

# What Would Jesus Buy: American Consumption of Religious and Spiritual Material Goods

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*This article examines an important and understudied part of the sociological study of religion: consumption of religious materials. We use data from the Baylor Religion Survey and present an initial look at which Americans read the Left Behind series, viewed The Passion of the Christ, or purchased religious paraphernalia such as "What Would Jesus Do" bracelets. Drawing on cultural consumption and religious capital research we explore class, demographic, and religious influences on consumption patterns. We find some support for each of these perspectives, which suggests that religious consumption is not a subset of cultural consumption nor of religious practice but is some combination of both.*

## INTRODUCTION

For many Americans, experiencing or connecting with the sacred often includes mediation through or with material objects or goods. Unique in the modern and postindustrial eras, however, is a mediation that is highly personal and readily accessible to larger and larger audiences. This often occurs through the consumption of religious material goods. But what religious goods are consumed and who consumes them? Anecdotal evidence suggests that certain religious goods are reaching millions of Americans through television (e.g., *Touched by an Angel*), film (e.g., *The Passion of the Christ*), and books (e.g., *The Purpose-Driven Life*). Multimillion dollar sales of these products indicate that Americans are "getting religion" in many other ways besides going to church. But how is this consumption associated with other sociological patterns such as traditional religious belief and behavior? Our aim is to offer quantitative analysis of the consumption of religious material goods and integrate the studies of material religion with other areas within the sociology of religion and the field of sociology more generally.

In this article, using data from the recently fielded Baylor Religion Survey, we present the first quantitative national-level portrait of the consumption of some of the most popular cultural goods currently in the American religious mainstream. By mapping the prevalence of these objects, we complement the research that has emphasized the fiscal and qualitative/symbolic significance of material religious goods. Further we extend our understanding of material religion by integrating it with some of the basic religious measures often used in social science research. Finally, we formulate some testable hypotheses based on the unique features of this data set.

## Religious Consumption in American History: A Brief Overview

Religious consumption is not a new or recent phenomenon. McDannell (1995) and Moore (1994) have eloquently shown that the distribution of popular religious goods has been an integral part of the American religious experience since the late 1700s. Such goods consisted of far more than Bibles and hymnals; religious consumption ran the gamut from moral tales of sexual

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ribaldry (presumably for the development of character) to theatrical revival sermons that captivated audiences in frontier towns over the expanding West. Varieties of health food products, wax crosses, images of Jesus from the muscular and rugged to the gentle and caring, were consumed by a growing, morally Christian society (Morgan 1999).<sup>1</sup>

In the 20th century, with improvements in manufacturing and the development of nonprint media technologies such as radio and television, religious consumption took on new dimensions in the selling and professing of the sacred (Hendershot 2004; Kaufman 2004). More religious products were now available than at any other time, including Christian art and a wide array of knickknacks, greeting cards, bumper stickers—sometimes described collectively as “Jesus junk” or Christian kitsch. All of this is often sold in hundreds of Christian religious bookstores across the nation (Hangen 2001; Hendershot 2004; McDannell 1995:223). Christian entrepreneurs also took hold of the airwaves to protect the public from “consuming” the immoral effects of movies and to broadcast their respective gospel messages (Hangen 2001). Radio evangelism’s prominence faded with the advent of televised religious programs such as Bishop Fulton Sheen’s *Life is Worth Living*, and during this time, unnoticed by academics but not by mass audiences, Christian and other religious written works were expanding considerably (Moore 1994).

We know that religious consumption is important—whether it is print media, the “electronic church,” music, film, clothing, or kitsch, religious consumption is very much a part of the American story of religion (Clark 2005; Hendershot 2004; Ostwalt 2003). These trends continue today with the landmark sales of books like *The Purpose-Driven Life*, *The Prayer of Jabez*, or the *Left Behind* series, not to mention films such as *The Passion of the Christ*. Along with increased consumption of material goods that fall squarely into the realm of the religious is the growing recognition that a “soft-pedaling” of religion can be extremely successful by appealing to interest in the sacred and secular.<sup>2</sup> Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* and the direct-to-video series *VeggieTales* are, to date, the prototypical media examples that straddle this line (Warren 2005). Products like *The Da Vinci Code* point to the complex nature of contemporary consumption as they defy easy categorization as “mystery thriller” versus “religious fiction.” But apart from the fact that these items are consumed in mass quantities, what is the *sociological* relevance of religious consumption? As Bader and Lockhart (2006) have pointed out there is a dearth of any theory connecting religious consumption with other aspects of social life. Instead, we must draw upon previous research in cultural consumption and rational choice approaches to religion to argue for the sociological relevance of religious consumption.

### ***Religious Consumption and Religious Capital***

Perhaps the most direct sociological explanation for religious consumption deals with religious capital; Iannaccone (1990) and more recently Stark and Finke (2000) define this as the “degree of mastery of and attachment to a particular religious culture” (Stark and Finke 2000:120). Consumable religious goods can enhance attachment to a particular religious culture (e.g., Christian “witness wear” that reminds one and others of evangelical identity) and they can reflect mastery of that culture (e.g., purchasing a study Bible for a small group study).

Religious consumption as religious capital largely reflects religious narratives, practices, and beliefs of certain religious leaders and religious communities within a specified time and culture (Carey 1988; Hoover and Clark 2002; Morgan 1999; Stout and Buddenbaum 1996). Religious goods tell us how the sacred is mediated in that particular time and place (Carey 1992). To this end, the majority of studies in religious consumption have provided a wealth of knowledge about the symbolic and interpretive significance of religious goods such as the popular use of the Bible (McDannell 1995), the *Left Behind* series (Forbes and Kilde 2004; Frykholm 2004; Shuck 2005), portraits of Jesus (Fox 2004), *The Passion of the Christ* (Beal and Linafelt 2006); angel themes in books, statues, and television

programs (e.g., *Touched by an Angel*, *Angels in America*; Clark 2005; Wuthnow 1998); and more recently Christian kitsch (Spackman 2005).<sup>3</sup> Thanks to such investigations we have a more lucid picture of what specific types of religious consumption mean to consumers. As the diversity and range of material religious goods grows their meanings will change and multiply.

Religious consumption is not only a type of religious capital, and other types of religious capital can affect it. Religious capital entails both mastery and attachment; therefore, it can include a wide range of practices and beliefs that are congruent with a religion. For example, conservative Protestants may take biblical literalism as a kind of mastery of theological convictions such as biblical inerrancy. Church attendance for Christians is generally viewed as an important practice and by extension greater attendance can be construed as greater mastery of disciplined communal participation.

