

PRACTICING RELIGION IN THE AGE OF THE MEDIA

EXPLORATIONS IN MEDIA,
RELIGION, AND CULTURE

Edited by
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CHAPTER 3

**BELIEVING IN ELVIS:
POPULAR PIETY IN
MATERIAL CULTURE**

Erika Doss

In 1985, Kiki Apostolakos, a language and psychology teacher in Athens, married a Greek American and emigrated to Memphis in order to “be closer” to Elvis Presley; she now lives near Graceland, Elvis’s home and his burial site. “The day he passed away, it hit me like lightning,” she remembers. “That very day I started making my arrangements, using the gold foil from cigarette packages, and decorating Elvis pictures. I feel so blessed that I can live in Memphis and do this. Elvis, his image, is so alive inside me.”¹ Apostolakos, whose Memphis apartment is covered with images of Elvis, spends every spare moment she can at Elvis’s grave, honoring him with votive offerings—angels, hearts, tokens, small portable shrines—all handmade and all featuring his image (fig. 3.1).

Her image making and grave-site rituals symbolize her deeply spiritual relationship with Elvis. A devout Roman Catholic (raised Greek Orthodox), Apostolakos does not worship Elvis but sees him as a man sent by God “to wake us up, to shake us, to ask us, what are we doing, where are we going?” Elvis is a mediator, an intercessor, between herself and other fans and God. As she says, “There is a distance between human beings and God. That is why we are close to Elvis. He is like a bridge between us and God.”² If, along with other fans, Apostolakos imagines Elvis as a saint, she also sees him as a redemptive figure. “I believe in Jesus Christ and I believe in God,” she remarks, “but Elvis was special. Elvis

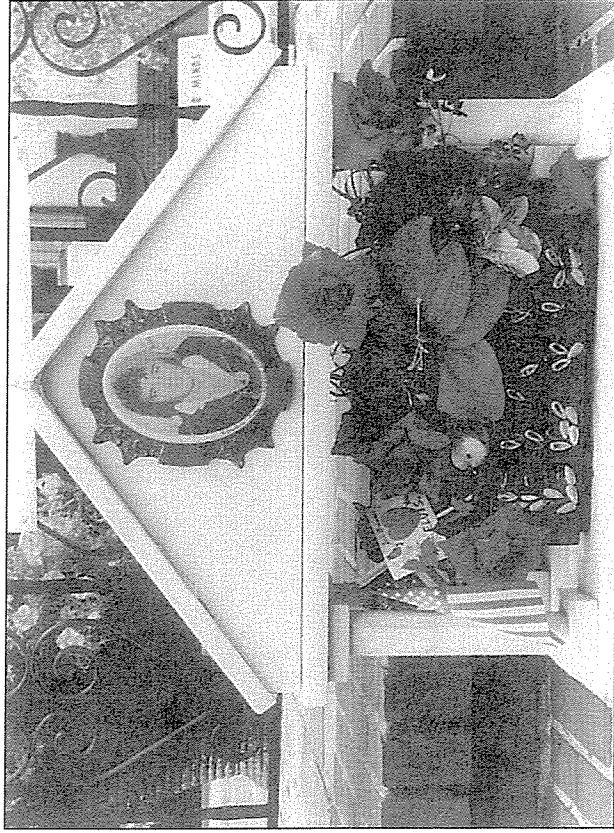


FIGURE 3.1

Elvis shrine made by Kiki Apostolakos, at Graceland's Meditation Gardens during Elvis Week 1993.

was in our times, he was given to us to remind us to be good." Servant of God and Christ-like savior, Elvis brings Apostolakos joy, intensity, pleasure, and purpose. "I don't go to church much now. I don't ask for anything else from God, my prayers have been answered," she says, acknowledging that her personal relationship with Elvis—as well as the works of art she makes and the rituals she performs that express that relationship—is the most meaningful cultural and social practice in her life.

Although Elvis died on August 16, 1977, he remains everywhere—his image seen on almost every conceivable mass-produced consumer item, his music honored in multiple tribute concerts and greatest-hits rereleases, his life dissected in endless biographies, art exhibitions, and documentaries. Contemporary folklore has it that the three most recognized words in the world are *Jesus*, *Coca-Cola*, and *Elvis*. Elvis fans are everywhere, too. Some belong to the five hundred or so official Elvis Presley fan clubs that exist around the globe. Others habitually visit Graceland, making it the second most popular house tour in the United States (after the White House). During Elvis International Tribute Week, a Memphis phenome-

non that occurs each August on the anniversary of his death, the city swells as thousands of fans gather in grief and celebration around Elvis's grave at Graceland's Meditation Gardens, displaying a kind of emotional intensity and reverence that clearly intimates Elvis's popular-culture canonization.

