

refuse to accept any restrictions of their behavior in the name of public safety, and the same phenomenon seems to be manifesting itself in the right-wing demonstrations taking place in Germany and elsewhere. This sort of aggressive selfishness is not a form of religious dissidence that tests our tolerance but rather a blatant rejection of social cohesion. In effect, the subject matter of this book has been overtaken by events, and this is always the weakness of books on current events, which do not stay current. When the author proclaims in conclusion that “armed fanaticism remains the basic obstacle to tolerance and freedom of expression” (206), he is thinking of radical Islamists and I am thinking of white supremacist militias and Donald Trump. Religion is but one basis of identity and one source of identity politics, but there are even more primitive and more strident forms of identity that are now asserting themselves in defiance of democratic norms. In a way, there is something naïve and nostalgic about the author’s melodramatic anxieties. It’s like worrying about an earthquake in California while the whole state is burning down.

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***Miss America’s God: Faith and Identity in America’s Oldest Pageant.***  
By Mandy McMichael. Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2019. xii  
+ 249 pp. \$34.95 cloth.

Scholars of Christianity and church history may be surprised to hear that in the last thirty years more scholars have published about beauty pageants than about prominent American evangelists Charles Finney or Billy Graham. This includes studies about how women represent moral virtue and about how pageants eroticize bodies in post-industrial capitalism; studies about broadcasting feminism and about advertising and modesty; studies about how pageants in Jamaica, Nigeria, or Mali expose the constitutive relationship between beauty ideals and gendered nationalist ideologies; studies about how Indian beauty pageants in Guatemala convey shifting social claims for cultural authenticity; studies about transgender inclusion in single-sex competition; and studies about pageants as political rituals. The study of pageants is not an obscure but omnipresent topic in the bibliographic record of the humanities and social science. The consensus in this record of research is that beauty pageants use women’s bodies to mobilize broader political and economic structures of power. For example, Magda Hinojosa and Jill Carle have argued American beauty queens can trade pageant titles for political roles. This is not unique to the United States (in Venezuela, Jamaica, and France, pageant winners also have won elected office), but is an export of the United States: every scholar of beauty pageants agrees single-sex beauty competitions have their origin in this particular settler colonial territory.

Mandy McMichael does not think much about these broad bibliographic insights. For her, the appropriate comparisons in an exploration of Miss America are not similar competitions in Mali or Nicaragua but *American’s Next Top Model* or *Dancing with the Stars* and the country that plotted the entertainment media preamble to whomever was last crowned (35). As McMichael explains it, circus impresario Phineas T. Barnum held

the first beauty contest in 1854. “Barnum was no stranger to repackaging entertainment as something noble and not base, a pattern that would adhere to the pageant into the modern era,” McMichael writes (39). This “noble and not base” assessment is McMichael’s primary observation across the work, showing how viewers have understood the contest as indistinguishable from American culture. Unsurprisingly, the golden age of the pageant—when networks televised the pageant to eighty-five million television viewers in 1960—was concomitant with the Cold War apex of the American Century. “Pageants reflect the beauty-obsessed culture” in which they emerge, McMichael says (33). If this is so, then the culture that produces pageants like women to be single, not pregnant, and available to date. “No man must own them so that they can be displayed and ogled by all” (32). Miss America participants were “potential wives and mothers; they were women one could take home to meet one’s parents” (14). The Miss America pageant exhibits women domesticated for eventual ownership by someone else.

Every pageant era objectified women’s bodies, but the first picketing on those grounds took place in 1968. Miss America stands in cultural memory as a problem for feminist respect. “Every day in a woman’s life,” lamented feminist Ros Baxandall, “is walking Miss America contest” (23). In the long-standing parlance of the pageant, the measure for “lifestyle and fitness” is the swimsuit competition. Getting to the victory circle through that event takes enormous discipline. Terry Meeuwsen (Miss America 1973) said she “felt like a racehorse that had been exercised, fed and groomed for a year” (59). In 1995, the pageant polled the American television audience, and seventy-nine percent of the nearly one million callers voted to keep the swimsuit segment of the contest (25). The 2018 decision to cease the swimsuit segment suggests a differently objectifying standard arrived. The pageant refocused female anxiety about self-abnegation in a one-piece by making the prize college scholarships. Yet nobody could confuse the basic purpose for the events, especially since they begin so young. Since the late 1990s, beauty pageant participation has skyrocketed; today organizers host more than 16,000 natural and glitz child pageants annually in the United States with an estimated 290,000 contestants.