Religious consumption can be encouraged by these forms of religious capital. As “mastery and attachment” to a religious culture increases, so too might interest in consuming religious goods. For example, if one attends church more frequently, one might learn of religious goods through sermon illustrations. Pastors and other religious professionals often use popular movies, music, and other trends as illustrations to convey the relevance of religion in everyday life. Some religious goods such as Rick Warren’s *The Purpose-Driven Life* or Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* might well appear in a sermon in Protestant and Catholic worship services, whether explicitly promoting or condemning such items. Studies among Catholics (Welch, Johnson, and Pilgrim 1990) and religious residents in Dallas (Stacey and Shupe 1982) in the 1980s showed that greater religious capital (measured as orthodoxy and practice) was associated with greater consumption of the “electronic church” or religious television, contrary to the popular belief that the growth of religious programming would reduce traditional practice and belief. Assuming little has changed in this pattern of religious capital effects on religious consumption, we expect that religiously active individuals will consume more religious products than less active individuals. This generalization aside, the religious capital approach also predicts that group-specific religious goods will be consumed more often by active participants of that religious group. Items that have broader appeal will have a weaker relationship to other forms of religious practice and belief.

### ***Class and Omnivorous Religious Consumers***

Consumption of religious products may also be affected by class-based patterns of cultural consumption. These types of goods and the lifestyles that developed around them form cultural capital for the individual. Bourdieu (1984) and Peterson and Kern (1996) have argued that cultural tastes are patterned and rational as opposed to random consumer choices. Consumption is a rational enterprise since it often entails an intentional expense of time and/or money on the part of the consumer. In their conceptualization, class tastes continue to dominate although for Peterson (1992) cultural tastes have changed from “elite snobbishness” or exclusivity in cultural preference to cultural omnivorousness, or a broader interest in a wider range of cultural goods such as musical genres. To date, we have little information on class tastes for religious goods in general,<sup>4</sup> but this relationship has been articulated regarding New Age consumption and rational choice arguments for religious experimentation. Greater interest in nonconventional religion and having the resources to engage that interest is the province of affluent classes (Stark and Bainbridge 1996). By extension, we would expect cultural omnivorousness in the realm of material religious consumption from the upper class, since they have the resources to purchase various types of religious products. In addition, we expect more educated individuals to consume a variety of religious books, given that greater education builds a taste for reading in general. We might expect then that greater degrees of religious interests and consumption are concomitant with greater educational attainment and income.<sup>5</sup>

### *Consumption and Nonclass Identities*

Some scholars counter that other social identities besides class now motivate individuals in their cultural capital acquisition and consumption (Zukin and Maguire 2004). Certain demographic identities such as being female, young, a southerner, or African American have selective effects in cultural consumption as a way of reinforcing symbolic boundaries that describe who one is and is not. Elijah Anderson (1990), for instance, noted that some young African-American men use rap music as a way to denote cultural distinction in a public space. Consumption of specific goods become vital to these identities and at the same time makes these identities more reliant on the consumption of certain goods to sustain authenticity.

Clearly, musical preferences are not the only form of cultural consumption in which these identity differences occur. Religious goods may be subject to the social experiences built around race, region, age, and gender, among other factors. For example, Sherkat and Cunningham (1998) found that rural southern African Americans consumed more religious television and radio than other African Americans. Not surprisingly, then, race has been argued to be one alternative identity upon which consumption differences may be based. To some extent religion in the American south remains unique in its cultural landscape, especially with respect to religion, and as such we might expect greater religious consumption in this region relative to other areas. Finally, in many ways, consumption of cultural goods is distinctively generational. As McDannell (1995) reminds us, the current experience of religious consumption is unique for its wide availability, at a scale never before imagined. Therefore, we might expect that younger cohorts will consume more religious goods than other generations, especially as consumption of material goods has become an increasingly important symbolic marker of identity.

Gender is an important characteristic in particular because of the intersection of findings in cultural taste and religiosity. Women invest more in high-status (and therefore a greater breadth of) cultural capital acquisition than men and some of this is evidenced in their greater tolerance for more genres of music (Bryson 1996). By that count, cultural consumption should be greater for women than for men. Kaufman showed that the miracles at Lourdes in the 1850s generated a unique and in some ways empowering spirituality for women (2004). In one of the few surveys of those in the market for material religious goods, the Christian Booksellers Association found in 1997 that 77 percent of shoppers at their retail stores were women ([www.cbaonline.org](http://www.cbaonline.org)). In addition, women make greater investments in religion in terms of religious practice and participation (Miller and Hoffman 1995; Miller and Stark 2002). Taken together, we might expect that women will consume more religious goods than men.

Demographic characteristics aside, religious identity remains an important symbolic boundary that motivates action and beliefs (Smith 2003). Logically speaking, we might expect at a very broad level that any religious attachment relative to no religious attachment will encourage religious consumption. That said, religious attachment is rarely ever so generic. Religiosity is often housed in particular traditions that place constraints on what one ought to believe and practice (Berger 1967; Stout and Buddenbaum 1996). Religious goods often originate from a specific theological perspective and as such can be identity-affirming and reinforce religious practice, as when a Protestant watches a religious service at home while temporarily incapacitated. Rosaries (Catholic), *hijabs* (Muslim), and Vineyard praise music (Pentecostal/evangelical) are but a few examples of religious goods that resonate with specific religious audiences. Religious capital gained through affiliation will enable a discriminating taste for identity-affirming religious goods.<sup>6</sup> This also aligns with Stark and Finke's concept of religious capital as they state further: "In making religious choices, people will attempt to conserve their religious capital" (2000:121). Hence we argue that tradition-specific religious products will be more often consumed by members of that tradition.

In sum, religious consumption is significant to the sociological study of religion in part because of its symbolic resonance within religious fields. Religious capital, cultural omnivore, and social identity perspectives provide different explanations for attaining material religious

goods. Religious practices and beliefs can motivate the purchase of religious goods, while greater education and income provide enhanced skills and material resources toward the same end. And to the extent that material goods reflect our social roles and identities, characteristics such as gender, race, age, and religious identity should also factor into religious consumption, whether as a subset of consumption in general or as a subset of religious capital.

### **The Varieties of Religious Consumption**

Implicit in the previous arguments for the sociological relevance of religious consumption are recognition of the enormous variety of religious goods and of the absence of any theoretical connections between genres of consumption and their correlates. While we have suggested some broad hypotheses for the *amount* of consumption and the tradition-specific nature of religious consumption, we do not have any standard measures that capture how different genres of religious goods might vary among consumers. Earlier studies focused on the “electronic church” (i.e., religious television and sometimes religious radio programs), while recent studies have looked at New Age “materials” (Mears and Ellison 2000), or include single measures of religious goods such as “gospel music” (Bryson 1996), or “religious or inspirational literature” (Wuthnow 2003). While we have broad theoretical predictions of consumption by drawing on work in the sociology of culture and religion, there still may be specific products that deviate from these broader patterns. With these problems and questions in mind, we now have data available to address some of these issues.

