Contents

Preface to the Revised Edition

Preface to the First Edition

Introduction: Finding Religion in Unexpected Places
Bruce David Forbes

Part One
RELIGION IN POPULAR CULTURE

1 The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture
Jane Naomi Iwamura

2 Consecrating Consumer Culture: Christmas Television Specials
Robert J. Thompson

3 Re-Mythologizing the Divine Feminine in *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Secret Life of Bees*
Jennie S. Knight

4 Like a Sermon: Popular Religion in Madonna Videos
Mark D. Hulsether

Part Two
POPULAR CULTURE IN RELIGION

5 Evangelicals and Popular Music: The Contemporary Christian Music Industry
William D. Romanowski

6 The Internet and Christian and Muslim Communities
Greg Peterson
Part Three

POPULAR CULTURE AS RELIGION

8 It’s about Faith in Our Future: Star Trek Fandom as Cultural Religion
   *Michael Jindra*

9 Losing Their Way to Salvation: Women, Weight Loss, and the Salvation Myth of Culture Lite
   *Michelle M. Lelwica*

10 An American Apotheosis: Sports as Popular Religion
   *Joseph L. Price*

11 The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock ‘n’ Roll
   *David Chidester*

Part Four

RELIGION AND POPULAR CULTURE IN DIALOGUE

12 The Disguise of Vengeance in Pale Rider
   *Robert Jewett*

13 Rap Music and Its Message: On Interpreting the Contact between Religion and Popular Culture
   *Anthony Pinn*

14 The Gender Dynamics of the Left Behind Series
   *Amy Johnson Frykholm*

Conclusion: Establishing a Dialogue about Religion and Popular Culture
   *Jeffrey H. Mahan*

Discussion Questions

Contributors

Selected Bibliography

Index
Popular culture, by its very nature, changes rapidly, especially in its particular examples. The first edition of this volume was prepared in the late 1990s and published in 2000. In those years, religion occasionally was explicit in popular culture in the United States, but more often one would discover religious themes below the surface.

Since then, the explicit appearance of religion in popular culture has exploded, exemplified in 2004 alone by The Passion in movie theaters, books such as The Da Vinci Code and the latest book in the Left Behind series atop best-seller lists, and the Joan of Arcadia series on television. Not surprisingly, scholarship about religion in popular culture has burgeoned as well.

It remains important to reflect upon the explicit appearances of religion in popular culture, to understand how they both shape and reflect us. It also remains important to probe the subtle, less obvious dimensions and influences of religion in popular culture. Many readers of the first edition of this book have told us that they appreciate its structure, which explores four different relationships between religion and popular culture and points out the four directions in which a discussion might proceed. Teaching professionals have found this volume useful, especially in undergraduate classes, to launch discussions on a wide range of topics.

This revised edition includes three entirely new chapters, minor revisions in four others, some new titles added to the bibliography, and a new feature: discussion questions for class consideration or for personal reflection. In its refreshed form, we hope this book will continue to provoke thoughtful study of the popular culture that surrounds us.

Bruce David Forbes
Jeffrey H. Mahan
January 2005
This volume of essays provides an introduction to an area of growing interest among students of religion and culture: the relationships between religion and popular culture. It reflects the wide range of methods that scholars have applied to tease out these relationships: some of the essays take their approach from the social sciences, while others are rooted in the humanities; some bring the tools of religious studies or theological disciplines to bear on popular culture, while others use the tools of film and television studies, anthropology, or other fields of cultural studies. All argue that religion has developed in the midst of, and adapted to the demands of, a consumer-oriented, mass-media culture.

Since such variety of approaches and interests has produced much interesting work, but not yet generated a clear and unified conversation, one goal of this volume is to provide a unifying framework. The division of the book into four parts, as discussed in the introduction, represents the set of key relationships between religion and popular culture which we believe have defined the work to date. We hope this will help students of religion and popular culture to understand and appreciate the work of others trained in different disciplines and methodologies, in order to deepen and enrich the conversation about religion and popular culture.

First and foremost, we owe our thanks to the authors of these essays. Their thoughtful and creative work, and their generous response to the tinkering of the editors, is much appreciated. They have been dialogue partners as well as writers, and their comments have significantly strengthened the volume.

