

Sean McCloud, *American Possession: Fighting Demons in the Contemporary United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. 175 pp + xi.

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In recent years, exorcism has saturated American popular culture. Movies (*The Conjuring*, *The Last Exorcism*), books (Andrew Pyper's *Demonologist*, Matt Baglio's *The Rite*) and reality TV series (*Paranormal State*, *Ghosthunters*) have all been devoted to laying out a modern demonology. This explosion of mainstream interest has brought attention to a longer history of Roman Catholic exorcism and Charismatic Christian deliverance ministry in the United States. *American Possessions* is one of only a handful of academic monographs that have attempted to make sense of the cultural work accomplished by demonic narratives and performances in certain modern American communities. With only 116 pages of text, this is a slim volume, but it makes an important contribution to a burgeoning conversation in the study of contemporary religion in America.

Importantly, this volume is not about the diversity of demon fighting in America, as the title seems to suggest, but focuses on that brand of spiritual warfare waged by “Third Wave” Evangelicals, a group of influential theologians, institutions, and adherents that emerged in the 1980s. McCloud has turned his attention to the wealth of deliverance manuals that have emerged from the movement – many detailing first hand encounters combatting personified evil. For these believers, the demonic is far from a metaphor. Malevolent entities reside in objects, homes, and lands. It is up to the practitioner of spiritual warfare to rid themselves of these influences, which bring with them misfortune, poltergeist-like disturbances, and spiritual decay. McCloud sets out to demonstrate how these ideas, as fringe as they may be, are tied into larger questions affecting American culture, namely consumerism, haunting, and therapeutic discourse.

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The first chapter introduces readers to the concept of spiritual warfare, by which the devout seek to purify the world from demonic influences. McCloud ably describes the various movements and peoples who become the objects and carriers of the Satanic in the Third Wave imaginary, providing fascinating accounts of evil identified in the Occult, Heavy Metal music, Asian religion, Roman Catholicism, and liberal politics. Through the presentation of these movements and so many others as impure, Third Wave evangelicals identify the acceptable boundaries of faith and practice. Chapter two examines the methods of liberating possessed objects, homes, and lands from demonic infestation. McCloud positions the demonic possessions within the larger literature on haunting. While demons may be attracted from individual sin and weaknesses, they are often present because of “generational curses” – demons attracted by previous evil acts. The devout perform a variety of acts to rid themselves of demons – they might mark off possessed land with wooden stakes embedded with bible verses, perform prayer-walks around haunted areas, discard heirlooms which have acted as conduits for the demonic, and repent vicariously for the misdeeds of ancestors. In chapter three, McCloud documents how deliverance manuals employ the same sorts of rhetoric and concerns as the larger self-help movement. Chapter four considers questions of agency and compulsion in Third Wave beliefs, focusing in part on “demon lovers,” figures akin to the succubus and incubus.

I have much more praise to offer *American Possessions* than I do criticism, but as with all volumes there are imperfections worth mentioning. My greatest criticism is that McCloud does not provide the reader with enough context to make sense of this material’s importance in modern American Christianity. He convincingly positions the concerns of Third Wave Evangelicals within American culture; however, he neglects to historicize or contextualize the movement within Evangelicalism. Specifically, I do not think that McCloud makes sufficiently clear what separates his object of study—the demonologies of the Third Wave Charismatic movement—from the wider swath of very similar literature produced by conservative Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Charismatics during the same time period and before.

American Possessions is erudite, as well as accessible, and belongs on the shortlist of essential scholarship on demonology and exorcism in the United States. As an important study of modern American belief on the demonic, it fits nicely alongside W. Scott Poole’s *Satan in America: The Devil We Know* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2010) and Michael Cuneo’s *American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty* (Bantam, 2002). While I might consider either of these volumes a better primer, McCloud brings a level of religious studies theoretical sophistication to the conversation previously unrealized.