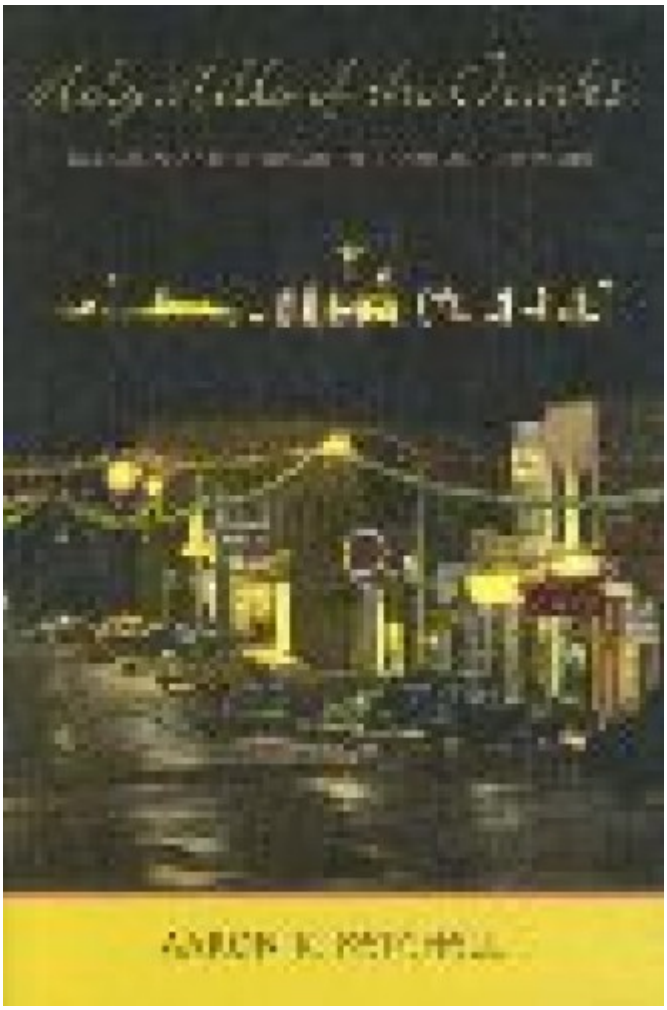
Holy Hills of the Ozarks/Shopping for God

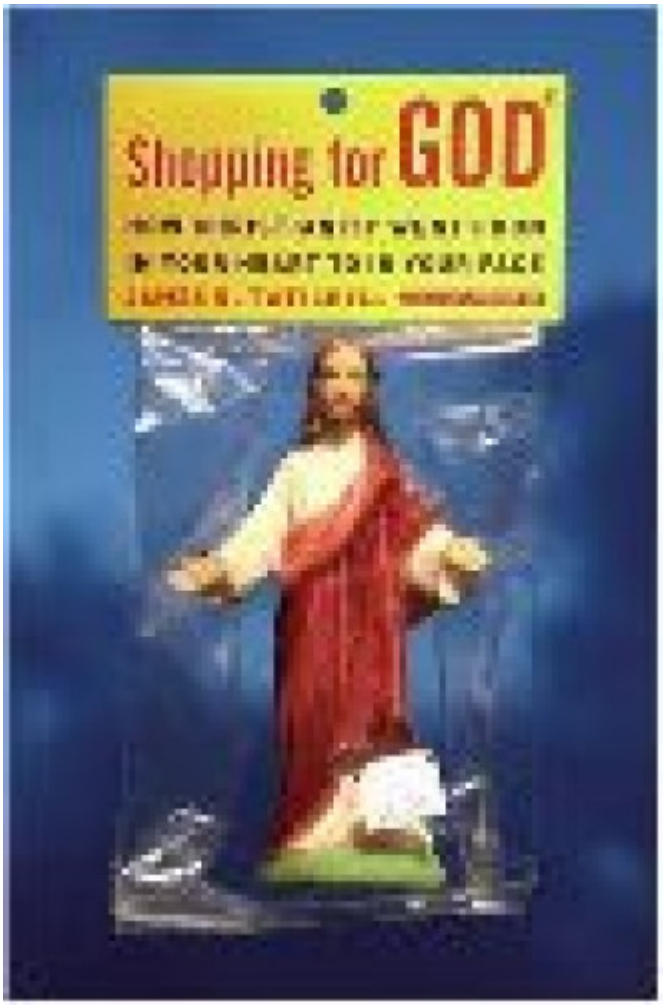
reviewed by Matthew Avery Sutton in the March 25, 2008 issue