## **METHOD**

### **Sample**

Data on the consumption of religiously themed items were taken from the Baylor Religion Survey. The survey was formed using the General Social Survey as a model, but the focal point was assessing the thoughts and beliefs of average Americans regarding religion in a more comprehensive manner than has been previously attempted. The data were collected by the Gallup Organization, using random-digit dialing to reach a nationally representative sample of Americans living in households with telephones. The telephone survey phase was used to gain respondents’ agreement to complete a mailed questionnaire. The data were collected in 2005, with 1,721 completed surveys overall. For in-depth and detailed information regarding the data collection process, see Bader, Mencken, and Froese (2007) in this issue. We applied a variety of statistical tests including analysis of variance, chi-square, and a variety of regressions techniques for these consumption measures and for the sake of parsimony we present the most general patterns here.

### **Dependent Variables**

One of the unique contributions from the Baylor Religion Survey is the richness of information gained from the religious consumption module. The first measure simply asks how much the respondent spent on purchases of religious goods in the past month, with answer choices divided into six categories, 1 = “none,” 2 = “less than \$25,” 3 = “\$25–49,” 4 = “\$50–99,” 5 = “\$100–999,” and 6 = “\$1000 or more.” Less than 1 percent of the respondents ( $N = 2$ ) marked the last category so these responses were merged with the next group such that 5 = “\$100 or more.”

Two types of consumption were measured: (1) purchases within genres of goods; and (2) use of specific items, namely, books and visual media. The central strength of the genre approach is to explore the varieties of materials that comprise religious goods. Thirteen product-genre religious items were surveyed for consumer behavior in the past year. Three items assessed whether a respondent viewed a religious-themed movie, read religious fiction, or read religious nonfiction. In addition, other genres covered: religious jewelry such as WWJD (i.e.,

“What Would Jesus Do”) bracelets or crucifix necklaces; devotional books or books of prayer; sacred books such as the Bible or Qur’an; music by religious artists or bands; religious art or pictures including portraits of Jesus or statues of religious figures; religious education products for children; Bible-study or group study materials; clothing with religious messages; bumper stickers or car decals with religious messages; and greeting cards containing religious messages or symbols.

Respondents were asked where they had made such purchases and were provided up to four different venues from which to choose: online merchant; religious store; nonreligious store; and “my place of worship.”<sup>7</sup> Respondents were instructed to indicate whether they have purchased any religiously themed items in the past year and to mark all that apply. While the variety of locations of purchase is an important consideration, this study aims primarily to understand *who* is likely to purchase *at least one product* from each genre regardless of location. All items were coded such that 1 indicates purchasing a product of that genre (regardless of source), while 0 indicates not purchasing from that genre.<sup>8</sup>

Two other sets of questions were aimed at consumption of some of the most popular recent religious books, films, and television. These survey items read: “Have you seen any of the following movies/television shows?” and “Have you read any of the following books?” with “yes” and “no” response options. Many respondents left these answer choices blank, so we dummy coded these responses into “yes” and “not yes” categories to account for this discrepancy. Questions regarding viewing consumption were directed at the following six items: *The Passion of the Christ*; *This is Your Day* featuring Benny Hinn; *Joan of Arcadia*; *VeggieTales*; *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*; and *Touched by an Angel*. For the specific reading section the items assessed were: the *Left Behind* series; *The Celestine Prophecy* by James Redfield; any book about *Dianetics*; *God’s Politics* by Jim Wallis; *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown; *The Purpose-Driven Life* by Rick Warren; and any book by James Dobson.<sup>9</sup> To our knowledge, these are the first empirical data that include such an extensive and comprehensive battery of questions on this topic.

### Explanatory and Control Variables

Class and other demographic variables were used to examine the aforementioned relationships. These include dummy variables for race (white = 1), sex (female = 1), region (east is the excluded category), and marital status (married = 1). Interval variables measured educational attainment (1 = “8th grade or less” to 7 = “post-graduate degree”), and income (1 = “\$10,000 or less” to 7 = “\$150,000 or more”). The respondents’ ages range from 18 to 93 and were coded continuously.

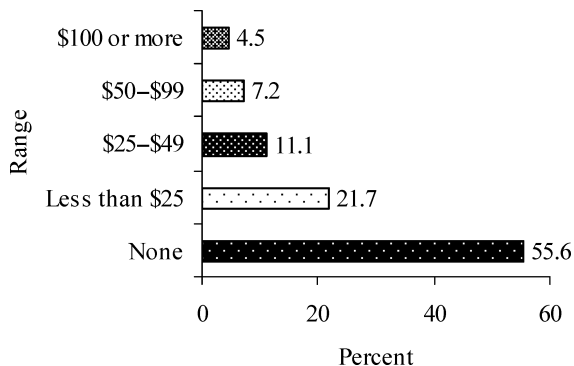
Religious capital measures included “biblical literalism,” a categorical variable where 1 = “The Bible means exactly what it says. It should be taken literally, word-for-word on all subjects,” and 0 = all other responses. In addition, church attendance was included as a variable ranging from 1 (never) to 9 (several times a week). To assess the effects of a respondent’s religious tradition, dummy variables were created using the religious tradition classification scheme that reduces the variety of denominational backgrounds into a few larger groupings that have historical and theological similarities. This specific scheme builds on the previous “RELTRAD” approach (Steenland et al. 2000) and offers greater precision in collapsing the varieties of denominations into a smaller subset of religious traditions (Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson 2007). The religiously unaffiliated or “nones” are the suppressed category in the multivariate analyses.

## RESULTS

### What Kinds of Religious Goods Are Consumed and How Much Is Spent on Them?

As seen in Figure 1, the general distribution pattern of spending on religious material goods shows that a slight majority (56 percent) spent nothing in the past month on religious goods while

**FIGURE 1**  
**AMOUNT SPENT ON RELIGIOUS MATERIAL GOODS AND PRODUCTS**  
**IN THE PAST MONTH**



the largest portion of actual spenders reported spending less than \$25 on religious goods in the past month (22 percent). Among the various genres of religious goods, not one was consumed by a majority of the sample. Religious greeting cards<sup>10</sup> were the most often purchased (37 percent) while religious bumper stickers and decals were the least purchased (8 percent) (see Figure 2).