THE RELIGION OF ELVIS

Eager to explain, and especially to debunk, the preponderance of Elvis imagery and the emotional and collective behavior of his fans, many journalists and critics relate how "culture" has become "cult." Some point out that Elvis's rags-to-riches life story and his tragic death neatly parallel the secular/sacred narrative of Jesus Christ, and hint at the contemporary possibility of Elvis's own eponymous cult foundation. Several hilarious spoofs of these Elvis-as-Messiah analogies have emerged in recent years, including *The Two Kings*, which contrasts "the bizarre parallels and strange similarities" between Jesus and Elvis ("Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan," "Elvis's backup group was the Jordanaires"), and the piously tongue-in-cheek *Gospel of Elvis*, which tells how "a boy from the poorest village of the land of Plenty became the Priest-King of the Whole World."³

Others cite a long list of quasi-religious factors that seem to confirm Elvis's contemporary deification: how in the years since his death, a veritable Elvis religion has emerged, replete with prophets (Elvis impersonators), sacred texts (Elvis records), disciples (Elvis fans), relics (the scarves, Cadillacs, and diamond rings that Elvis lavished on fans and friends), pilgrimages (to Tupelo, where Elvis was born, and Graceland), shrines (his grave site), churches (such as the Twenty-four-Hour Church of Elvis in Portland, Oregon), and all the appearances of a resurrection (with reported Elvis sightings at, among other places, a Burger King in Kalamazoo, Michigan). Ritual activities that occur during Elvis Week are cited as further evidence of Elvis's cult status.

"The worship, adoration and the perpetuation of the memory of Elvis today, closely resembles a religious cult," baldly states Ted Harrison, a former religious-affairs correspondent with the British Broadcasting Corporation. It is, he proclaims, "nothing less than a religion in embryo." Writer Ron Rosenbaum agrees, arguing in a 1995 *New York Times* article that Elvis's popularity has "transcended the familiar contours of a dead

celebrity cult and has begun to assume the dimensions of a redemptive faith." A host of scholars have probed the Celtic, Gnostic, Hindi, and voodoo derivations of Elvis culture, contemplated Graceland's status as "sacred space," and considered how and why some fans insist that Elvis, like Jesus, defeated death. Less charitable writers cynically attribute the entire phenomenon to the fierce mass-marketing techniques of his estate, Elvis Presley Enterprises, Inc. "Explicit manifestations of 'Elvis Christ' did not exactly evolve," carps British journalist John Windsor. "They were cunningly contrived for a mass market."⁴

Easy explanations that Elvis's omnipresence and the devotion of his fans embodies a cult or religion bring up all sorts of questions, including the issue of religious essentialism. What is it about the revered images, ritual practices, and devotional behaviors within Elvis culture that is essentially religious? And do these images and practices constitute the making of a discrete and legitimate religion? Why is it that *images* of Elvis seem to have taken on the dimensions of faith and devotion, viewed by many Elvis fans as links between themselves and God, votive offerings for expressing and giving thanks, as empowered objects that can fulfill wishes and desires?

ELVIS: NOT A RELIGION

These questions are complicated by the fact that most Elvis fans quickly dismiss intimations that Elvis is a religious figure or that Elvis images and Elvis-centered practices constitute any sort of Elvis religion. "Elvis did not die for our sins, nor is he Jesus Christ and it is very wrong to even try and draw comparisons," writes one fan. "It's only the media who seem to be obsessed with turning Elvis into a religion, you don't hear normal fans discuss it," says another, who adds: "You only have to see the number of books published on the topic in recent years to see it's yet another way to make yet more money out of Elvis. This topic makes Elvis fans look foolish and I'm sure Elvis would be deeply offended."

Such protestations may confuse Elvis's cult status: What does it mean when adherents deny the religiosity of something that looks so much like a religion? Yet their resistance begs consideration. Some fans object in order to avoid charges of heresy or iconoclasm, because their religion forbids sacred status for secular figures. But most do so to avoid being

ridiculed as religious fanatics. If religion was "respectable and respected" at the close of the 1950s, today it is often spoofed by a popular press that is generally uneasy with displays of religious emotionalism and obsessed more with religious misconduct than with genuine, deeply felt human needs for intimations of the divine.⁵ Fringe religions, moreover, are almost always held up against the standards and values of mainstream religions, so most media accounts of Elvis's "cult" status frame his fans as abnormal outsiders whose faith does not follow institutionalized spiritual practices. Canny to their media marginalization, it is not surprising that many fans deny fidelity to any sort of Elvis cult or religion, suspicious of facile analyses that come close to equating them with the Branch Davidians or the Japanese followers of Aum Supreme Truth.

Without discounting their objections, however, it is important to recognize that from its "city on the hill" creation myth to the present-day proliferation of New Age spirituality and the growth of fundamentalism, religiosity—mainstream and fringe—remains central to American identity and experience. As a religious people, Americans tend to treat things on religious terms, apply religious categories, and generally make a religion out of much of what is touched and understood. According to a 1980 Gallup Poll, Americans "value religion" and maintain "strong religious beliefs" to far greater degrees than the citizens of any other Western industrial nation.⁶ Yet Americans tend to be predominantly private and diverse in their religious beliefs and practices. Indeed, much of America's "ongoing religious vitality" can be attributed to the long-standing democratic, or populist, orientation of U.S. Christianity: as "custodians of their own beliefs," Americans have traditionally shaped and accommodated their religious practices to mesh with individual, rather than strictly institutional, desires. Contemporary Americans continue to mix and match religious beliefs and practices, creating their own spiritual convictions out of that amalgamation.⁷ It may be that when Elvis fans protest that their devotion to Elvis is not "religious," they are really objecting to an institutional definition of the term. In fact, their privatizing veneration of Elvis is one strong historical form of American religiosity.

My references here to "religion" are not meant as metaphorical flourishes; nor do I want to mitigate the reverence that many fans have for Elvis as a "kind of" religion. Religion constitutes those practices and attitudes that imbue a person's life with meaning by linking him or her to a transcendent reality: that which is beyond purely immanent, or secular,

experience and understanding. Assertions of affinity between religion and the generally privatized spiritual beliefs and practices of Elvis fans stem from their similarly supernatural, and inexplicable, character and authority. Collecting Elvis stuff, creating Elvis shrines, and going to Graceland are not, in and of themselves, religious acts and practices. But they can become religious if they affect a transcendent and all-powerful order that can influence human affairs and is not inherently apprehensible.

