

# Would you Adam and Eve it? Social Scientific Contributions to the Study of the Reception of Scripture in Consumer Society

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## 1. Introduction

As someone once wrote, capitalist societies present themselves as an immense accumulation of commodities. The question of how meanings are assigned to commodities in capitalist societies, and the question of how these meanings are circulated, has attracted a number of scholars of religion over a number of decades. Katie Edwards' (2012) *Admen and Eve: The Bible in Contemporary Advertising* maintains the critical, anti-consumerist attitude that informs previous studies of religion and advertising. By examining scriptural tropes in advertising, her research has the potential to offer significant insights into the utilization and interpretation of scripture within contemporary popular culture and its role in the (re)creation of consumer subjectivities. In taking this to be the vital task of the study of the reception of the Bible and popular culture, my concern is that the methodologies employed in the emerging subdiscipline are not necessarily as well adapted to the task as they might be.

I approach Edwards' work from my perspective as a sociologist of religion and contemporary culture, currently embedded in an anthropology department. My interest in this essay is to address methodological continuities within studies of religion and advertising, and within studies of the reception of the Bible and popular culture, to compare these methodological approaches with certain social scientific approaches to the study of contemporary popular and consumer culture, and to suggest that certain problems within existing studies of religion and advertising might be addressed through a multi-disciplinary approach or an internal shift in methodological focus. To this end, I will draw upon studies from within sociological cultural studies and social anthropology (cultural anthropology for American readers). I will also try to approximate the kind of broad reading that I think is desirable in this kind of work; in addition to engaging with material from my own discipline that examines consumer media, I will be drawing upon insights from a few key texts from within the profession of advertising itself. In making use of this material I am not trying to become instantly expert in a discrete discipline, for I am even less expert in the study of consumer behavior than I am in the study of scripture; what I am trying to do is better understand the culture of the advertising industry, as well as the culture of consumerism.

My argument, simply put, is that if the study of the reception of the Bible and popular culture is going to offer insights into the function of scripture in contemporary consumer societies, then it must move beyond methodologies designed for the study of sacred literature; there must be meaningful engagement with the cultures of production and consumption of popular culture, and biblical scholars must be prepared to surrender their privileged interpretive position. I have argued elsewhere that in reception histories of biblical tropes in popular music, the typical approach is to identify a favored genre or artist, then utilize a similar

methodology as found in approaches to the study of scripture that reception scholars critique or wish to move away from (Abraham 2015). The focus is on the production of culture through recourse to biographies and interviews, and the consumer of popular culture is the trained biblical scholar through the close reading of lyrics as text. In the case of popular music, then, reception studies of the Bible in contemporary popular culture are methodologically incapable of telling us as much about the current reception of the Bible as they would like to, since engagement with the world beyond biblical scholarship is limited to the production of popular culture. In the case of the study of biblical tropes in contemporary advertising, I think the methodological question is more pronounced. Without engaging the culture within which advertising is produced, in addition to engaging the culture within which advertising is consumed, advertisements might appear as fully formed ideological artifacts without the complexities that biblical scholars have recognized inform the production and reception of scripture.

As I will concede in the conclusion, the question of whether dialogue with other methodological approaches to the study of religion and/or popular culture is relevant for the study of the reception of the Bible and popular culture is an open one. I am certain some scholars of the Bible committed to core disciplines within what has come to be labeled critical theory will reject the utility of dialogue with the methodological approaches discussed in this essay. However, as biblical reception studies, or reception history, shifts into the study of popular culture, it seems reasonable to me to engage with established bodies of work on popular culture. This requires the acknowledgment that, paraphrasing popular musicologist Dai Griffiths (1999), the high analysis of low culture is not the recent innovation it is commonly claimed to be when engaged in by biblical scholars (e.g. Edwards 2012, ix). One can trace the scholarly study of British popular culture back at least half a century to Leavis on the right and Hoggart on the left—and this is to say nothing of the work of Adorno (1991) and his fellow Frankfurters, which exerts an obvious but often unstated influence on many of the texts in and around this field. For example, Jhally (1989) analyzed advertising and religion from a Marxist perspective a quarter of a century ago, arguing that both religion and advertising exist to comfort the confused and that advertising masks exploitative relations of production by interpellating workers into the false consciousness of consumers. A similar spirit animates Sheffield's (2006) study; although she is more agnostic about the social functions of religion, she argues that advertising can be ideologically powerful enough to form an analogue to, or example of, Tillich's notion of religion as one's "ultimate concern."