We are also grateful to professors William Dean, Patricia O’Connell Killen, Marty Knepper, John Shelton Lawrence, and Monica Siems for their thoughtful responses to this project. Doug Abrarhs Arava, Jan Spauschus Johnson, and Reed Malcom at the University of California Press have been supportive, challenging, and encouraging colleagues. Much of Bruce David Forbes’s early work on this volume occurred during a sabbatical year generously provided by Morningside College. Morningside and the Iliff School of Theology also provided staff and student assistance: we thank Elizabeth Pexton Connolly, Andy Downing, Lynn Kogelmann, Chris Schulman, Jann Schwab and Katrina Smith for their crucial roles in assembling, organizing, formatting, and proofreading the manuscript.

Earlier versions of the following essays have appeared elsewhere in similar form. Appreciation is expressed for permission to republish them in this volume:


Jeffrey H. Mahan, Iliff School of Theology
Bruce David Forbes, Morningside College
Bruce David Forbes
INTRODUCTION

Finding Religion in Unexpected Places

Religion appears not only in churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples; it also appears in popular culture.¹ Best-selling popular music has included Joan Osborne’s “[What if God Was] One of Us,” U2’s “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For,” and Madonna’s “Like A Prayer.” The video of “Like a Prayer” features burning crosses, a gospel choir, and a black Christ figure, all mixed together with sensuality. The *Da Vinci Code* and the *Left Behind* fiction series have broken sales records in bookstores. The animated television program *The Simpsons* frequently features the family’s interchange with their very religious neighbor Ned Flanders, and even personal appearances by God and the devil. Movies and television shows ranging from *The Exorcist* to *The X-files* to *Buffy* suggest a widespread fascination with demonic possession, vampires, and a variety of occult phenomena. Batman has been portrayed in a crucifix pose on the covers of at least seven comic books in recent years. What does it all mean?

Other examples of intersections between religion and popular culture are quite different in character. When preaching workshops for ministers include advice that sermons should be shortened, to accommodate the television-influenced attention span of seven or eight minutes between commercials, popular culture apparently affects the shape of institutional religion. At other times, aspects of popular culture seem to become a religion: the national hoopla surrounding the Super Bowl has suggested to more than one scholar that this January event has all the trappings of a religious festival. When fans virtually organize their lives around football or basketball, might we say that sport is a religion?

All of these examples both pertain to religion and are drawn from the realm of popular culture, which some people would dismiss as trivial, faddish, or “just entertainment,” but which a growing body of scholars finds to be a significant focus for reflection and analysis. This essay, and this book, are about the connections between the two: popular culture and religion. Looking at the various ways these two subject areas interact with one another provides a way to reflect on religion which is quite different from studying religious institutions, their scriptures, and their formal theologians. Approaching the study of religion through popular culture can help us learn more about widespread perceptions of religion, and the role religion plays in the everyday lives of people. The analysis of popular culture also can provide insights about how religions change and are changed by the cultures that surround them. To help frame the discussion of such avenues of inquiry, this introductory essay will attempt to define popular culture, summarize some of the basic terminology and strategies of popular culture analysis, and introduce four different ways that popular culture and religion relate to one another.

DEFINING POPULAR CULTURE
What is popular culture? Most of us already have a rough idea from the very phrase itself, but some clarification might be helpful. Scholars in the field frequently distinguish popular culture from both high (or elite) culture and folk culture. To employ suggestive examples from the realm of food: high culture is a gourmet meal, folk culture is grandma’s casserole, and popular culture is a McDonald’s hamburger. All three are forms of “culture,” which is intended here as a neutral term that includes the whole range of human products and thoughts that surround our lives, providing the context in which we live. Although some advocates of high culture would like to use the word “culture” in a more restricted sense, arguing that the word should be applied only to those human works that are of higher sophistication and quality—so, for instance, a symphony orchestra might be an example of “culture” while a polka band would not—analysts of popular culture use the word “culture” in a wider sense, without making judgments of value, quality, or taste, so that comic books and Faulkner novels, tuxedos and torn jeans, radio talk shows and university lectures, and the three meals mentioned above are all parts of “culture.”