THE ICON OF ELVIS

The issue of Elvis's place in America's democratic, diverse, and individually synthesized religious realm may best be considered by asking why so many Americans have come to place their faith in an image of Elvis. Why is Elvis an icon, and what does this reveal about how contemporary Americans visualize faith? Examining how and why his fans have made him a figure of popular-culture canonization, and how his iconic dominance is actually embedded in and extended from their specific religious feelings and practices, may provide some answers.

Elvis was, of course—and remains—a profoundly charismatic figure, which clearly contributes to his popular, and perhaps religious, status. Mainstream religions tend to be fronted by charismatic types (Jesus, Confucius, Gautama Buddha, Muhammad, Joseph Smith), as do their cult counterparts (most recently, Jim Jones, David Koresh, Shoko Ashahara). And the diversity of Elvis's extraordinarily magnetic image, whether sexually provocative teen idol or jumpsuited superstar, has certainly generated his appeal on many different levels for many different fans. But being charismatic does not automatically translate into reverential status; plenty of contemporary rock stars and sports heroes are objects of adoration, but few sustain religious veneration. Contrary to presumptions about “the religion of the stars,” the cult of celebrity and the religious beliefs and practices cultivated by Elvis fans are not exactly the same. Elvis's religious import hinges on his multifaceted image, which is for many fans imbued with a certain mystical greatness and looked on for access to a transcendent reality. It is long-standing, too—as early as 1957, some fans were trying to start an Elvis Presley Church, and as recently as 1995 a Saint Louis group (the Congregation for Causes of Saints) sought his can-

onization.⁸ Most fans, however, prefer to commune with Elvis privately, in their homes.

ELVIS IN THE DOMESTIC SPHERE

The domestic sphere can be a safe haven far and away from an unfriendly outside world, a sanctuary where fans can be with Elvis without drawing attention. Many fans have special rooms or areas in their homes especially dedicated to Elvis, which they describe as “quiet places” where they can think about and “be really close to Elvis.” Some spend hours each day in their Elvis Rooms, listening to Elvis's music, watching his movies, looking at pictures of him in books and magazines. “I like to go to my Elvis Room, down in the basement, after supper,” remarks one fan in Roanoke. “It's a quiet space and time for me.” Filled with Elvis stuff that she has collected since the 1950s, the room “helps to keep memories of Elvis alive.” As places where secular thoughts and tasks are suspended, Elvis Rooms allow personal and private moments of contemplation and solitude. As places where fans spotlight their collections of Elvis stuff, they also speak to the ways in which material culture plays a major role in sanctifying and legitimizing Elvis as a special, important entity.

This combination of religious and commercial sensibilities in the American home is not new: in the nineteenth-century, as we saw in the preceding chapter, Protestants and Catholics alike linked religiosity with domesticity, creating a more sanctified home with parlor organs, Bibles, and religious pictures and sculptures.⁹ Filling special rooms, and sometimes whole houses, with Elvis paintings, plates, trading cards, limited-edition lithographs, watches, dolls, and many other mass-produced and handmade items, Elvis fans similarly sacralize their homes, using images and objects to declare their deep-felt devotion to Elvis.

The ways they organize their Elvis Rooms reveal how they freely appropriate the look and feel of domestic religiosity in order to cultivate a reverential atmosphere in a secular realm. Whatever their religious affiliation, or lack thereof, Elvis fans tend to choose patterns of visual piety that closely correspond to the home shrines that have long been a “vital part of domestic Christianity” for Americans of African, Irish, Italian, Latino, Polish, Portuguese, and many other backgrounds.¹⁰ From the modest

grouping of a framed religious motto and family photographs on top of a living room piano or television set to more elaborate assemblages of holy cards, votive candles, and school photos, home shrines sacralize domestic interiors. Uniquely coded by their creators, who are primarily female, home altars integrate personal and sentimental items with more purely devotional offerings, thus blurring distinctions between the domestic and the divine.

The circulation of these Judeo-Christian visual and material traditions within Elvis culture is clearly evident in the homes of particularly dedicated fans. Stepping into Mary Cartaya's Florida home, for example, is like walking into a private Roman Catholic chapel, but in place of crucifixes, religious pictures, and reliquaries there are dense, neat rows of Elvis posters, decanters, pennants, spoons, and plates (fig. 3.2). This fan calls her home a "memorial to Elvis" and calls Elvis her "guardian angel." She is a practicing Catholic and has special allegiance to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal,¹¹ but there are few Catholic religious items displayed in her home.

Born in 1942, Cartaya describes her father as an "abuser" who beat his wife and three children and kicked Mary out of their South Miami home at the age of fifteen. "All I had was my record player and my Elvis records," she recalls, "and I listened to them over and over." In 1967, Cartaya married; her only child died at birth in the early 1970s. Her second marriage, in 1982, lasted only six months. "I was alone and Elvis was there for me," she remarks. "Elvis has brought so much to me, and when he died I wanted to make sure his image wasn't mutilated. He gives me the boost to overcome the hurdles. Through him I know that things can be done."