Momentarily moving away from these kinds of heavily politicized cultural readings, I will begin this essay by outlining some quite different approaches to the study of consumer media within anthropology and sociological cultural studies, paying particular attention to the importance of understanding the culture within which advertising is produced. The subsequent section will attempt to draw the discussion closer to the question of methodologies employed in reception studies, paying particular attention to the importance of understanding the culture within which advertising is consumed. Section 4 will propose a methodological alternative by outlining the methods and results of a single, small-scale focus group study of consumers of advertising. I will conclude by suggesting that questions of methodology and interdisciplinarity in the study of the reception of the Bible and

popular culture pose deeper questions for biblical studies and the study of popular culture.

## 2. A Different Culture

In a lecture delivered to the Finnish Anthropological Association, Ernest Gellner invoked the authority of an unusual figure to defend the importance of ethnographic research methods, against reliance on interpreting texts:

The best formulation of the general distrust of documents which I know comes from the pen of a man who was not technically an anthropologist or social scientist at all, though his achievements as an investigator are indisputable: the British traitor and Soviet spy Kim Philby. In an autobiography written in Moscow but published in the West—I quote from memory—he notes that it is the naïve and inexperienced spy who thinks he has achieved something if he has succeeded in stealing a confidential document from, say, a foreign embassy. The document itself is worthless. How does one know it was not written by some junior person ... (or) ... a move in an internal intrigue, intended to promote a reaction and lead to the adoption of views quite contrary to those advocated in the document? What *is* valuable is to be able to speak informally and at length with the members of the embassy in question, and to get a real feel of how they habitually and naturally think. Once that is understood, it becomes easy to interpret even minor and unconfidential signs. Without it, leaks, documents are useless. With it, they are almost redundant. (Gellner 1998, 82-83)

The utility of ethnography, Gellner argues, is that it allows scholars to understand the “interdependence of institutions and meanings.” It also necessitates close attention be paid to the methods one utilizes to understand the subjects and objects of one’s research, even if Gellner notes the risk that scholarly interest in the method of research might eclipse interest in the substance of research.

In the case of understanding the role of biblical tropes in contemporary advertising, it seems to me that there are two particular cultures that need to be understood in the way Gellner is alluding to. The first is the institutional culture of the advertisers themselves. The second is the culture of consumerism; in this case it is the culture of the postfeminist consumers at which the advertisements in Edwards’ book are ostensibly aimed (Edwards 2012, 3-6, ch. 3). Understanding these cultures goes some way to understanding the medium of advertising itself and the way in which meanings are mediated such that certain communicative acts become more or less likely. Daniel Miller’s (2012) ethnographic study of advertising and consumerism in the Americas can help us understand both. His examination of advertisers in the Caribbean revealed various conflicts of interest around notions of authority and autonomy. Much like, say, a department of biblical studies, religion studies, or anthropology, advertisers are in a constant battle of creativity against accountancy, and local offices are in constant conflict with central offices as they seek the maximum permissible degree of control. Miller turns up further ambiguities insofar as the world of advertising is thoroughly reflexive, with advertising campaigns influencing each other in ways that remain semi-opaque to outsiders. Advertising agencies are also enthusiastic advertisers of

advertising itself, moreover, especially in the instances when its utility cannot be quantified.