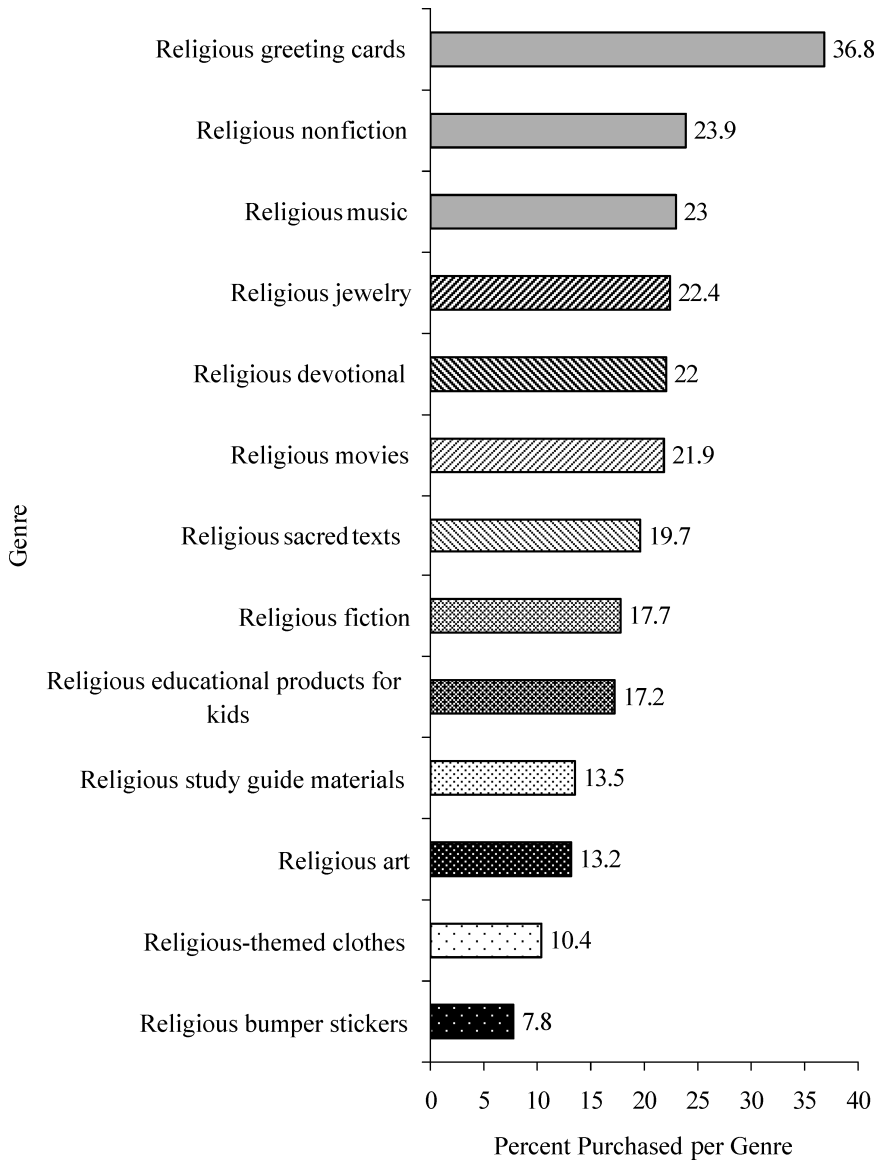
We created a 13-point scale that summed reported purchases where a point was given if the respondent purchased anything at all (within the past year) from a given genre (Cronbach's alpha = 0.88); we found that 60 percent of the respondents purchased at least some item from one of these genres whereas only about 3 percent purchased at least one of every item. While the average number of genres from which individuals purchased goods was 2.5 (out of a possible 13 genres), when we censored the sample to exclude nonconsumers, the average number of genres increased to 4.1. In other words, while religious consumption is a general phenomenon, it is a particularly salient feature for some more than others. This suggests that there is a possible distinction between nonconsumers and consumers of religious goods.

These general findings aside, how well do class, demographic, and religious factors explain religious consumption? Since the scale of buying breadth represents a summed count of the different genres and has a skewed distribution, we conducted a Poisson count model on the scale (Long 1997). The antilog of the parameter estimates yields the percentage change in predicted number of genres consumed over 1, similar to odds ratios. Model 1 (labeled "Buying Breadth") shows that higher levels of income are associated with less breadth in religious consumption, suggesting exclusivity among those at higher levels of income. Each unit increase in income results in a 5.8 percent decrease in the number of religious genres purchased. Older respondents are also more likely to report a narrower range of genre consumption with each additional year of age resulting in a 1.1 percent decrease in the predicted number of genres purchased. Net of other effects, women are predicted to consume 25.7 percent more genres of religious goods than men. For each unit increase on the education measure there is a predicted 2.4 percent increase in the count of genres purchased.

As expected, evangelicals, mainline Protestants, and religious others are all more likely to have a wider breadth of religious consumption than religious nones. Biblical literalism and attendance at religious services are also positively associated with breadth of religious consumption. On average, biblical literalists consume 16.8 percent more genres of religious goods than nonliteralists. Similarly, each unit increase on the measure of attendance at religious services results in 27.2 percent increase in the genres of religious consumption. As a measure of the goodness of fit for the Poisson model the deviance value divided by degrees of freedom was equal to 2.86, which suggests a good fit.

For assessing the amount spent on religious items in the past month, the skewed distribution of the dependent variable indicated that a standard OLS model was inappropriate. In order to

**FIGURE 2**  
**RELIGIOUS CONSUMPTION BY GENRE**



correct for this we condensed the variable for amount spent into three categories of no money spent ( $N = 765$ ), fewer than \$50 spent ( $N = 319$ ), and more than \$50 spent ( $N = 329$ ). We then conducted an ordinal logistic regression model to assess which factors influence higher amounts of spending on religious consumption.<sup>11</sup>

With the exception of income and education, we found a fairly consistent pattern of effects for demographic variables on the amount spent and buying breadth. Older people tend to spend less on religious consumption than younger people. Women were more likely to spend money on religious goods than were men. Greater levels of educational attainment were not significantly associated with the amount spent on purchases. Furthermore, greater levels of household income were negatively associated with breadth of purchases, but positively associated with the amount spent on religious goods. Thus, individuals at higher income levels may spend more due to greater resources, but they consume only certain types of products.