For such fans, Elvis Rooms are creative means to help them cope with the difficulties and needs in their lives, refuges where they experience their feelings for Elvis privately, on their own terms. Judeo-Christian home shrines are similarly powerful forms of domestic piety, especially for women. Generally excluded from public forms of religious leadership and expression, Christian women often use the domestic sphere to communicate their personal spiritual needs and desires. Home altars are one of these manifestations—both private religious endeavors and visibly conscious expressions of family relationships, traditions, and memories. By making them, women strengthen those relationships and traditions, their religious beliefs, and their own identities.¹² By blending the domestic and the divine, home altars nurture female and family spirituality and



FIGURE 3.2

Elvis images in the home of Mary Cartaya, Florida, 1995.

transform the private sphere into a powerful locus of religiosity. The look and feel of many Elvis Rooms suggests that various Judeo-Christian traditions of domestic religiosity that allow believers to decorate their homes and venerate their chosen deities or holy figures in highly personalized ways appear to have been absorbed by many Elvis fans.

ELVIS AND PUBLIC DEVOTION

Many of the images, effects, and rituals that fans use in their homes to articulate their devotion to Elvis are repeated in the public sphere, especially at Graceland during Elvis Week. Religious terms like *pilgrimage* and *shrine* are not part of the average Graceland visitor's vocabulary, and many might be offended at the use of such words. Still, Graceland—set back on a hill and completely surrounded by fieldstone walls and white fences—is conceptualized by thousands of Elvis fans as an especially hallowed place whose every surface is charged with Elvis's spirit. Fans go to Graceland to walk in his mansion, gaze at his things, mourn at his grave site, and be

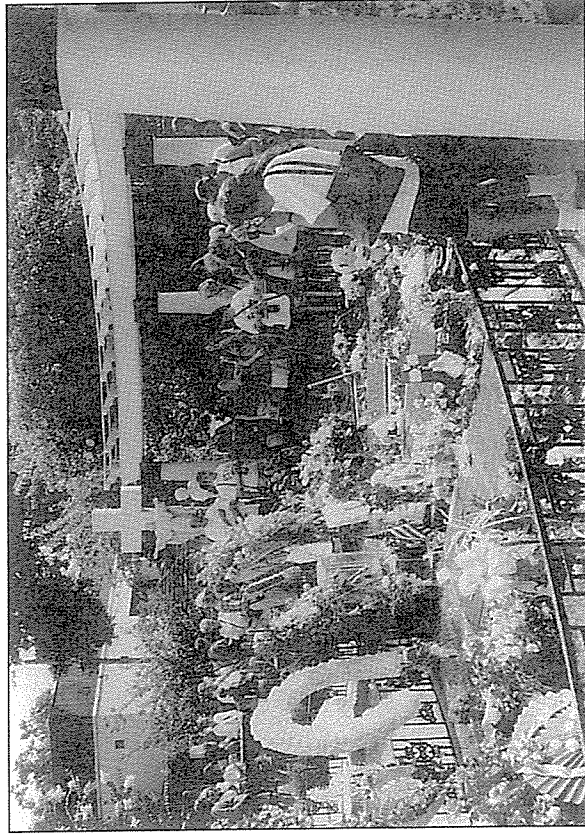


FIGURE 3.3
Elvis fans in the Graceland Meditation Gardens, Elvis Week 1996.

that much closer to the man they adore (fig. 3.3). Some leave notes: slips of paper tucked under vases or hidden behind curtains with messages like “Elvis, we miss you. Love, Bob and Marge.” Others are unable to resist the temptation to take a little of piece of Graceland home with them, pocketing leaves, pebbles, sticks, and pinches of dirt as tokens of their pilgrimage and their brush with Elvis. It is the stuff of material culture—which in this case is Graceland and its relics—that is pivotal to the devotional practices and beliefs of Elvis’s fans.

Graceland’s shrine-like sensibility is particularly evident during Elvis Week, when fans engage in specific rituals. They tour Graceland, attend fan festivals and memorial services, watch Elvis-impersonator contests, visit Sun Studios near downtown Memphis, eat at local restaurants, and tag their names on the walls in front of Graceland. They spend a lot of time buying Elvis stuff at the gift shops that surround Graceland. Fans at area motels participate in elaborate window-decorating competitions; others submit pictures and crafts to the annual Elvis Art Exhibit held at the Graceland Plaza Visitor Center. Ordinary spaces—motels and restaurants, for example—become sacred spaces during Elvis Week, because Elvis fans occupy them and fill them with images and objects that they

deem to have special significance. Simultaneously a shrine and a shopping mall, Graceland’s multi-acre complex is no different than other pilgrimage sites: at Lourdes, at the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and at Graceland, devotional practices, material culture, and commercialism are typically mixed.

Elvis Week culminates in the all-night Candlelight Vigil on the anniversary of Elvis’s death, when fans gather at the gates of Graceland and walk up the mansion’s steep pathway to the Meditation Gardens for a brief, private tribute. Each solemnly bears a glowing candle, lit from a torch at the start of the procession. Once back down the driveway and outside Graceland’s gates, the celebrant snuffs the candle out. The tone of this ritual is clearly borrowed from traditional religious practices, from the ceremonial ambience of a Christmas midnight mass to the precise vigils at the Shrine of Saint Jude in Chicago, where the lighting of candles marks the beginning and the end of each pilgrim’s devotional encounter.¹³ It also resembles secular rituals such as Bic flicking at rock concerts (an encore summons) to the lighting of the Olympic Torch. For those who are not familiar with ceremonial behavior, sacred or secular, Elvis Inc. provides some “special guidelines”: “Please avoid loud talking or laughter or any behavior that might be offensive to, or unappreciated by those who take this tribute seriously. The Candlelight Vigil is intended to be a solemn, respectful tribute.”