Miller's work also illustrates examples of the quite different cultural processes at work amongst producers of advertising and in the individual and collective lives of consumers of advertising. He illustrates this in part by citing amusing examples of advertising that unexpectedly fails or succeeds because of unintended interpretations, leading Miller (2012, 135) to reject the notion that there is some "seamless relationship between active commerce and passive consumers." He cites advertising intended to avoid ethnic discrimination by using only actors of mixed ethnicity causing outrage in a minority community protective of its endogamous marriage tradition, and a highly and deliberately sexualized commercial for soy milk—complete with a man with a pneumatic drill between his legs—boosting sales of soy milk for children's school lunches because, well, the man with the drill certainly looks like he is working hard. The *Advertising Age* website also reports on failed advertising campaigns such as these, which offend or confuse consumers. As in Philby and Gellner's example of the difficulties of deciphering diplomatic documents, the reports often suggest that internal intrigues are afoot.

This point about understanding advertising should underline the importance of understanding the culture of consumers of advertising. That the advertising industry is obsessed with empirical consumer research is one reason why I consider engagement with consumers to be an important ingredient in understanding how meanings are made with and through advertising. In beginning to move from a concern with understanding the culture of the producers of advertising to the culture of the consumers of advertising, we can begin with insights from the famous adman Rosser Reeves—the inspiration for the character of Don Draper in the television series *Mad Men*. What Reeves (1961, 8) referred to as the "the beginning of reality in advertising" was the recognition of the importance of engaging with consumers. His agency engaged in such large scale quantitative research since the 1940s, aimed at testing how effective a particular advertisement is at "moving an idea from one man's head into the head of another" (Reeves 1961, 92). One of the reasons why he viewed empirical research as important was his rejection of the notion emerging from cultural critics and social scientists that consumer society "is based on a thick substratum of cement heads" being hypnotized by an advertising industry fabricating undesirable desires and unneeded needs (Reeves 1961, 138-141). Instead, he argued that advertising is driven by a long list of quite banal desires, unchanged over the millennia, such as healthy children and healthy teeth, which can be met in new ways by new products.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reeves shared a professional rivalry with his brother-in-law, David Ogilvy. Reeves' direct and unpretentious style of advertising, focusing on the "unique selling proposition" of a particular product, fell out of favor in the 1960s as Ogilvy's more subtle and artistic ads proved to be less irritating (Cracknell 2011). This came to be known as advertising's "Creative Revolution" and led to the forms of advertising featured in Edwards' (2012) study, which openly embrace fantasy and symbolism. Ogilvy always considered himself a disciple of Reeves, however, and he was no less insistent upon the importance of consumer research (Cracknell 2011). Writing the foreword to one advertising text book, Ogilvy (1998, xiii) claimed that success in advertising – defined as sales per dollar – "lies in perpetual testing of all the variables."

The point is not whether we agree with Reeves' claims about the nature of human desire. Even if we believe that desire is constituted by capitalism's culture of inequity, or that the heart is deceitful above all things, or both, we can recognize that the culture of advertising works with its own anthropological understanding of the consumers of its products. Some fundamental arguments and dispositions that Reeves advanced in his book, which began life as a manual for new employees, are in accord with latter arguments from the academic left—in contrast to earlier views influenced by the Frankfurt School. Perhaps the most basic text to take account of is Stuart Hall's (1999) foundational essay "Encoding, Decoding." A version of this essay was originally published in 1973 as a medieval-sounding "stencilled paper" and republished many times since. Like Edwards, Hall is concerned with the relationship between power and culture, and he argues against treating mass-communication in consumer societies as a closed "loop" reproducing the ideologies of the powerful. Instead, he focusses on the multiple instances, processes and protagonists who are involved in the transmission, reception and reproduction of a particular message on television, the *relative* autonomy that all these moving parts enjoy, and the resulting inevitability of "misunderstandings." Hall (1999: 514-517) differentiates between types of misunderstanding in the consumption of mass media; there are obviously cases of "literal" misunderstandings and "individual" idiosyncratic misunderstandings, but there are also cases of the systematic failure or refusal of groups of people to interpret a message in the manner in which its producers wish them to, instead interpreting the message in a "*globally* contrary way."