**TABLE 1**  
**REGRESSION OF ITEMS (UNSTANDARDIZED BETAS WITH STANDARDS**  
**ERRORS)**

|                                  | Buying Breadth <sup>a</sup> |                | Spending <sup>b</sup> |            |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|-----------------------|------------|
|                                  | Unstandardized Beta         | b <sup>c</sup> | Unstandardized Beta   | Odds Ratio |
| Demographics                     |                             |                |                       |            |
| Age                              | -0.011                      | 0.988***       | -0.007**              | 0.993      |
| Female                           | 0.229                       | 1.257***       | 0.517***              | 1.676      |
| White                            | 0.014                       | 1.014          | -0.070                | 0.932      |
| South                            | -0.022                      | 0.978          | 0.133                 | 0.875      |
| Class indicators                 |                             |                |                       |            |
| Education                        | 0.023                       | 1.024*         | -0.018                | 0.982      |
| Income                           | -0.059                      | 0.942***       | 0.129*                | 1.138      |
| Religious tradition <sup>c</sup> |                             |                |                       |            |
| Catholic                         | 0.054                       | 1.056          | -0.051                | 0.950      |
| Black Protestant                 | 0.068                       | 1.070          | 0.280                 | 1.323      |
| Evangelical Protestant           | 0.234                       | 1.264**        | -0.056                | 0.964      |
| Mainline Protestant              | 0.188                       | 1.207*         | 0.149                 | 1.161      |
| Jewish                           | -0.458                      | 0.633*         | 0.024                 | 1.025      |
| Other                            | 0.462                       | 1.587***       | 0.099                 | 1.104      |
| Religiosity                      |                             |                |                       |            |
| Biblical literalism              | 0.156                       | 1.168***       | 0.261***              | 1.299      |
| Attendance                       | 0.241                       | 1.272***       | 0.436***              | 1.546      |
| Constant                         | -0.265                      | *              | -2.946***             |            |
| Constant 2                       |                             |                | -4.206***             |            |
| R <sup>2</sup>                   |                             |                | 0.234                 |            |
| N                                | 1,462                       |                | 1,413                 |            |

<sup>a</sup>Poisson regression results.

<sup>b</sup>Ordinal regression results.

<sup>c</sup>Religious nonaffiliated is an excluded category.

\* $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$ .

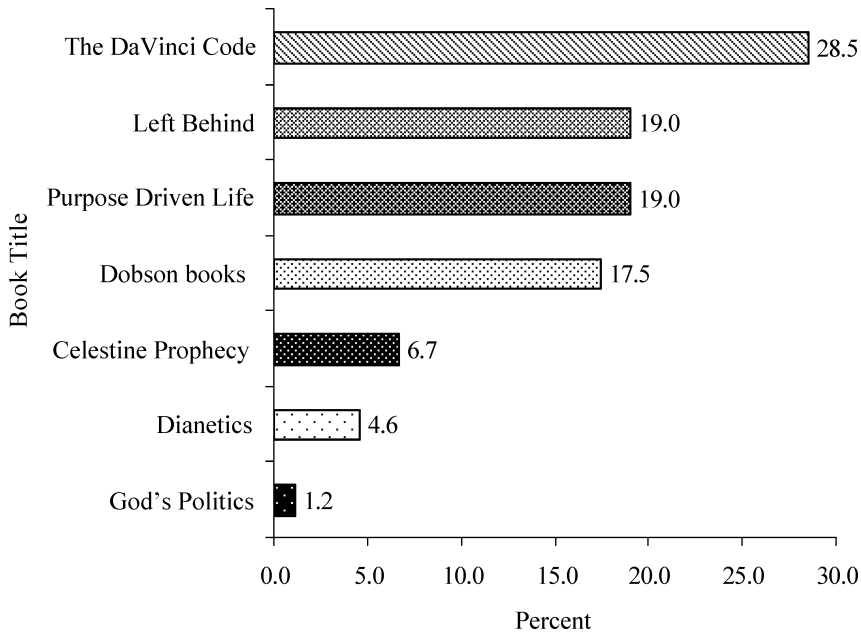
Source: Baylor Religion Survey.

No variables for religious tradition were significant predictors of whether a person was more likely to have spent money in the past month on material religious goods. This may be indicative of the fact that there is no specification in the denominational or religious nature of the products consumed for the variable assessing amount spent. As expected however, religious capital in the form of biblical literalism and worship attendance are positively associated with greater spending on religious items. We then find some qualified support for our religious capital expectations. Table 1 presents the results of both the Poisson and ordinal logistic regressions.

### *Specific Media Religious Consumption: The Evangelical Difference*

As suggested earlier, religious goods are often not intended as a generally “religious” good. Instead, they are drawn from particular traditions and such traditions imbue practitioners with specific religious capital. Thus we would expect that specific material items would be more often consumed by members of that religious tradition. When we look at the religious book examples

**FIGURE 3**  
**READERSHIP OF SPECIFIC RELIGIOUS BESTSELLERS**



we find that the general public has not overwhelmingly consumed any one of these items, not even Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, which had the largest reported readership (29 percent). This suggests that religious consumption patterns are not evenly spread among American adults (see Figure 3).

Of these religiously themed books, four would be considered pro-evangelical (*The Purpose-Driven Life*, *God's Politics*,<sup>12</sup> the *Left Behind* series, and Dobson books) in that the authors are noted publicly as evangelical Protestants. Two might be described as non-Christian (*The Celestine Prophecy* and *Dianetics*), while *The Da Vinci Code* is unique in that while it is focused on a fictional history of Catholicism, its thematic focus might be described as secular or demythologizing. Given these particular orientations we might expect that the greater share of readers of the evangelical books to be among evangelical affiliates, while the greater share of religious others might be found reading non-Christian religious books. *The Da Vinci Code* constituency, given its hybrid configuration, might be of greatest appeal among both Catholics and nonaffiliates for different reasons.

We present results for logistic regression analyses for six of the seven works: the *Left Behind* series; *The Purpose-Driven Life*; books by James Dobson; *The Celestine Prophecy*; *Dianetics*; and *The Da Vinci Code* (see Table 2). The types of products presented are vastly different in content and target audience. This may account for finding a variety of patterns among the different sociological characteristics under consideration. In general, we found an "evangelical book" readership with certain characteristics; however, the other three books did not share any pattern either with the evangelical book cluster or with one another as nonevangelical religious books.

The readership of the evangelical books (the *Left Behind* series, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, and books by James Dobson) is significantly younger and more often female. Further, Midwesterners, Southerners, and western state respondents (with one exception) are more likely to have read these works than respondents from the eastern part of the country. Educational attainment did not distinguish *Left Behind* readers, but had a significant and positive relationship with readers of the other two evangelical books. Greater reported income significantly increased the likelihood of reading all of these items. As expected, evangelical Protestants were significantly more likely to

have read these books relative to the nonaffiliated, net of other factors. Greater church attendance also increases the likelihood of reading evangelical books, while having a literal interpretation of the Bible increased the likelihood of reading the *Left Behind* series and Dobson books, but not *The Purpose-Driven Life*. This suggests that Rick Warren's work is engaging a more diverse religious constituency than others.