The distinctions between the three classifications of culture (high, folk, and popular) have to do especially with the size of their audiences, and perhaps also the means by which they are transmitted. High or elite culture, often transmitted in written form (a literary magazine, the score of an opera, a gourmet cookbook), has a limited audience by its very intention, and is addressed to persons who are perceived to have superior backgrounds or more sophisticated taste. Folk culture, often transmitted orally (family recipes, local legends, regional marriage customs), also has a limited audience, because the oral communication is roughly limited to the more immediate family, community, or other local or regional group. Popular culture might be communicated in many ways, but it most often becomes widespread, and thus popular, through mass media (television, radio, movies, books, magazines, and cybercommunication). As its very name implies, popular culture is marked by its larger audience.

At this point a disagreement has arisen among scholars of popular culture about its further definition. How indispensable are the mass media to the concept of popular culture? One circle of scholars is represented by Ray Browne, a key figure in the founding of the Popular Culture Association and the American Culture Association. They consider popular culture to be the broad “way of life of a people” that “has existed since the most primitive times”: in other words, even before the advent of the printing press and other developments of mass media. Athenians laughing at the plays of Aristophanes would be an historical example. This approach to the definition makes it possible to discuss the existence of popular culture throughout virtually the entire range of human history. When this definition is used, popular culture and folk culture sometimes merge and are difficult to distinguish in earlier time periods, although they still contrast with high culture.

Another circle of scholars is represented by Russel Nye, also a central figure in the development of popular cultural analysis as an academic field. They contend that truly popular culture requires a mass audience (created by urbanization and democratization) and technologies of mass distribution (the printing press and the various forms of mass media that followed). Thus, writes Nye, popular culture “describes a cultural condition that could not have appeared in Western civilization before the late eighteenth century.” In essence, mass mediation is a basic part of the definition for this group of scholars and not for the other. When we move beyond historical questions and consider the present, however, both perspectives agree that popular culture refers to “that which is (or has been) accepted or approved of by large groups of people,” and that, today, the mass media are of central importance in its transmission. Thus popular culture includes such expressions as television programs, movies, popular music, supermarket magazines, popular fiction (romance, detective, western), and much more.

The question remains: how widespread must something be in order to be considered popular? For
example, if the “top forty” songs are the only expressions of truly popular culture in music, what does one say about country, hip hop, jazz, and other forms of music that are widely accepted among more targeted audiences? Are these not expressions of popular culture as well, within what we might call sub-universes or sub-cultures of the larger national or international cultures? We must acknowledge that we are dealing with spectrums of popularity, and it is difficult to draw clear lines. Yet these very degrees of popularity can be one of the subjects for our analysis, as we ask what it means that certain popular cultural forms flourish in some subgroups and not in others.

These comments, then, do not leave us with an absolutely clear definition. The contrasts between popular culture, folk culture, and high culture are instead simply a suggestive typology, and the pure types do not always precisely fit actual examples. Furthermore, an example of popular culture in one time period or geographical location might be high culture in another setting, such as medieval European morality plays, which may have been popular culture when performed by street players centuries ago but become high culture when presented in an American university theater today. In short, as Ray Browne writes, popular culture “is an indistinct term whose edges blur into imprecision,” but, even with its imprecision, the notion of “popular culture” draws our attention to the widespread, common, frequently commercial, and often entertaining aspects of our cultural context as worthy of attention and reflection.

ANALYZING POPULAR CULTURE

Why should we pay attention to popular culture, even studying it in academic settings? What could we learn? Put most simply, popular culture both reflects us and shapes us, and the implications of that twofold dynamic are profound.

On the one hand, popular culture reflects us. This strikes many as common sense, because it is the general public that makes something popular. For example, creators and producers offer new television series to the public every year, but their manipulation of publicity and time slots cannot automatically guarantee that a show will be a hit; the public decides, sometimes surprising the pundits. “We” make something popular when it touches a chord within us, perhaps expressing our assumptions and values, or portraying our yearnings, or providing moments of escape. There has to be a reason (or reasons) why great numbers of people choose to watch one television series and not another. The trick, of course, is to figure out what the reason is. In the process, we are essentially trying to learn about ourselves.

Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, in their introduction to popular culture analysis at the beginning of Popular Culture: An Introductory Text, offer a “Popular Culture Formula” that exemplifies this approach. Their formula states simply that “the popularity of a given cultural element (object, person or event) is directly proportional to the degree to which that element is reflective of audience beliefs and values.” Thus, we examine elements of popular culture “not as ends in themselves but as means of unlocking their meaning in the culture as a whole.” It is a “quest for meaning” to ask “why audiences choose one cultural element over another” and try to discern what this choice says about those audiences.

