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## The Catholic Imagination

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Mary Bittner Wiseman

In *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (Silver Hollow Press, 2018), critic Eleanor Heartney has used the under-recognized carnal dimension of Catholicism to write a book about art and the body that performs the welcome task of undermining the split between mind and body that still haunts much philosophy and religion. The title of the first chapter, "Body and Soul: The Workings of the Incarnational Consciousness," tells the book's tale, which is that there is the set of doctrines that comprise the religion *qua* religion, on the one hand, and there is the imagination formed by exposure to the expressions of these doctrines in the art, music, cathedrals, rituals like the Passion of Christ and the May celebrations of Mary, in which little girls dress in white and wear white veils, on the other.

The incarnation of Christ that is the crux of Christianity and in the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ that is the heart of the Catholic Mass are examples of the centrality of the body to the 'incarnational consciousness' that is a legacy of those who were brought up under the influence of the Catholic church. Subsequent chapters show how many artists who were raised as Catholics, express the carnal imagination in their art. Their work was often excoriated by the conservative government in the 1990s when it launched the first culture war against the new focus of liberals on racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities that they saw as threatening the hegemony of the white Western male heterosexual world. Under this aegis arms were taken against works of art like Andre Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987) for disrespecting and undercutting the power of the still majority Christian world and *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* (1989) for its homoeroticism. Heartney shows how some artists were inviting the official religion to acknowledge the centrality of the body in Catholicism and others were claiming dignity for something the Church condemned out of hand.

Art was a target because it had power, a power that has now been ceded to the media, the new scapegoat of the conservative right. Heartney proposes that art expressive of the view encapsulated in the Catholic imagination that we are bodies and that the bodies suffer, endure, decay, desire, and are a source of knowledge can effect social change. And it can do this by reminding us that the religion that infused our early life is also part of our identities because religion goes "all the way down" and does not consist only in the embrace of a set of doctrines. The doctrines, protected by the First Amendment, have been used to condemn abortion, gay marriage, rights of the sexually different, and free speech itself. Were religion taken out of its protected doctrinal home and brought down to earth it could do good. First, by stopping the liberal left from reflexively rejecting religion because of its often being used as a bludgeon against a so-called elite. Second, by showing the conservative right that Christianity does not condemn the body with its needs for sustenance (food, housing, jobs) and expression (sexual freedom).

This second edition of the 2004 *Post Modern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* was motivated by the deepening of the division between the conservative and

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religious South and the liberal and permissive North, where each side has uncannily adopted tactics of the other. The liberals are using tactics common to fundamentalists when they refuse to allow speakers who don't agree with them to be heard in their schools, and when they want to tear down statues of historic figures who sanctioned slavery and supported the secession of the South in the Civil War. Conservatives now cry for affirmative action for the white working class victimized by the globalization that has taken their jobs. This is the globalization that has further reduced art to the plaything of the market, stripping it of some of its power and causing conservatives to rail instead against the media as what is undermining their program. Hearney's idea is that recognizing the incarnational nature of the Catholic imagination in the work of many artists raised as Catholic shows the influence of religion to go far beyond the embrace of certain doctrines and therefore ought neither be used to condemn certain actions nor be rejected as irrelevant to those who do not endorse its doctrines. Just as art in the Middle Ages taught the unlettered the stories from the New Testament, so now artists with a Catholic imagination can start to blur the boundaries between the set of doctrines that include Incarnation and the complex everyday reality of the embodied life.

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