By contrast, no age effect appeared for readers of *The Celestine Prophecy*, *Dianetics*, or *The Da Vinci Code*. Women continue to comprise the greater share of the readership except for *Dianetics*, and regional location was not significant relative to the east coast readership. Educational attainment increases the likelihood of reading *The Celestine Prophecy* and *The Da Vinci Code*, whereas increasing household income has no effect except for *The Da Vinci Code* readers. In sum, the purchasing patterns indicated by these class and demographic characteristics share only a few similarities to those associated with purchasing evangelical books or to one another.

As expected, religious "others" were about three times more likely to have read *The Celestine Prophecy* and *The Da Vinci Code* relative to the nonaffiliated. Evangelicals were significantly less likely than the nonaffiliated to have read *The Celestine Prophecy*. In terms of biblical literalism

**TABLE 2**  
**PREDICTORS OF POPULAR RELIGIOUS READING**

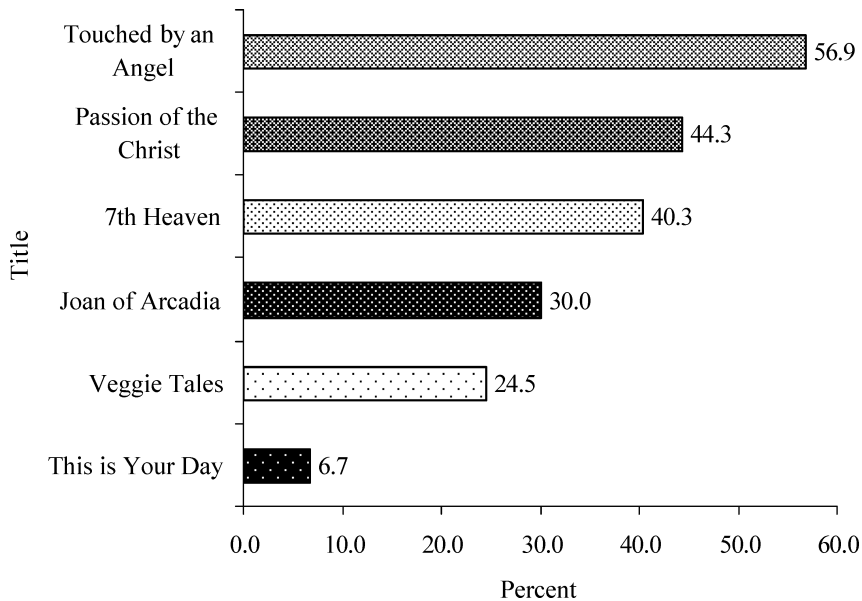
|                                  | <i>The Left Behind</i> Series<br>Odds Ratio | <i>The Purpose-Driven Life</i><br>Odds Ratio | James Dobson Books<br>Odds Ratio | <i>The Celestine Prophecy</i><br>Odds Ratio | <i>Dianetics</i><br>Odds Ratio | <i>The Da Vinci Code</i><br>Odds Ratio |
|----------------------------------|---|--|----------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|--|
| Demographics                     |   |  |                                  |   |                                |  |
| Age                              | 0.973***                                    | 0.987**                                      | 0.985***                         | 1.009                                       | 1.014                          | 0.999                                  |
| Female                           | 1.863***                                    | 2.598***                                     | 2.482***                         | 1.828**                                     | 0.970                          | 1.525***                               |
| White                            | 1.035                                       | 1.141  | 0.915                            | 1.100                                       | 0.339***                       | 0.832                                  |
| Midwest                          | 1.934*                                      | 2.316**                                      | 1.958*                           | 0.739                                       | 1.190                          | 0.858                                  |
| South                            | 3.231***                                    | 2.594***                                     | 1.728*                           | 1.571                                       | 1.704                          | 0.864                                  |
| West                             | 2.960***                                    | 2.400**                                      | 1.482                            | 1.202                                       | 1.400                          | 0.997                                  |
| Class indicators                 |   |  |                                  |   |                                |  |
| Education                        | 0.955                                       | 1.185**                                      | 1.228***                         | 1.363***                                    | 0.881                          | 1.227***                               |
| Income                           | 1.131*                                      | 1.174**                                      | 1.299***                         | 1.002                                       | 0.992                          | 1.181***                               |
| Religious tradition <sup>a</sup> |   |  |                                  |   |                                |  |
| Catholic                         | 1.116                                       | 0.778  | 1.096                            | 0.734                                       | 1.049                          | 1.571*                                 |
| Black Protestant                 | 2.078                                       | 2.110  | 1.385                            | 0.799                                       | 0.223                          | 0.421                                  |
| Evangelical Protestant           | 3.328***                                    | 2.254*                                       | 5.211***                         | 0.398*                                      | 1.179                          | 0.873                                  |
| Mainline Protestant              | 1.892                                       | 1.537  | 1.642                            | 0.566                                       | 0.767                          | 1.541                                  |
| Jewish                           | 0.170                                       | 0.132  | 0.511                            | 0.351                                       | 0.000                          | 0.490                                  |
| Other                            | 1.395                                       | 0.314  | 0.851                            | 2.986**                                     | 0.910                          | 3.225***                               |
| Religiosity                      |   |  |                                  |   |                                |  |
| Biblical literalism              | 1.475*                                      | 1.375  | 1.972***                         | 0.677                                       | 0.148**                        | 0.473***                               |
| Attendance                       | 1.183***                                    | 1.401***                                     | 1.420***                         | 0.944                                       | 0.890*                         | 0.957                                  |
| Constant                         | 0.034***                                    | 0.002***                                     | 0.001***                         | 0.011***                                    | 0.187*                         | 0.091***                               |
| R <sup>2</sup> (Nagelkerke)      | 0.258                                       | 0.336  | 0.391                            | 0.120                                       | 0.106                          | 0.166                                  |
| N                                | 1,502                                       | 1,502  | 1,502                            | 1,502                                       | 1,503                          | 1,502                                  |

<sup>a</sup>Religious nonaffiliated is an excluded category.

\* $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$ .

Source: Baylor Religion Survey.

**FIGURE 4**  
**VIEWERSHIP OF SPECIFIC RELIGIOUS FILM AND TELEVISION PROGRAMS**



and church attendance, we find no effect on reading this work, but significant negative effects on reading *Dianetics* and *The Da Vinci Code*. With respect to these specific examples, we find some evidence of diverging effects of religious capital on purchasing.

### *Specific Media Consumption II: A Passion for VeggieTales*

With respect to religious visual media, we found that of all examples given, *Touched by an Angel* had the largest viewership, the only one to garner a majority (57 percent) (see Hoover 2006).<sup>13</sup> The much-touted *The Passion of the Christ* drew in 44 percent, making it the second most consumed religious product in our examples (see Figure 4). While these figures are certainly informative about what proportion of Americans are consuming certain products, which items are consumed most may have more to do with availability and marketing than consumer desire. It is easy to understand why media such as *Touched by an Angel* and *The Passion of the Christ* outpace *VeggieTales* and Benny Hinn's programs in terms of viewership. The former are widely promoted and available to mass audiences, while *VeggieTales* is a straight-to-video purchase aimed at children and Benny Hinn programs appear on cable television without much promotion.