In Review



Holy Hills of the Ozarks: Religion and Tourism in Branson, Missouri

Aaron K. Ketchell
Johns Hopkins University Press



Shopping for God: How Christianity Went from In Your Heart to In Your Face

James B. Twitchell
Simon & Schuster

In 1739, Benjamin Franklin went to hear itinerant evangelist George Whitefield preach in Philadelphia. Whitefield was quickly becoming the greatest celebrity in colonial America, drawing crowds in the tens of thousands, and Franklin wanted to know why. In Whitefield he discovered a brilliant innovator who blended drama with faith, blurring the lines between religion and entertainment. “Every accent, every emphasis, every modulation” of Whitefield’s voice, Franklin observed, was “perfectly well tuned and well placed.” The feeling Whitefield evoked reminded him of the pleasure he experienced when listening to “an excellent piece of music.”

Franklin soon learned, however, that attending a Whitefield performance was not free. “I silently resolved he should get nothing from me,” he recalled. But as Whitefield “proceeded I began to soften, and concluded to give the copper. Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that, and determined me to give the silver; and he finished so admirably that I emptied my pocket wholly into the collector’s dish, gold and all.” In colonial times and in every century since, American Christianity has taken the form of a consumer faith, something to be bought and sold. Aaron K. Ketchell’s *Holy Hills of the Ozarks* and James B. Twitchell’s *Shopping for God* approach this packaging of Christianity for a modern consumer culture from very different angles.

According to Ketchell, who teaches at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, there are few places that better illustrate the relationship between faith, entertainment and consumer culture than Branson, Missouri. In the late 19th century, the Ozarks region became a popular tourist destination for people seeking a respite from city life. Among those who visited was Harold Bell Wright, a young minister-in-training and devotee of the growing Social Gospel movement who struggled with poor health and sought the curative powers of the Ozarks. Over the next decade, he repeatedly returned to the region. He also began to write. His first novel, *That Printer of Udell’s* (1903), ran as a serial in the Christian Century. His next novel, *The Shepherd of the Hills* (1907), made him one of the most popular writers of the first half of the 20th century.

Set in the Branson region, *Shepherd of the Hills* tells the story of Daniel Howitt, a minister who comes to the Ozarks in search of peace after years of relentless toil in Chicago. Keeping his background a secret, Howitt takes a job as a shepherd. Before long, he becomes a Christ figure, mentoring, leading and protecting the community. He also discovers that the landscape itself is sacred, that the Ozarks are “temples of God’s own building.” The novel was a hit, selling as many as 2 million copies, and religious and tourist groups almost immediately sought to capitalize on Branson’s new fame and “spiritualized aura.” The Presbyterians built a retreat center on the top of a hill, and resorts quickly followed.

Tourists hunted for the characters and places identified in *Shepherd of the Hills*, and enterprising residents were more than willing to play the part, seeking to profit from their “ambitious fiction-turned-assumed-fact relationship with the book.” Some even learned how to speak and act like “hillbillies.” Branson boosters named fishing boats after Wright’s characters, staged plays based on the book’s storyline and offered

Shepherd of the Hills tours throughout the 20th century. As Ketchell brilliantly argues, Branson entrepreneurs wove Christian sentiment “into a fabric of nostalgia, premodern longing, and whitewashed rusticity.”

Although present-day tourists may not be familiar with Wright’s novel, “notions of sanctified topography, virtuous local residents, and authentic experience of social and spiritual regeneration still beckon many to Shepherd of the Hills country.” Branson’s 7 million annual visitors can choose from an amazing array of entertainments. Among the most popular is Silver Dollar City, a Christian-run amusement park complete with a chapel, regular church services and a saloon that serves only soft drinks. The city’s religiously oriented variety shows are also a major draw. “People who attend one of the region’s theatrical performances,” Ketchell explains, “will not encounter an explicit missionary presentation,” but they will find religiously tinged music, nostalgic renderings of the past, deference to civil religion, family-values rhetoric and plenty of patriotism and flag waving. The Osmonds, Yakov Smirnoff, Tony Orlando and Andy Williams have all drawn enormous crowds in Branson. Wayne Newton, Merle Haggard and Willie Nelson all flopped.