Thus, without dismissing the existence of dominant and intended meanings, the recognition of the relative autonomy of decoding messages from those encoded in mass media allows for the recognition of *resistant readings*. This topic became popular in empirical studies of media consumers later in the 1980s, and has remained so. The most cited example of this work is probably Henry Jenkins' (1992) *Textual Poachers*, which examines processes of meaning-making and world-making by popular culture's "consumer producers." Jenkins' book was amongst the first studies of "slash fiction," amateur fiction written by usually female fans of existing media, dissatisfied with characterizations in these programs, who re-script characters accordingly—most infamously reinventing the relationship between *Star Trek's* Captain Kirk and Commander Spock. Although the closest biblical studies has come to slash fiction is some of the essays of Roland Boer (2000), the critical and creative capacities of consumers of popular media has been clearly demonstrated in cultural studies, sociology and related disciplines for several decades. To ignore this risks a return to the methods and assumptions of the Frankfurt School in which the interpretation of a single, enlightened expert supersedes the interpretations of the diverse consumers of popular media, whose personal and political development is held back by popular media.

### 3. A Conceptual Conundrum

It seems, therefore, that there is a recurrent methodological and conceptual conundrum in critical studies of advertising culture—not just Edwards' (2012) study, but earlier studies such as Sheffield's (2006). The studies recognize and fleetingly acknowledge the critical faculties of consumers—that it is not merely experts who are capable of cynical, ironical, or explicitly resistant readings of the

mediascape, in other words—and yet this acknowledgement must be disavowed to bolster both the central argument about the deleterious impact of commercial media upon the lives of late capitalist subjects and the research methodology that relies upon academic experts to decode popular media and so reveal its deleterious impact. For example, Sheffield (2006, 106-108) engages in a kind of vulgar Durkheimian approach when arguing that while advertisements may direct themselves at individual consumers, the meanings of advertisements are socially inscribed. This methodological slight of hand excuses Sheffield from engaging with any interpretations of consumer media other than her own and those of like-minded scholars of religion. Critically-minded scholars present themselves as privileged decoders of commercials when copious data from countless studies makes it quite clear that ordinary consumers are perfectly capable of similarly critical reflection—and do it without being paid. I do not think that Edwards (2012, 11) goes far enough in merely refusing to reject the “pleasure” that consumers may take in the commercials being analyzed “as ‘wrong’ or inappropriate,” therefore; where there is a lack of engagement with the lives and critical capacities of non-experts studies do not need to be openly condemnatory to be problematic.

This lack of engagement with people’s lives can prevent a proper understanding of the ways in which ideas come to be claimed and believed by social actors. In matters related to biblical tropes in popular culture in consumer society, there seems to me to be two key questions. First, there is the question of the relationship between popular culture and consumer subjectivities. In contemporary Continental philosophy and cultural theory this question is provocatively posed by Slavoj Žižek (1989), building on the work of Peter Sloterdijk (1988) and his notion of “enlightened false consciousness.” When consumers are well aware of the tactics that advertisers use to sell products—a critical observation in total accord with results from countless empirical research projects—why does consumerism’s symbolic system still seem to function? Secondly, there is the question of the authority, religious or otherwise, biblical tropes have in consumer societies. I agree with Edwards (2012, 106) that the “vast majority” of consumers of Eve advertisements “are familiar with the biblical story,” but the question that is left unasked and unanswered—which is also the case in reception histories of popular music (Abraham 2015)—is whether the story is recognized as biblical and whether Eve’s story is therefore categorically different for consumers than, say, the stories of Rapunzel, Red Riding Hood and Cinderella that Edwards (2012, 99) also cites. If consumers of these advertisements were asked, I suspect we would find a variety of interpretations—especially somewhere as diverse as contemporary Britain. We cannot begin to answer these questions, though, without engaging the lives and beliefs of contemporary consumers of popular media and scripture.