Religiously themed visual media consists of a variety of presentations of the sacred and the spiritual (Carey 1992). Of our six specific visual items, only Benny Hinn's *This is Your Day* is explicitly evangelical. *The Passion of the Christ* is based on an interpretation of a traditional Catholic (with an emphasis on violence) view of the death of Jesus, while the remaining items are more generically moral or spiritual in theme with no explicit religious tradition emphasized. These works allude to Christian concepts such as angels, or exercising forgiveness, but in general they convey relatively nondenominational moral messages that seem to have a wide appeal (see also Roof 1999; Schultze 2003). We expect that this latter subset will show fewer affiliational differences in viewership but more distinction in terms of practice and belief. For the purposes of parsimony, we focus on three items in particular for their popularity and unique characteristics: *The Passion of the Christ*; *Touched by an Angel*; and *VeggieTales*. As we show, consumption of *VeggieTales* exhibits a series of differences in viewership relative to other religious visual media (see Table 3). As with the presentation of our results on religious readership, we present three

specific products that are very different in content and audience, but we do so to provide a glimpse of the breadth of both religious consumption and our data.

The average viewer of *The Passion of the Christ* was more likely to be younger, nonwhite, and nonsouthern, net of other factors. Highly educated adults were significantly less likely to have seen this movie and as might be expected, larger numbers of Catholics and evangelical Protestants were more likely to have seen it as well. Unlike our other consumption measures, mainline Protestants and black Protestants were also significantly more likely to have seen this movie relative to the nonaffiliated. Biblical literalism and church attendance also significantly increased the likelihood of watching *The Passion of the Christ*.

*Touched by an Angel* viewers had a different demographic composition and religious capital influence compared to *The Passion of the Christ* audience. They are more often female, but not significantly different in age, race, or southern residence. And more so than *The Passion of the Christ* viewers, they are significantly less educated. The audience for this show draws from the same types of religious affiliates, namely, Catholics, evangelicals, mainliners, and black Protestants, and while greater church attendance increased the likelihood of having watched this program, biblical literalism did not.

*VeggieTales* viewers, by contrast, had a combination of characteristics that were unique relative to viewers of the other two visual media. As children's products this series is most likely to be purchased by mothers, and therefore women. Moreover, it is young, white, more affluent women who are purchasing this video series. Consumers are similar to *The Passion of the Christ*

**TABLE 3**  
**LOGISTIC REGRESSION OF RELIGIOUS ITEMS VIEWED**

|                                  | <i>The Passion of the Christ</i><br>Odds Ratio | <i>Touched by an Angel</i><br>Odds Ratio | <i>VeggieTales</i><br>Odds Ratio |
|----------------------------------|--|--|----------------------------------|
| Demographics                     |  |  |                                  |
| Age                              | 0.976***                                       | 1.003                                    | 0.936***                         |
| Female                           | 0.853  | 2.034***                                 | 2.401***                         |
| White                            | 0.558**  | 0.960                                    | 2.819***                         |
| South                            | 0.730**  | 1.014                                    | 0.868                            |
| Class indicators                 |  |  |                                  |
| Education                        | 0.877***                                       | 0.860***                                 | 1.116**                          |
| Income                           | 0.993  | 0.941                                    | 1.110**                          |
| Religious tradition <sup>a</sup> |  |  |                                  |
| Catholic                         | 2.342***                                       | 2.224***                                 | 1.495                            |
| Black Protestant                 | 2.730**  | 3.332***                                 | 4.799***                         |
| Evangelical Protestant           | 3.550***                                       | 2.086***                                 | 4.328***                         |
| Mainline Protestant              | 2.116**  | 2.021***                                 | 2.073**                          |
| Jewish                           | 0.656  | 0.732                                    | 0.226                            |
| Other                            | 0.894  | 1.285                                    | 1.439                            |
| Religiosity                      |  |  |                                  |
| Biblical literalism              | 1.485**  | 1.237                                    | 1.125                            |
| Attendance                       | 1.172***                                       | 1.104***                                 | 1.251***                         |
| Constant                         | 1.911  | 0.725                                    | 0.086***                         |
| R <sup>2</sup> (Nagelkerke)      | 0.211  | 0.161                                    | 0.369                            |
| N                                | 1,502  | 1,504                                    | 1,502                            |

<sup>a</sup>Religious nonaffiliated is an excluded category.

\* $p \leq 0.05$ , \*\* $p \leq 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p \leq 0.001$ .

Source: Baylor Religion Survey.

viewers in that they are younger, and they are similar to *Touched by an Angel* viewers in that they are predominantly female. Unlike the other two religious visual media, this audience is predominantly white. In addition, Catholic affiliates were the only Christian group not to watch this series more so than the nonaffiliated. While church attendance had the predicted religious capital effect, biblical literalism did not.

### DISCUSSION

In sum, religious consumption is a complex behavior and cannot be uniformly assessed by arguments from cultural and religious capital perspectives (Grossberg et al. 2006). The cultural omnivore thesis was not supported in our analysis of buying breadth, but was relatively supported in specific reading items, and in viewing one of the three visual media. This suggests perhaps that religious consumption is an altogether different form of consumption relative to other cultural goods. Upper-class Americans are somewhat more selective when it comes to this form of consumption, but the same can be said for the lower classes as well. Perhaps selective religious consumption indicates greater religious commitment that reaches across class boundaries. Qualitative research may help reveal the potential differences in motivation between class preferences in their selection of religious consumption, as well as insight into what the impetus for purchasing various items may have been. Future research should also consider the similarities and divergences between secular cultural consumption and religious consumption in order to better understand the persistent significance of class distinctions.

Younger Americans purchase a greater variety of religious goods and spend more on them. They are not necessarily drawn to the same kinds of religious goods as older Americans. In this sense, religious consumption joins cultural consumption more generally as an experience that is increasing in importance with each generation. In terms of gender, on the other hand, we found a near universal female dominance in religious consumption. This may come as no surprise if we consider that consumption has historically been targeted toward women, their role in family socialization often requires purchases of various goods,<sup>14</sup> and they are proportionally more often in American religious communities. The curious problem lies in interpreting the lack of significance for viewing *The Passion of the Christ*. Conventional wisdom would say that this film most likely generated a greater appeal to a male audience due to its violent content, but symbolically this work also focuses on a male figure (a male savior); in this way, some men who are normally not interested in religion nor participate in religious communities may still “get religion” through viewing these items. Further research in this area might consider other ways in which religious consumption is gendered and its significance for contemporary faith and practice.

