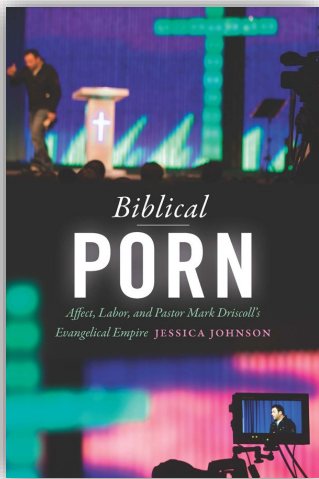


BOOK REVIEW

Biblical Porn: Affect, Labor, and Pastor Mark Driscoll's Evangelical Empire

By Jessica Johnson

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The rise and demise of the Mars Hill megachurch in the US Pacific Northwest is by this point well-known to many both inside and outside the Church. Mars Hill's financial practices, membership tactics, and ideologies of sex and gender have provoked strong reaction. While reactions to Mars Hill include leaving Christianity altogether, transitioning to a more liberal Christianity, or remaining within Reformed Christianity, people across these categories rightfully ask *how* Mars Hill happened.

Jessica Johnson, a self-described non-Christian and “feminist anthropologist” (20) makes the question of how Mars Hill happened central to her study (6). Johnson conducted research on Mars Hill over the course of a decade, though her fieldwork occurred primarily during the years 2006-2008 and 2014-2016 (13-15). In seeking a vocabulary to describe

experiences at Mars Hill, Johnson relies on concepts of affect and labor. She describes affect as “intersubjective intensities” such as shame, joy, paranoia, anger, and conviction (3-4). Conviction is perhaps the most important example of affect for Johnson, which she powerfully describes as “belief that feels like one’s own” (9).

Johnson uses the concept of affect alongside labor to describe the mechanics of Mars Hill. In doing so, she goes beyond both commonplace concepts of belief and charisma and established scholarly emphases on discourse and representation. Mars Hill, Johnson argues, operated by pastor Mark Driscoll propagating a narrative of divine exceptionalism that inspired members, small group leaders, deacons, camera-people, musicians, security officials, and other pastors to labor for the sake of the church. Their labor—investing time and energy into what seemed to be an incredible church—was an example of affect and a generator of more affect, too. Labor, affect, and Driscoll’s narrative powers interacted with each other to grow, grow, and grow the church. Eventually negative affects such as shame, paranoia, and distrust combine with the negative stories circulating online so that a critical mass of people no longer labored for Mars Hill. At this point Driscoll failed to control the narrative of the church, and it dissolved.

The main chapters of Johnson’s ethnography focus on different topics and technologies related to Mars Hill’s operations, including exorcisms in Chapter Two, militarized Christianity in Chapter Five and throughout, and multimedia marketing in Chapter Four. More than any of these, though, Johnson tells the story of Mars Hill through its content on sex and gender, which she calls “biblical porn” (7). The crux of Johnson’s provocative concept, also the book’s title, is the truth that opposites are highly similar. In explicitness of teaching, in circulation of talk

confessing sexual sin, in sky-high expectations of marital sexuality, and in celebration of hyper-masculinity, Mars Hill's anti-pornographic approach to Biblical sexuality was, in fact, pornographic. Pornographic—gratuitous and sexual, to define the term—teaching, confession, expectation, and celebration was the affect and labor that Driscoll cast a narrative net over in order to grow Mars Hill.

Johnson's arguments in the book are well-cited, strongly made, and of great importance. Besides this, at a methodological level, Johnson succeeds in going beyond representation and discourse. She does so first by providing a corporeal, body-centered description of human experience. She probes her from-the-gut laughter at a video of Driscoll's (4), the tears shed by women of Mars Hill in a confession meeting (127-8), and nuances of Driscoll's speech patterns when preaching (28-29). The inclusion of these non-discursive details is methodologically painstaking, but the pay-off is that Johnson demonstrates how conviction at Mars Hill operated in people's bodies, not just their minds.

Besides centering the body, Johnson highlights non-human actors and networks—an LED-powered stage that synced with the tone of Driscoll's preaching (116), an anonymized church forum that enabled offensive conversation (69-71), and web-based technology that allowed Mars Hill to have synced Q and A sessions across multiple church campuses (131-134). People laboured to make and maintain these technologies, which in turn distributed and produced the affect that motivated more people to labour for Mars Hill. For anyone looking to write about religious experience in a way that includes the human body, the material world, or both, Johnson's ethnography is exemplary.

While the depth and breadth of Johnson's knowledge is apparent throughout *Biblical Porn*, at one point she makes a mistake. Early on in the book, she writes that Driscoll "preached in the verse-by-verse style of systematic theology" (24). However, systematic theology does not typically engage with Scripture verse-by-verse. It seems Johnson means to say Driscoll favoured exegetical theology and therefore practiced expository preaching, which refers to preaching verse-by-verse through a portion of the Bible. Usually, an expository preacher preaches through a book of the Bible over multiple sermons. Indeed, Johnson cites sermon series by Driscoll on the Song of Solomon (111) and on Nehemiah (77-79).

One error in terminology does not undo what is a great ethnography on an important topic. Johnson produces a description of Mars Hill whose richness and detail depends on years of observant participation with an ethnographer's sensibilities. The book's vocabulary makes it less accessible than its premise and topic suggests—I recommend it for reading by upper-year undergraduates and graduates in social sciences, as well as by ministry leaders. Whether people in the church catch the finer points of affect theory or not, Johnson has something important for the Church to hear—explicit anti-pornographic content is pornographic. Therefore a church must do more than oppose the world; it must be different. Being different, rather than opposed, is only found in Christ.



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