On this point, I want to return to the work of anthropologist Daniel Miller (2012). In his Caribbean ethnography, he found a quite different approach to the question of the culture and subjectivity of consumerism than one encounters in existing studies of religion, advertising and consumer culture. When he asked working class Trinidadians what they did for a living, in the great tradition of both anthropologists and advertisers, he caused unintended offense. For unlike Miller’s peers—academics like us who locate no small part of our identity in what we do for a living—the working class Trinidadians Miller spent time with considered

their jobs to be unpleasant chores to be endured, not an important part of their identity, and therefore not a legitimate topic of discussion with a foreigner who wanted to get to know them better (Miller 2012, 56-57). Asking about their consumer life rather than their working life was much more pleasant, for this was the part of their lives in which they felt more empowered and more “authentic.” Miller (2012, 66-67) argues that similar attitudes were encountered in the former socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe. In rather different contexts, one also finds recognition of the creativity and liberating potential of consumption in studies of youth subcultures from explicitly postmodern sociological perspectives (Thornton 1995; Muggleton 2000) and even eclectically semiotically Marxist ones (Hall & Jefferson 1976; Hebdige 1979).

It is also worth drawing attention to Miller’s (2001, 2009) ethnographic work on the relationships of working class Londoners to the commodities in their homes and in their lives. His research participants are reflexively aware of the way that commodities change their meanings and values, and the way that a certain commodity can represent a relative or a relationship. Miller (2001, 119) argues on this basis that what might be termed commodity fetishization is not false consciousness but “a profound appreciation of a state of affairs”; material objects really are affective objects, and they can be considered to exert a kind of agency, and not necessarily detrimentally so, when brought into relation with the complexities of people’s lives and histories. This empirical research also pushes him to reject strongly the notion of any kind of inherent individualism and fragmentation in late capitalist consciousness. That the kinds of institutions which allow for the organized resistance Edwards (2012) would like to see directed at consumer capitalism—*structurally speaking*, trade unions, political parties and churches—attract shrinking commitment is a given, but there is no correlating contradiction between forming meaningful relationships with both commodities and people (Miller 2009, 346-357).

One can of course object to all this from personal or policy-based perspectives. I have already alluded to Edwards’ (2012, 68-69, 79-80) argument that forms of individual empowerment and consumer choice are inferior to collective organization and campaigning for changes to the economic system. Since most of us will agree, I think there is an additional apt point that Miller’s study of the material lives of working class Londoners makes. The apparent “failure” of the housing estates where the research was carried out was a result of the fact that the plan of the estates “never reflected the people that had to live in them”; they were designed by modernist architects with particular notions about how other people ought to live and reform their lives (Miller 2001, 117-118).

#### **4. A Methodological Alternative**

I have been suggesting that scholars of the reception of scripture in popular culture engage with practices of the reception of scripture amongst everyday consumers of popular culture, and do not restrict themselves to scholarly interpretations. I am not suggesting every study of the reception of scripture must engage in in-depth empirical research, such as Bielo’s (2009a) project on the reception of scripture

amongst contemporary American Evangelicals during breakfast Bible studies.<sup>2</sup> I do believe that it is advantageous for scholars working in this field to engage with existing empirical research on topics of direct relevance to their research, where their own research design, methodological preferences, or lifestyle choices prevents them from engaging in a systematic way with non-academic consumers of the media they are studying. On the issue of gender and consumer culture, for example, Desmond (2003, 115-117) cites decades-old large-scale empirical research on women's interpretation of gendered advertising, finding critical awareness of the stereotypes and strategies of advertisers. The beginnings of a productive process of reflecting upon emic and etic, expert and non-expert, understandings of the culture in question can be as simple as taking account of this type of research in second or third-hand forms.

I will cite a single example of the kind of empirical research that is feasible to carry out as part of the study of the reception of scripture in consumer societies: Scott & Cloud's (2008) focus group study with twelve identifiably postfeminist women responding to the Dove "campaign for real beauty" advertisements.<sup>3</sup> This study is instructive for both its methodology and its findings. The authors explain how their small scale study developed from a classroom discussion about Dove's products and its advertising campaigns, which they realized was similar to the kind of focus group research routinely engaged in by the advertising industry itself. Unsurprisingly, participants in the focus group articulate critical, but different, interpretations of the advertising.