For most Elvis fans, the Candlelight Vigil is a hushed, somber ceremony, the cathartic moment of an emotional week. Rituals often have special meaning because of a tangible sensual quality, and this one is particularly sensational: there are the sounds of cicadas, low murmurs, hushed cries, and Elvis’s music, broadcast over strategically placed loudspeakers; there is the visual spectacle of Graceland lit up at night, and of flickering candles and a seemingly endless line of fans slowly parading along Graceland’s serpentine driveway; and then there are the smells of wax, perfume, flowering magnolias, mounds of roses, and sweat—and, of course, the damp and steamy heat, made even more oppressive from standing in line with tens of thousands of other fans, pressed together, for hours on end. Combined, these make the Candlelight Vigil an especially spectacular ritual.

The event’s special character is further enhanced by the offerings that fans leave at Elvis’s tomb: flowers, photographs, pictures, dolls, toys, teddy bears, and records (see fig. 3.4). A fan from Missouri often leaves

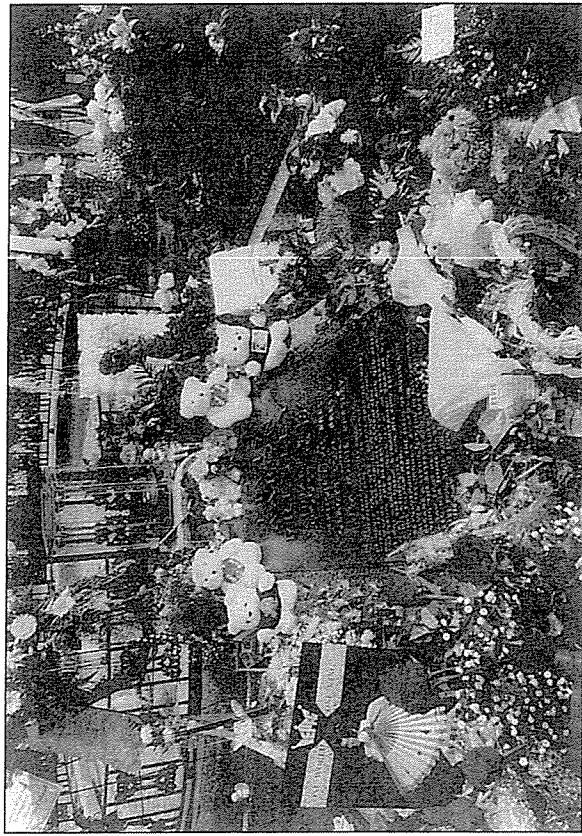


FIGURE 3-4

Gifts left by fans at Elvis's grave during Elvis Week 1996.

one or more tableaux that incorporate letters or mementos from fans who have not been able to make the trip to Graceland. One, a sculpture of of tinfoil, gift wrap, and plastic flowers, included a pledge of devotion from Ralf, a disabled fifteen-year-old fan from Germany; another combined Elvis images with pages from Kahlil Gibran's poem *The Prophet*, one of Elvis's favorite books (fig. 3-5). Some of these gifts, especially those featuring images of Elvis, are offered much as are ex-votos, or *milagros*, at Catholic shrines. Made of tin and shaped like body parts (hearts, hands, feet), ex-votos are commonly left as petitions or to thank a saint for a cure or healing;¹⁴ an ex-voto of a leg might be left at Lourdes, for example, to thank the Virgin Mary for the mending of a broken bone. Offerings representing Elvis—dolls and pictures that simulate his body or face and that are placed on or near the spot where he is buried—seem to have similarly powerful connotations for Elvis fans.

These gifts are a way of saying thank you—expressions of gratitude to Elvis from his fans. In a culture where mourning often takes material form (the placing of flowers on graves; the leaving of dog tags at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial; the making of panels for the AIDS NAMES Quilt) the offerings left at Graceland, especially during Elvis Week, help fans



FIGURE 3-5

Elvis gift made by Ilse Oullette, featuring Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*, left, at Graceland Meditation Gardens, Elvis Week 1993.

express their grief at Elvis's death. The images and objects they place on Elvis's grave are the physically expressive focal points of their tributes to both his greatness and his absence; they help atone for the pleasure he gives them, for the pain of his death, and for the sorrow of their loss.

THE CHURCH OF ELVIS

There are also other quasi-religious manifestations of Elvis Culture. Elvis "churches" that have sprouted in recent years include the First Church of Elvis ("pastored" by Doug Isaacks, of Austin, Texas, since 1991) and the First Presleyterian Church of Elvis the Divine. In 1996, the latter staged a widely publicized, two-day "Elvis Revival" that was bent on "E-vangelizing" students at Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The First Presleyterian, like most of these manifestations of Elvis divine, is mostly realized on-line—a click-in church of the cyberspace, says Lotus software founder Mitch Kapor, that is the "great new spiritual frontier."¹⁵ Primarily the products of Gen X fans who have cottoned on to Elvis's vast spiritual appeal, these Elvis churches are certainly more cynical than the home shrines and Graceland rituals of "authentic" Elvis fans.

