to it. Mars Hill members were not simply acted upon. They contributed physical presence, bodily labour, imaginative attention, and multi-vectored communication to the Mars Hill system. They gave permission for their tears to appear on video, something they might not have done as isolated individuals. Producers of the Mars Hill experience as much as consumers of it, they experienced a trauma that was transpersonal rather than individualistic.



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