Surviving such grooming requires more than individual ambition; McMichael wagers religious purpose supports individual contestants. In the early years of the pageant, Christians lobbed harsh critiques at its competitors. This included a “Resolution by Beauty Contests” issued by the Southern Baptists, saying that beauty contests and “so-called ‘beauty revues’, are evil and evil only” (89). Now, there is an “almost genial relationship” between Christians and the Miss American program. The bulk of McMichael’s original findings emerge in the more analytical chapters 4 and 5 than the first three historical chapters. There McMichael discerns the religious experience—their evangelistic use of the pageant, the struggles with anti-Semitism, and individual conversion stories—of pageant participants through several data sources. McMichael circulated a questionnaire at the Miss Alabama competition, and she attended more than 35 national, state, and local pageants. She plumbed multiple memoirs by pageant winners, including Vonda Kay Van Dyke’s (Miss America 1965) *That Girl in Your Mirror* (1966), Cheryl Prewitt’s (Miss America 1980) *A Bright-Shining Place* (1981), and Heather Whitestone’s (Miss America 1995) *Listening with My Heart* (1997). From this range of information, McMichael decides that “religion stands at the core of Miss America” (148).

What McMichael means by this is twofold: many contestants profess religion, and even when they don’t, being a successful contestant requires being a square person of nearly religious social obedience. Miss Americas attend ribbon cuttings and sing the national anthem at sporting events. They embody “the American spirit” (84). The

scholarship on the global phenomenon of beauty pageants presses analytical consequence into the fact of this civility, showing how contestant good works conveyed politicized ideas of beauty, ethnicity, and empire. Through her own bibliographic myopia, McMichael conveys how the Miss America Pageant functioned as “a self-perpetuating entity, understanding its appeal even if and when those outside of it did not” (75). Cosmopolitanism isn’t what keeps Miss America going. Enshrining a limited idea of the American girl next door does.

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***Moral Victories in the Battle for Congress: Cultural Conservatism and the House GOP.* By Marty Cohen. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. xi + 248 pp. \$69.95 cloth.**

In the 1980s, very few Republicans in Congress were social conservatives. A substantial minority, especially in the Northeast, were pro-choice, and most of the others preferred to avoid discussion of abortion and other social issues entirely. Economic issues, they thought, were the key to winning elections in a culturally divided America, because even if Republican voters could not agree on abortion policy, they could unite around a promise of fiscal conservatism, lower taxes, and pro-business initiatives. But that changed in the 1990s. By the end of the twentieth century, Congress was filled with Republicans who had won their seats on a promise of socially conservative legislation. How did this happen? Was it the result of party strategy or something else?

Marty Cohen’s *Moral Victories in the Battle for Congress* answers this question with a detailed statistical analysis of congressional races throughout the United States during the 1980s and 1990s and concludes that the shift toward social conservatism in the Republican Party came from grassroots Christian Right activists, not from party leaders, and that it first occurred on a wide scale in 1994. Cohen also argues that this strategy has endured because it worked.

The Religious Right, of course, emerged long before 1994, and if movement leaders such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson had had their way, Republicans in Congress would have embraced antiabortion policies at least a decade earlier. But during the 1980s, the Christian Right, despite its influence in the Reagan administration, gained little traction in Congress because the movement could not deliver victories in congressional races. Cohen analyzes several races from the mid-1980s where socially conservative candidates won House district Republican primaries only to lose in the general election to Democratic candidates who probably could not have defeated a more moderate Republican. Cohen argues that the socially conservative candidates lost in safely Republican districts because of the opposition of traditionally Republican, socially liberal, fiscal conservatives who were willing to cross party lines to defeat the candidates of the Christian Right. And he argues that this was mostly the fault of Christian Right candidates who frightened moderate voters away with their overtly Christian rhetoric.

But by 1994, the Christian Right had learned from its mistakes, and it began fielding candidates who were socially conservative but did not market themselves as