In a widely used metaphor, popular culture is like a mirror, reflecting who we are. Yet when we look into the mirror, the images are somewhat altered or distorted, because only portions of our realities, interests, values, and desires are reflected back to us, with a selectivity that is influenced by the personal perceptions and intentions of the creative forces behind popular culture. As a result, Nachbar and Lause and others refer to popular culture as a funhouse mirror.

Because popular culture surrounds us, it seems reasonable to assume that its messages and subtle
themes influence us as well as reflect us. If popular culture reflects values we already hold, that reflection also serves to reinforce our values and deepen our commitment to them. If selective images emphasize certain groups or experiences and neglect others, our perceptions of reality may be altered. Television programs and commercials of the 1950s, in which African Americans seldom appeared, provide an example. Consistent viewing of such programming helped the dominant white society ignore or forget that African Americans were part of the nation’s community, and let African American viewers receive and internalize the message that they were marginal.

Michael Real provides another example of how popular culture shapes us. His book, *Mass-Mediated Culture*, argues that

> Mass-mediated culture primarily serves the interests of the relatively small political-economic power elite that sits atop the social pyramid. It does so by programming mass consciousness. . . . For example, while allegedly “giving people what they want,” commercial television maximizes private corporate profit, restricts choices, fragments consciousness, and masks alienation.9

Kenneth Myers, an evangelical Christian and a journalist, offers a different critique of the subtle influences of popular culture in “the erosion of character, the spoiling of innocent pleasures, and the cheapening of life itself.”10

Almost all arguments about popular culture’s influence on us, however, include the hope that once we analyze popular culture’s subtle dynamics and raise them to a level of consciousness, they will no longer affect us, at least not as powerfully as before. We will be resistant to manipulation; activists then might be able to blunt popular culture’s effects, and perhaps even change the production of popular culture in directions the activists find appropriate.

This is an indication of a more general conflict between the creators of popular culture and their critics, which illustrates the twofold claim that popular culture both reflects us and shapes us. When crusaders argue that television programs, advertisements, Nintendo games, and other products of popular culture prompt violence, or demean women, or encourage materialism, popular culture’s producers often answer that they are merely reflecting society. On the much debated subject of violence, for instance, critics complain that the frequency of violence on television has helped create a more violent society, while producers argue that their programs simply express the realities of an already violent society. From the perspective of this essay, such a disagreement presents a false choice, because both claims may be true; it remains relevant, however, to argue which claim is more significant than the other.

To examine popular culture as both a reflection and a shaping force, what specific strategies or methodologies might we employ to try to discern the underlying meanings and influences of popular culture? The essays in this book will provide examples of a variety of approaches. However, let me first make two general points.

First of all, some discussions that purport to be popular culture analysis limit themselves to a consideration of the intentions of the creators and the nature of the popular culture text or artifact itself. These discussions are valuable, and are akin to literary analyses, but unless we add a focus on audience reception, on how and why the public receives and responds to the element of popular culture, we will miss the special insights that the study of popular culture can bring. For example, it may be interesting to hear the inside stories told by producers and cast members of the various *Star Trek* television series, including descriptions of their personal backgrounds and motivations, but the central question for popular culture analysis is why and how *Star Trek* became popular. What attracted the audience? What does its popularity say about the audience? How does it influence the audience?
Secondly, we are likely to discern more about the meanings of popular culture when we examine patterns rather than isolated examples. A critic might discuss a unique, groundbreaking novel by a particular mystery writer, but this novel becomes more significant for popular culture analysis when examined in light of detective fiction as a genre, particularly when it represents a continuing or changing pattern rather than a single anomaly. Single examples tend to focus upon creative uniqueness; patterns and genres point to broader themes and popular response.