Distinctions such as authentic and inauthentic don't really work, however, since the tricksters who organize the campy parodies of an institutionalized Elvis faith say that they are Elvis fans, too. Silly and sardonic, to be sure, they aim to debunk the "secret" religious underpinnings of Elvis Culture and generally to demystify Elvis's iconic status. A lot of time and energy is invested in producing "sacred" cyberspace Elvis texts and shrines, such as the First Presleyterian's on-line "sermons"; these have weekly topics like "How to be Spiritually Correct" and "The Contract with Elvis." "Although I see all this as satire," says Isaacks, "Elvis may actually evolve into a major religion some day. Let's face it, it's no sillier than any other religion." Or as Norm Girardot, a professor of religious studies, comments, "The Presleyterians remind us [that] the seriousness of religion can only be rediscovered in relation to all of its glorious absurdity." Humor and jokes and derision, after all, are all forms of participation, ways of mocking and celebrating at the same time.¹⁶ Embedded in all of the quasi-religious revelations of Elvis along the electronic highway, there lurks a real contemporary yearning for spiritual intensity and belonging.

People build shrines and make pilgrimages for religious reasons because of deeply felt needs for meaning and enlightenment, in hopes of salvation or expectations of spiritual satisfaction and as tributes to special, sacred figures, things, or places. The burgeoning of Elvis home shrines, Elvis Week rituals, and Elvis cyberspace temples and texts suggests that Elvis culture has taken on the dimensions of religious faith and belief. The central component in this quasi-religious construction is, of course, Elvis himself and the ways he is increasingly imagined as a special, wondrous, virtuous, transcendent, and even miraculous figure. "Elvis was no god," his fans say again and again, but the ways they revere him suggest that he is often perceived as a saint and a savior, an intercessor and a redeemer. Infiltrated by evangelical and New Age manifestations of spirituality and therapy, of metaphysics, healing, miracles, and meditation, today's Judeo-Christian religions are awash in a blend of mysticism and millennialism, and today's faith in Christian redemption is often accompanied by dabblings in a variety of other spiritual strains. Devotion to Elvis dovetails with this contemporary religious blending, particularly among Americans who have long made a habit of spiritual synthesis and reconfiguration. As Mary Cartaya remarks, "I've got Elvis sitting on my left shoulder and God on my right and with that combination, I cannot fail."

Not surprisingly, fans' understanding of Elvis's religiosity generally correspond to their own particular religious persuasions. Fundamentalist Christians say Elvis was "very religious" and cite his Pentecostal upbringing, his religious faith ("All good things come from God," said Elvis in 1956), and his various gospel albums (including *How Great Thou Art* of 1967).¹⁷ Other fans see Elvis as a New Age spiritualist, recounting his interest in alternative religions, mysticism, and the occult, pointing out that the book he was reading when he died was *A Scientific Search for the Face of Jesus* (about the Shroud of Turin). Recently, many fans have imaged Elvis as an angel—not a teen angel but a radiant personality appointed for spiritual service. He was the cherub of the month for a 1995 issue of *Angel Times*, a glossy magazine with the publishing philosophy that "God's angels appear to all peoples of the world regardless of religion, race, culture."¹⁸ Whether as Southern fundamentalist, supernatural New Ager, or rock-and-roll angel, fans make of Elvis the religious icon they want him to be.

FAITH IN ELVIS

Understanding the faith that fans have in Elvis does not lend itself easily to deterministic models of cultural analysis. Fans talk about the “wonder” and “mystique” of Elvis and repeatedly describe him as a “miracle.” As one writes, “Elvis is an emotion that entails everything we are capable of feeling. It cannot be captured. It cannot be bought. You cannot draw it. You cannot write it. You cannot take a photograph of it. You can’t even explain it. YOU HAVE TO FEEL IT—IT MUST BE FELT BECAUSE IT COMES STRAIGHT FROM THE HEART!” There are “popular ways of knowing” that are emotive, irrational, superstitious, and revelatory, and these are the ways that fans feel about Elvis and how they see him as a special and transcendent figure in their lives.¹⁹ Their faith in him is made “real” through the tangible stuff of material culture, through Elvis’s image.

Some argue that these materialist forms of Elvis’s “deification” are only a facet of the American obsession with transformative consumerism. Elvis is indeed an intercessor in this scenario, but his mediation is between his fans and their faith in consumption; in other words, collecting Elvis stuff and making Elvis shrines may help fans construct meaning in their everyday lives, but it mainly keeps them addicted to an ideology of buying things to feel better. Obviously, Elvis culture is thoroughly drenched in the world of consumerism, and fans readily admit that they “need” Elvis stuff in order to “take care” of Elvis and participate in his fandom. But such a view fails to take into consideration the ways in which fans rely on Elvis’s image as an all-powerful, nonreferential, and largely incompressible transcendence. As such, Elvis’s image does not simply prop up fundamental beliefs in consumerism but raises the issue, as art historian David Freedberg writes, of the “deep cognitive potential that arises from the relations between looking—looking hard—and figured material object[s].”²⁰

Looking plays a large role in the formation and practice of religious belief: there is the “identification of the *seen* with what is to be *believed*,” Michel de Certeau argues. There is a plurality of visual pieties, as well, and different fans see Elvis in different religious roles.²¹ Some see him as an especially integrative spiritual figure. One remarks: “Although I am a Christian, I have never experienced such unity in any form of worship. Elvis bonds us between nations, religions, and across all age ranges.” Others see Elvis as a loving, intimate, and merciful figure, imagining him in

much the same way that antebellum American Christian women imagined Jesus as a warmer and more affectionate spiritual authority.²² He was a “gentle man,” writes Cartaya; he “never hurt us, but instead, left so much for us to enjoy.” Still other see Elvis as a healer. In an especially poignant memoir, a fan from Duluth writes that her mother’s long and painful bout with cancer was eased by her vast collection of Elvis memorabilia: “The velvet Elvis was in her bedroom. The bronze plaque was hanging above the stove in the kitchen. The 26 inch statue that could play Elvis songs on mini cassettes was on the TV set. There was even a painting in the bathroom. In the final stages of illness, when she was heavily medicated on morphine, she often commented that the various Elvises around the house were talking to her, comforting her.”