James B. Twitchell, who teaches English and advertising at the University of Florida, is also interested in Christian entertainment. His sometimes funny, sometimes frustrating *Shopping for God* is a haphazard look at how Christians buy and sell religious experience.

Twitchell believes that consumers of both faith and material goods “yearn for a certain kind of experience, expect a certain kind of brand story, and desire a certain kind of community.” The historic, mainline denominations have forgotten this. They “forgot how to sell. Or just don’t care.” Part of the problem is that the meaning of church membership has changed. In previous generations, to be a church member meant something about who you were. This guaranteed that older, wealthier mainline denominations did not need their members; their members needed them. Today, however, material goods, not membership, are what signify status.

In one of the smartest sections of the book, Twitchell analyzes mainline denominations’ efforts to use mass media to regain cultural currency. He concludes that their advertising has been a failure because instead of marketing their brand (denomination) they market their product (Christianity). As a result, consumers who see their ads may be attracted to the faith, but they don’t necessarily learn anything about why they should choose one denomination over another.

After his captivating dissection of church advertising, Twitchell turns to what he identifies as the biggest problem in the mainline churches—impotent, effeminate, emasculated clergy. He seems to believe that the 1990s best-seller *Men Are from Mars*, *Women Are from Venus* is the gospel truth. Invoking absurd stereotypes, he writes that most men "do not like to be told what to do. . . . And men especially do not like to be told they are not in control of their fate." Nor, Twitchell argues, do they like to sing or pray aloud in public. Once churches stopped singing "Onward Christian Soldiers" and began emphasizing the need for a relationship with Jesus Christ, men disappeared. (He does not explain why personal-relationship rhetoric is so prevalent among men in successful evangelical churches.)

The alternative Twitchell presents to this emasculating faith is the evangelical megachurch, which is "selling, selling, selling, 24-7." And what does Twitchell think that the megachurch is selling? Hypermasculinity. "The care of men is megachurch job number one, and I have not seen a single mega that doesn't focus on getting him in its crosshairs." How do they do this? Once again invoking ridiculous gender stereotypes, Twitchell writes that megachurches use "all the technologies men appreciate," they have "comfy seats," they preach "nonthreatening" messages, they include "slick music videos to make emotions easier to sense," and they offer golf tournaments and motorcycle clubs.

Twitchell's gendered reading of the megachurch is at odds with most of the literature on these churches. In reality, the megachurches' attention to families, not men, is the most fundamental cause of their growth. Furthermore, the very "pastorpreneurs" that Twitchell invokes—Bill Hybels, Rick Warren and Joel Osteen—are by no means alpha males.

A more likely cause of the megachurches' success that Twitchell does explore is their ability to put on a good show. They use state-of-the-art sound systems (with the volume set so high that, according to Twitchell, men don't have to worry about their singing being heard), and their performances are seamless. "They are entertaining. Fun!" They minister "not only to spiritual issues but to the feel-good entitlement of brand-shifting shoppers," whom they study and understand.

The styles of *Holy Hills* and *Shopping for God* could not be more different. Ketchell based *Holy Hills* on his doctoral dissertation, and it reads that way. Twitchell, on the other hand, sounds like the teacher who tries to be hip by adopting the vocabulary of his students. He tells us that the Methodists used to be "smokin'!" and that

Whitefield “rocked.”

So what does the future hold for the Christian marketplace? Things are certainly changing in the Ozarks. The year 2006 saw the opening of Branson Landing, a $420 million venture featuring shops such as Ann Taylor and Victoria’s Secret, two Hilton hotels, a handful of bars, and luxury condominiums. This development may signal a move away from the region’s traditional commitment to inexpensive family entertainment or, more likely, it may reflect the increased economic power of evangelicals and conservative Christians’ accommodation to consumer culture. One thing is certain. As consumer trends shift, religious entertainers and innovative pastorpreneurs will continue to change with them.