The findings for religious capital influences suggest several points of consideration. By far, religious consumption, based on the measures used here, is dominated by evangelical Protestants (Hendershot 2004). McDannell (1995) noted that manufacturers of Protestant religious goods in the mid-to-late 20th century were expanding, and indeed what we may be seeing here is the fruit of such efforts. Evangelicals buy from more genres and make up larger shares of the consumers of most of the products we reviewed. However, when viewed from the perspective of specific item usage, we find that consumption is not indiscriminate. Similar to the religious capital argument made by Stark and Finke (2000), we find that religious capital is conserved for the most part. Products that have a pro-Christian theme tend to be consumed more often by Christian sectors of America’s religious economy, but we find no consistent pattern with non-Christian product consumption. In a couple of instances, we found significant *nonconsumption* of religious goods that may be evidence of the cultural boundary work suggested by Smith et al. (1998). A sense of religious identity in an age of material consumption may take the form of restraining one’s purchases from those goods that do not affirm one’s identity as a person of faith.

In terms of church attendance and biblical literalism, we found that with the exception of *The Celestine Prophecy*, most religious consumption is encouraged or discouraged either by religious belief or behavior or in some instances both. This may indicate that religious goods appeal

to specific audiences (i.e., conservation of religious capital). Future research might consider other ways in which religious practices and motivations apart from these traditional measures foster religious consumption. This, too, suggests that perhaps religious material consumption may constitute an important dimension of American religiosity.

Future research should also consider the prevalence of other religious goods used by non-Christian believers. Marilyn Halter's (2000) review of the commodification of ethnicity included the ironic "kosherization" of Muslim and Jewish products that are increasingly finding wider audiences among Christian and secular consumers. Henna tattooing, yoga, and Buddhist meditation practices are also consumed by a wide spectrum of Americans but we know little about their relationship to other religious beliefs and behaviors.

While we have argued that cultural omnivore, demographic, and religious identities have some theoretical value in integrating material religion with other areas in the sociology of religion, "supply side" factors that influence religious consumption such as the availability and marketing of religious items are important considerations that deserve scholarly attention. The availability of some religious goods may be more prevalent than others (compare the *Left Behind* franchise versus *Joan of Arcadia*), which can alter the meaning of the relationship between religious practice and some types of religious consumption. In addition, as seen in recent research on how religious media is used in American homes, the purposes for which an item is used vary greatly (e.g., Clark 2005; Frykholm 2004; Hoover and Clark 2002). Use of *halal* ("blessed") products might be out of concern for healthier foods (as opposed to an interest in Islam) and watching *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* might be for "wholesome background noise" (as opposed to exploring faith issues in the series). How might factors such as access and different functional ends for religious consumption affect who consume these goods? Further qualitative inquiry into these processes will deepen our understanding of these patterns.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, we present an initial portrait of American religious consumption, and argue that it is a significant feature of American religious life and deserving of scholarly attention. Religious consumption is an activity that overlaps multiple spheres of life, including the economic marketplace, identity formation/maintenance, participation in a religious tradition, and entertainment. In a postindustrial age with unprecedented amounts of economic power at the individual level, choices in material religious consumption will grow all the more important and may even transform how spirituality and the sacred are experienced. Research on this topic invites scholars to consider new ways in which the sociological study of religion can integrate with other areas of private and public life. In so doing, religious experience, which is so central to millions of Americans, will be understood more holistically by including not only what one believes, but how one exercises such beliefs.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank the John Templeton Foundation for a generous grant to conduct this study. We also thank Kevin Dougherty, Paul Froese, Jeanne Kim, Chris Ellison, and the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2006 Society for the Scientific Study of Religion Annual Meeting.

## NOTES

1. Building a moral society was also evident at the federal level where post-Reconstruction era Progressive Christians sought out legislation to curtail prostitution, prizefighting, and alcohol consumption (see Foster 2002).
2. We are grateful for this insight provided by one of the anonymous reviewers.
3. Indeed, the number of symbolic interactionist studies on popular religious consumption has expanded exponentially in recent years. Leading scholars who have produced a great deal of research from this perspective include Stewart Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark.

4. The only exception we have found is Bryson's study of musical genre dislikes where the category of gospel music was one of the most popular of musical genres and yet most rejected by tolerant respondents (Bryson 1996:894).
5. Mears and Ellison (2000), however, did not find this in their study of New Age consumption in Texas.
6. Some religious communities and identities exist primarily through religious goods, such as the New Age movement (e.g., Bader and Lockhart 2006; Mears and Ellison 2000).
7. By phrasing the question so that purchases occurred during the last year, there will clearly omit those who have purchased items earlier in their lifetimes. However, since the data represent a cross-sectional glimpse of social location, religious identities, and religious affiliations/participation, it is crucial to our analyses that religious consumption be recent.
8. We acknowledge that this approach has certain limitations. We do not know the exact number of products that were purchased within that genre, nor do we know what the respondent means when she reports purchasing within that genre as far as the exact nature of the religious good. And as may be the case for many consumer goods, it is not clear whether the respondent actually used the product purchased. Nevertheless, this information is far more comprehensive than any other data available, and allows scholars to consider new avenues for understanding material religion as well as contemporary religious experiences more generally.
9. Clearly, there is a great range in audience appeal as some items cater more to specific groups such as evangelical Protestants while others have a broader interest base. These specific products were chosen as representations of some of the more popular items available on the market today.
10. Our data do not differentiate cards for religious holidays (Christmas, Hanukkah, and Easter) from greeting cards that have religious content. Whether cards purchased in the last year are considered religious is left to the judgment of the respondent. However, this strengthens our data in that the respondent must consider the cards to be religious in order to respond affirmatively.
11. The proportional odds assumption had a chi-square value of 27.9 with 14 degrees of freedom, resulting in a *p*-value of 0.014. While this is lower than the standard of 0.05, we felt that multinomial logistic regression unnecessarily obscured our analyses by comparing nominal categories rather than ordered categories. Simulation models by Kim (2003) show that rejection of the null hypothesis for the proportional odds assumption does not have practical applications for large samples. Moreover, substantively similar results were found using both OLS and multinomial regression (figures available upon request).
12. In light of the low percentage of readers for Jim Wallis's work, this analysis will not cover this book.
13. This may confirm Wuthnow's (1998) explanation of Americans' attachment to angels in their spiritual quests.
14. An important example of this appears with respect to children's religious consumption. Parents, and more often mothers, are the primary source of material religious goods in the lives of children. Hillary Warren's (2005) interviews with women who watch *VeggieTales* typifies this pattern.

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