Most religions make distinctions between a higher god (or gods) and lesser divines. In the Christian world, saints are seen as advocates, as mediators between believers and the divine. Only Christ is viewed as a figure of salvation. Based on their comments and behaviors and the way they look at Elvis, it appears that many Christian Elvis fans, and even those who are not Christian but whose sense of what is religious stems from living in America’s overwhelmingly Judeo-Christian milieu, see Elvis as both a saintly mediator and a redemptive, Christ-like figure. Blending religious archetypes, or simply mixing them up, fans liken Elvis as a spiritual intercessor whom they produce and personalize—in art and in ritual practices—as an instrument of therapeutic relief.

Some fans say Elvis “was no saint,” but these are often Roman Catholic fans for whom the term *saint* strictly connotes a canonized figure who performed miracles and lived in an especially virtuous manner—which Elvis, most fans agree, did not. Others argue that there are differences between religious beings and contemporary celebrities, but they tend to ignore the way secular figures and heroes (from Eva Peron to Che Guevara) can become saints by way of shrines, pilgrimages, and popular veneration. The fact that so many Elvis fans look upon his image as a source of protection and relief and think of him as a special man who was “beyond human” and “bigger than life” certainly suggests that they have extended sanctity to Elvis.

Whether he is viewed as Saint Elvis or “alter Christus,” fan understandings of Elvis’s religiosity follow from their imaging of him as a legendary entertainer, a down-home Southern gentleman, a patriot, a philanthropist, and a sad man who died alone—each image an amalgamation of

Elvis fact and Elvis apocrypha. Some suggest Elvis is especially seen as a "permissive savior" who encourages his followers to indulge and consume and enjoy themselves. But as much as fans find pleasure in Elvis's image and his music, it is pain, and the sense that through their devotion to him they can somehow ease that pain, that is most evident in their ritualistic behaviors during Elvis Week. Aside from assassinated political figures (Lincoln, J.F.K., Martin Luther King Jr.), Americans have historically embraced few secular-realm martyrs. Elvis's pain and suffering, his drug-addict death in a gilded bathroom, his failure to find happiness despite achieving stardom and wealth, may be what attracts so many of his fans, likewise caught up in pursuing the myth of the American dream. They identify Elvis as a fellow sufferer, which may explain that the image of Elvis most loved by contemporary American fans, and most frequently evoked by his impersonators, is that of the Vegas Elvis, the "Late, Fat, Pain-Racked, Self-Destructive Elvis."²³ That image of Elvis embodies the pleasure *and* the pain of his many fans.

Elvis Rooms and Elvis Week rituals reveal how Elvis is understood by his fans as a revered figure of enormous capacity who mediates between themselves and their particular theological constructs. Images of Elvis, by extension, are understood by fans as icons with the explicit power to intercede between themselves and a higher power (god). This works because images of Elvis are multifaceted and mercurial and because American religiosity is essentially flexible and democratic. On one level, then, fans place their faith in images of Elvis because they correspond to the personal mores and ecclesiastical self-image they desire. On another level, fans place their faith in images of Elvis because he provides a kind of "secular spiritual succor," because he both shares and can minister to their pleasure and their pain.²⁴

For many fans, the authority of Elvis's image lies in its iconic ability to satisfy spiritual needs and respond to *personal* notions of contemporary piety. Many critics lump these private constellations of belief and practice all together, eager to construct cultish apparitions of an Elvis religion. But there is no totalizing institutional religious paradigm at work in Elvis culture. Instead, Elvis fans independently construct a series of cultural and social practices that both foster a sense of belonging (to Elvis fan clubs, for example), and allow room for individual beliefs. Faith in Elvis neatly corresponds to abiding American needs for spiritual community and spiritual solitude, which makes Elvis a profoundly democratic American icon.

NOTES

This is a shortened version of the chapter "Saint Elvis," in Erika Doss, *Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith, and Image* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 69–113, 266–70. Reprinted with permission of Erika Doss.