The diverse interpretations mentioned in the article include women now considering Dove a "woman-friendly and size-friendly company" which will be looked favorably upon when making future necessary purchases, the rejection of what is perceived to be a common view that self-identified feminists reject concern with personal style and pleasure, and non-feminist undergraduate students who are aware and disapproving of manipulative techniques used in advertising aimed at women and girls. In this latter vein, the focus group research reveals a common view of the *contrived* nature of advertising, even in a campaign that deliberately eschews or subverts the explicitly fantastical or celebrity-focused approach ubiquitous in the Eve advertisements in Edwards' (2012) study. The very presence of "real" women in Dove's advertising leads to intense scrutiny about whether or not these women are professional models in disguise or whether their appearance has been altered in postproduction. Even though research participants acknowledge the "positive difference" between this "real beauty" commercial and proximate commercials, it is impossible for them to conceive of the advertisement as anything other than manipulative—and almost certainly created by men. There is openness to purchasing the product—although research participants maintain a quaint interest in what the product actually *does*, harking back to Reeves' (1961) old school approach to advertising—but there is no suggestion that even if the

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<sup>2</sup> The collection Bielo (2009b) edited, *The Social Life of Scriptures*, contains a number of examples of this kind of ethnographic, long-term, fieldwork-based approach to studying the reception of scripture which I have argued is a potentially important partner discipline to reception history (Abraham 2011).

<sup>3</sup> The series of advertisements deliberately features women of more diverse body types and age ranges than is usually the case in advertisements for cosmetic and personal hygiene products.

product makes the women feel more physically attractive that this will be the kind of personal and political panacea that Edwards' (2012, ch. 2) hints at.

Many anthropologists, and a fair few sociologists, would argue that research of this kind is problematic because, like the close reading and political decoding of texts by experts, it is artificial. Advertisements are rarely scrutinized in such an intense and focused manner. Edwards (2012, 7) is entirely correct to point out that when it comes to print advertising, "brands have less than a second between page turns to make an impact on the consumer." And yet, as Scott & Cloud make clear, their study emerged from an (almost) natural setting—a classroom discussion that spilled over into regular conversation. There are also problems with the self-selecting nature of these studies, and social scientists have spent a lot of time considering questions of their validity and generalizability. However, studies of this type, however modest their sample size, help us to understand the deeper questions of the kind that Žižek (1989) and Sloterdijk (1988) raise—how does the culture of consumerism survive the shattering of its ideological artifice? And studies of this type, however modest in their sample size, could also help us to understand the question of how scripture is received when embedded in consumer media.

## 5. Concluding Concerns

I have argued that methodological adaptations, drawing on approaches from within the social sciences, will assist the emerging subdiscipline of the study of the reception of the Bible and popular culture to produce a more accurate and nuanced analysis of scripture in consumer society. I hope I have made a reasonable representation of my position, drawing on key texts and illustrative examples from within the social sciences. I concede, however, that the question of any methodological shift in the study of the reception of the Bible and popular culture is an open one that points to deeper issues concerning contemporary biblical studies. From the perspective of a scholar of religion and contemporary culture outside the discipline of biblical studies, it is notable that biblical studies can still "get away" with an Adornoesque approach, marginalizing the interpretive capacities of ordinary consumers of popular culture. That biblical studies' foundational divide between academic experts and laity is reproduced in reception studies of the Bible and popular culture is not surprising, but it will have to be negotiated in order to engage with studies of contemporary popular culture beyond its disciplinary boundaries.

I certainly hope this engagement takes place. I am not proposing a one-way process, if for no other reason than that the study of popular culture and religion outside of biblical studies, and the study of popular culture in general, vicariously benefits from the attention paid to popular culture by biblical and religious studies. At a time in which the humanities and social sciences are under pressure in many different countries, for sometimes similar and sometimes different reasons, the study of popular culture becomes a target just as the study of the Bible does if it cannot prove its financial viability. What I have noticed, though, is that to study popular culture within or alongside the study of religion, borrowing language and drawing analogies, gives popular cultural studies a moral seriousness and social importance at a time in which the heavily politicized study of popular culture is no

longer considered credible—outside of biblical studies, at least. Because of the importance of this topic, I hope an interdisciplinary conversation can develop.

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