



McMichael, Mandy. Miss America's God: Faith and Identity in America's Oldest Pageant. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2019, 249 pp.

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In *Miss America's God: Faith and Identity in America's Oldest Pageant*, Professor Mandy McMichael deftly provides a concrete narrative of how the frequently complex issues of sex, entertainment, competition, and religion have intersected throughout the pageant's history in meaningful, contradictory, unpredictable, and complex ways that have provided for a frequently controversial yet riveting annual competition. The author does this within five chapters.

McMichael discusses how fierce opposition from the Catholic Church and other religious institutions during the inaugural years of the pageant (1921–1928) culminated in the pageant's suspension for a few years (in 1929–1932 and 1934). The early years of the pageant were filled with salacious stories of naive young women arriving in Atlantic City only to be seduced and corrupted by unscrupulous men. Similar stories of debauchery continued well into the mid-1930s until pageant officials realized that something had to be done to change the sordid image of the contest.

In 1935, the pageant hired Lenora Slaughter, a Southern religious woman who had years of experience in public relations. The decision turned out to be a positive and productive one for the pageant. Slaughter implemented numerous stipulations that were effective in eventually transforming the image of an event that had been largely dismissed as tawdry, earthy, and renegade to one of a contest populated by wholesome,

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religious, and morally respectable women. Despite such changes, the pageant still endorsed problematic issues in that it prohibited women of color from entering as contestants.

The early Cold War years were boon years for the pageant and have often been referred to as its "golden era." The nation had just ended a victorious war, yet it had to be on guard against its former allies, the Soviet Union and China, two of the world's largest nations, which had now become communist. Anything or anyone seen as being too radical was automatically considered suspect and in danger of becoming targeted and perhaps even prosecuted for espousing such viewpoints. The pageant, with its emphasis on and showcasing of white, healthy-looking, young women who resembled Stepford wives was very appealing to mothers who wanted to think of their daughters as "all-American girls" as well as to conservative men, many of whom heavily embraced patriarchal views of sexuality.

The mid-1960s and 1970s brought challenges to the pageant. Pepsi Cola dropped its sponsorship in 1968. Feminist and civil rights groups denounced the pageant for being lily-white. The 1980s and 1990s saw increasing interest in the contest. It was also during these decades that several pageant winners, Cheryl Prewitt Miss America 1980, Kellye Cash, Miss America 1987, Debbye Turner Miss America 1990 and Heather Whitestone, Miss America 1995, the first Miss America with a major disability to win the pageant) openly touted their religious values, and McMichael discusses each of these women and a few others in her book.

Over the past few years, the Miss America Pageant has remade its image many times in an effort to regain the kind of popularity and relevance it enjoyed in the mid-20th century. To this end, the pageant added all sorts of additions, such as a Miss America Quiz, a "contemporary active wear" segment that was reminiscent of a typical Gap clothing commercial, runner-up contestants from ABC's *The Bachelor* and *American Idol*, and other reality-show antics.

The pageant has survived a series of threats to its existence, including the Great Depression, World War II, the modern women's movement, and the Vanessa Williams/Penthouse magazine scandal. Unfortunately, though, its recent efforts to become culturally relevant to 21st-century America have done no more than provide ammunition to critics (and there are a number) who charge that the pageant is an outmoded relic resorting to desperate attempts to survive.

In 2006, the pageant changed networks from ABC to Country Music Television and moved its broadcast date from two weeks after Labor Day to late January. CMT moved the pageant westward from Atlantic City to Las Vegas and then dropped it after two years. The pageant signed with TLC in 2007.

The pageant seemingly floundered on a number of fronts, the most notable being the talent segment. Since the late 1990s, the talent portion of the pageant had gradually shrunk to the point that it counted for only a minimal segment of a contestants' score. Since 2019, talent has reemerged as a much more significant factor in the pageant.. Arguably, the talent segment of the pageant is among its most crucial elements. It is the vital ingredient that has distinguished the Miss America Pageant from its competitors and imitators, such as Miss USA, Miss Universe, Miss Teen USA, etc.

Although the swimsuit competition was, in all likelihood, more popular, until its discontinuation in 2018 by then CEO Gretchen Carlson, Miss America 1989, the talent competition is the force that affords the pageant real legitimacy. Despite the claims of some detractors, the fact remains that, throughout the pageant's long history, contestants have displayed considerable talent in a variety of fields.

The pageant has featured a number of memorable performances. Many pageant watchers remember the sultry version of "Happy Days Are Here Again" sung by Vanessa Williams, who became the first black woman to win the crown in September 1983 and was Miss America 1984. Or there was Miss America 1993, the late

Leanza Cornett's (1971–2020) show-stopping version of "A New Life." In 1995, Heather Whitestone—the first hearing-impaired Miss America—performed a flawless dance to "Via Dolorosa," a song she was unable to hear. This was great television.

In the last section of the book, McMichael describes how religion has played a crucial role in defining the pageant and, moreover, celebrates a particular form of nationalism. McMichael argues that many supporters of the pageant see it as a way of promoting religion and other seemingly conservative values for its audience. One interesting point McMichael makes is that the pageant is deeply rooted in Southern culture. While there is undoubtedly some truth to this, it is also safe to say that it is heavily immersed in rural Midwestern culture as well. Thus, it is not surprising that these are the two regions of the nation where the pageant tends to be the most popular.

By refocusing its efforts on enhancing the talent competition and demonstrating the deep religious faith that many of the contestants supposedly genuinely adhere to, the pageant can possibly reclaim and maintain its distinctiveness as an enduring icon. Moreover, this can very well possibly manage to win over viewers who harbor an intense degree of skepticism toward the institution.

Miss America's God is a well-written, engaging book that provides valuable insights into the complexity and frequent manipulation of gender roles in our society. The book is very versatile in its focus and is a prime example of interdisciplinary scholarship.

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