1. Kiki Apostolakos, quoted in author interview, August 14, 1995. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from fans in this chapter stem from author interviews conducted in Memphis and elsewhere between 1993 and 1996 or from surveys of Elvis fans during 1996.
2. Apostolakos, quoted in Ted Harrison, *Elvis People: The Cult of the King* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1992), 68, 53.
3. A. J. Jacobs, *The Two Kings* (New York: Bantam, 1994); Louie Ludwig, *The Gospel of Elvis* (New Orleans: Summit, 1996).
4. Harrison, *Elvis People*, 9; Ron Rosenbaum, "Among the Believers," *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, New York, September 24, 1995, 50–57, 62; John Windsor, "Faith and the State of Graceland Enterprises," *Independent* (London), August 15, 1992, 33. See also Lucinda Ebersole, "The God and Goddess of the Written Word," and Gary Vikan, "Graceland as *Locus Santos*," in *Elvis + Marilyn: 2 x Immortal* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), 136–45, 150–66; John H. Lardas, "Graceland: An Analysis of Sacred Space on the American Religious Landscape," (paper given at the 1995 American Academy of Religion annual conference); Sue Bridwell Beckham, "Death, Resurrection and Transfiguration: The Religious Folklore in Elvis Presley Shrines and Souvenirs," *International Folklore Review* 5 (1987): 88–95; and John Fiske, *Power Plays Power Works* (New York: Verso, 1993), 181–205.
5. James Wall raised these points at the conference "The Expression of American Religion in the Popular Media," held in Indianapolis, April 1993. See also Stewart M. Hoover, *Mass Media Religion: The Social Sources of the Electronic Church* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1988), and Stewart M. Hoover and Knut Lundby, eds., *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1997).
6. Poll noted in Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 210.
7. Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 220–21 and passim; Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 212, 218; Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (New York: Harper, 1993). Ideas of personal religious pluralism in complex industrial societies were first advanced in the works of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman; see, for example, Berger's *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967) and Luckman's *The Invisible Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

8. Edgar Morin, *The Stars*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 71–108. The 1957 Elvis “church” is noted in Patricia Jobe Pierce, *The Ultimate Elvis: Elvis Presley Day by Day* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 136.
9. Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840–1900* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), and McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); David Morgan, ed., *Icons of American Protestantism: The Art of Warner Sallman, 1892–1968* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), and David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). See also David Halle’s analysis of religious iconography in contemporary Catholic homes in *Inside Culture: Art and Class in the American Home* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 171–92.
10. McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 275.
11. This group was founded in 1830 after the Virgin Mary was said to have appeared to a Parisian nun, instructing her to make a special medal in her honor.
12. See, for example, Kay Turner, “Mexican-American Women’s Home Altars: The Art of Relationship” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, Austin, 1990), and Turner, “Home Altars and the Art of Devotion,” in *Chicano Expressions: A New View in American Art*, ed. Inverna Lockpez (New York: Intar Latin American Gallery, 1986), 40–48.
13. Robert Orsi, “The Center Out There, In here, and Everywhere Else: The Nature of Pilgrimage to the Shrine of Saint Jude, 1929–1965,” *Journal of Social History* 25, no. 2 (1991): 222.
14. See also Christine King, “His Truth Goes Marching On: Elvis Presley and the Pilgrimage to Graceland,” in *Pilgrimage in Popular Culture*, ed. Ian Reader and Tony Walter (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 103. On votive offerings, see Stephen Wilson, introduction to *Saints and Their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore, and History*, ed. Stephen Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 21.
15. For the home page of the First Presbyterian Church of Elvis the Divine, see <http://chelsea.ios.com/hkarlini.welcome.html>. On the revival at Lehigh University, which was organized by Professor Norman J. Girardot for his course “Jesus, Buddha, Confucius, and Elvis,” see Girardot’s essay “But Seriously: Taking the Elvis Phenomenon Seriously,” *Religious Studies News* 11, no. 4 (1996): 11–12. Mitch Kapor is quoted in Eugene Taylor, “Desperately Seeking Spirituality,” *Psychology Today* 27, no. 6 (1994): 54–62, 64, 66, 68.
16. Norman Girardot, “What Really Happened in Bethlehem? The Religious Power and Apocalyptic Pathos of the Religious Phenomenon” (paper at the Third Annual Conference on Elvis Presley, Memphis, August 15, 1997). On similar forms of derision, see Nathalie Heinich, *The Glory of Van Gogh: An Anthropology of Admiration*, trans. Paul Leduc Browne (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 129–30, and

Celeste Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 45–46. See also Greil Marcus, *Dead Elvis: A Chronicle of a Cultural Obsession* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 74–85.

17. Elvis, quoted in William Steif, “What Makes Elvis Presley Tick—No. 3: The Pelvis Explains That ‘Vulgar’ Style,” *San Francisco News*, October 17, 1956, 3.
18. Maia C. M. Shamayim, “Elvis and His Angelic Connection,” *Angel Times* 1, no. 4 (1995): 20–25. See also Raymond Moody Jr., *Elvis After Life: Unusual Psychic Experiences Surrounding the Death of a Superstar* (Atlanta: Peachtree, 1987); Jack D. Malley and Warren Vaughn, *Elvis: The Messiah?* (Mount Horeb, Wisc.: TCB, 1992); Isabelle Tanner, *Elvis—A Guide to My Soul* (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Elisabeth International, 1995); and Catherine L. Albanese’s analysis of Elvis’s religiosity in *America: Religions and Religion* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1981), 318–20.
19. Fiske, *Power Plays*, p. 181.
20. P. Stromberg, “Elvis Alive? The Ideology of American Consumerism,” *Journal of American Culture* 24, no. 3 (1990): 11–19; David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 432.
21. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 187; see also David Morgan, *Visual Piety*.
22. Fan quoted in Adrienne Young, “Taking Care of Business: Elvis Fans and Moral Community” (master’s thesis, George Washington University, 1994), 123. On women and affectionate religion in the nineteenth century, see Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977).
23. Mark Gottdiener, “Dead Elvis as Other Jesus,” in *In Search of Elvis: Music, Race, Art, Religion*, ed. Vernon Chadwick (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 189–200; Rosenbaum, “Among the Believers,” 62, 64.
24. Rosenbaum, “Among the Believers,” 52.

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