



The Poisoned Chalice: Eucharistic Grape Juice and Common-Sense Realism in Victorian Methodism (Religion & American Culture)

Jennifer L. Woodruff Tait

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This work examines the introduction of grape juice into the celebration of Holy Communion in the late 19th century Methodist Episcopal Church and reveals how a 1,800-year-old practice of using fermented communion wine became theologically incomprehensible in a mere forty years. Through study of denominational publications, influential exegetical works, popular fiction and songs, and didactic moral literature, Jennifer Woodruff Tait charts the development of opposing symbolic associations for wine and grape juice. She argues that 19th century Methodists, steeped in Baconian models of science and operating from epistemological presuppositions dictated by common-sense realism, placed a premium on the ability to perceive reality accurately in order to act morally. They therefore rejected any action or substance that dulled or confused the senses (in addition to alcohol, this included “bad” books, the theatre, stimulants, etc., which were all seen as unleashing unchecked, ungovernable thoughts and passions incompatible with true religion).

This outlook informed Methodist opposition to many popular amusements and behaviors, and they decided to place on the communion table a substance scientifically and theologically pure. Grape juice was considered holy because it did not cloud the mind, and new techniques—developed by Methodist laymen Thomas and Charles Welch—permitted the safe bottling and shipment of the unfermented juice.

Although Methodists were not the only religious group to oppose communion wine, the experience of this broadly based and numerous denomination illuminates similar beliefs and actions by other groups.

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