

Piety in pop art: **Visual Piety: A History and Theology of Popular Religious Images**

By David Morgan. University of California Press, 283 pp.

by [Frank Burch Brown](#) in the [April 14, 1999](#) issue

David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theology of Popular Religious Images* (University of California Press, 283 pp.)

Many people who consider themselves serious about either art or theology acknowledge a fondness for popular religious art. But not many critics or theologians have given popular art much thought. They assume that it is a waste of time to ponder or analyze something so accessible. And even if they like some popular religious images, thoughtful people assume that most are pretty bad art--and perhaps a sign of immature faith or undisciplined feelings.

David Morgan, a sophisticated though unconventional art historian at Valparaiso University, has already challenged such assumptions in *Icons of American Protestantism: The Art of Warner Sallman*, which he edited. He further develops his historical and theoretical analyses of popular religious images in his latest book.

Morgan leans heavily on the results of a 1993 advertisement that he placed in 73 religious publications. The ad asked respondents to report their reactions to such familiar Sallman paintings as *Christ the Good Shepherd* (1943) or *Christ in Gethsemane* (1941), and to describe the place of these paintings in their lives as Christians. Morgan asked people to comment especially on the *Head of Christ* (1940), which the ad pictured.

Not surprisingly, since most people would feel a little mean or unchristian if they put down such widely loved Christian art, only 11 percent of the 531 expressed a negative view of Sallman's work. Most of those who responded were more than 60 years old, most were Protestant, and many were evangelical. Sixty-six percent of the respondents, and 72 percent of the favorable ones, were women.

Morgan places these responses in a larger artistic, social and historical context. Doing so enables him to show, for example, why many viewers ascribe "universality" to the *Head of Christ*, construing it as a true image of the Christ they have always imagined--at once masculine, humane and holy--while others find this image to be effeminate or ethnocentric. What one sees in such images is in part socially constructed, Morgan argues. Thus pictures of physical contact between David and Jonathan look very different to modern American viewers than they do to people in times and places where such contact between males is common and regarded as sexually neutral.

Although Sallman figures prominently in the book--perhaps too prominently--this study ranges widely. Morgan discusses popular Catholic and Eastern Orthodox images, late medieval works, American devotional and Sunday school art, and popular renditions of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*. His book gives a vivid account of a popular aesthetic that blends everyday interests with an eclectic sense of beauty. It offers fresh perspectives on both Protestant and Catholic piety by illuminating just how images "make belief work."

If Morgan is right, Protestants have been closer to Catholics in their use of images than the classic theological battles over the subject might lead one to conclude. Both Catholic and Protestant theologians (unlike the Orthodox) have often treated images as something for the spiritually immature. But in both traditions theological condescension has had little impact on popular piety. Morgan's book thus joins Colleen McDannell's *Material Christianity* (1995) in questioning the extent to which one can fairly characterize Protestant and specifically evangelical Christianity as predominantly a piety of the word. And it joins David Freedberg's *The Power of Images* (1989) in arguing that images continue to have religious powers that no iconoclastic or rationalist impulse can entirely suppress.

Indeed, images pervade contemporary spirituality--as the proliferation of labyrinths and angelic figures attests. Religious images flood the evangelical media and music videos. But this raises some questions not addressed by the above studies, which are chiefly historical and sociological. Admitting that the criteria regarding artistic quality are many and varied, we still might ask whether there is any correlation between some kinds of popular (or even elite) art and some kinds of immature or distorted faith. Are there religious strengths and limitations associated with particular artistic styles? Are there hazards in embracing popular images uncritically? Are there reasons to worry about the power of certain images, if not of

images in general?

Morgan disavows any interest in questioning people's theologies and rarely questions their taste. But if images are as important as he says, then surely such questions of theology and criticism become not only interesting but necessary.