DEFINING RELIGION

The academic examination of popular culture has flourished in recent years, with the development of the Popular Culture Association and the American Culture Association, presentations about popular culture at other scholarly conventions like the Modern Language Association, the American Academy of Religion, and the American Studies Association, and the advent of popular-culture commentators in the national media. Yet religion has often been underrepresented in these discussions. For example, Nachbar and Lause’s *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*, a reader commonly used in undergraduate courses, contains twenty-nine articles, none of which directly pertain to religion. Such an omission is puzzling, because religion is a pervasive element of the American experience. Ninety-five percent of Americans indicate that they believe in some sort of God or Higher Power; only five percent claim to be atheist or agnostic. Approximately forty percent of the United States population reports attending worship in any given week. The 1993 edition of the *Encyclopedia of American Religions* lists 1,730 religious organizations, large and small, in the United States and Canada. Certainly, if we are going to examine popular perceptions and behaviors, the topic of religion should be included in the conversation.

If it is to be included, perhaps we should clarify what we mean by “religion.” It is tempting to say simply that religion has to do with “belief in God,” but such a definition reflects the assumptions of Western religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The Hindu understanding of Brahman, or Taoist teachings about the way,” or the spirit world of some Native Americans, would not quite fit this reference to “God,” and yet all are generally recognized as religions. Even changing the reference to “God or gods,” or “a higher power,” does not solve the problem. Thus, there is disagreement among scholars about how to describe the focus of attention that makes religion identifiable. We want to be broad enough to include what we generally recognize as religions, without being overly broad.

Another complication arises from the fact that religion can be perceived at several levels. The most readily recognizable manifestation is institutional religion: major world religions such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and tribal spiritualities, among others, plus any number of smaller groups. Beyond the institutionalized religions, one often can detect some broad societal movements or tendencies about what is holy or what is valued most highly. Furthermore, many individuals have their own somewhat unique, personal religious beliefs and practices that do not fit with any particular group. It has become commonplace for many to call the institutionalized groups “religions,” and to use the label “spirituality” to refer to general movements and private expressions, yet many scholars in religious studies would use “religion” in a broader sense, to include the institutionalized groups, general cultural tendencies, and individual expressions as well.

Thus, some definitions of religion are very broad and inclusive. When the Christian theologian Paul Tillich calls religion “ultimate concern,” or when the authors of an undergraduate text define religion as “any person’s reliance upon a pivotal value,” they see religion as the organizing principle in a person’s
life, the value or concern to which everything else is subordinate. While such a definition definitely includes major world religions, it also might include some orientations that are less frequently seen as religious: nationalism, or materialism, or athletic competition. It could also include both individual and group expressions. Defined this broadly, the topic of religion certainly ought to arise in the process of analyzing popular culture, because popularity is seen as an indication of what the public values, and that might be called their “religion” in its broadest sense.

Other scholars would use the word religion in a narrower sense, to refer to human expressions that are closer to the traditional religions most people recognize. Julia Mitchell Corbett’s working definition of religion in her textbook Religion in America is that a “religion is an integrated system of belief, lifestyle, ritual activities, and institutions by which individuals give meaning to (or find meaning in) their lives by orienting themselves to what they take to be holy, sacred, or of the highest value.” This definition still is broad enough to include unconventional religions, including the so-called “new age movement” or twelve-step programs, but it is more restrictive than the previous definitions cited. Even when defined more narrowly, religion appears frequently in popular culture.

As with our discussion of the concept of “popular culture,” we need not arrive here at one conclusive definition of the term “religion,” although we will return to a further discussion of definitions when we ask whether a feature of popular culture like sports might be considered a religion. For now, it is helpful to see the spectrum of subject matter that is associated with the topic of religion. In learning about religion and popular culture, we will find ourselves discussing not only the institutional religions we readily recognize, with rabbis, and cathedrals, and revivals. Religion may be present in discussions of the roles superheroes play as deliverers, or reflections on the struggles of life, or in devotional acts to a celebrity, or in ritual patterns of television viewers.

## FOUR RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN RELIGION AND POPULAR CULTURE

Religion and Popular Culture is an emerging field of study and has seen an explosion of interest in the last two decades. A list of publications since the year 2000 alone on the general theme, or on subtopics such as music or movies, would fill pages. Scholars interested in the subject come from very diverse formal educational backgrounds (theology, history, biblical studies, literature, cultural studies, anthropology, and others), and they often are unaware of each other’s work. It is a field in need of definition, articulated methodologies, and fuller awareness of the diverse contributions already made. This book hopes to contribute to the process.

One step is to recognize that religion and popular culture relate to each other in at least four different ways, and each merits examination:

1. Religion in Popular Culture
2. Popular Culture in Religion
3. Popular Culture as Religion
4. Religion and Popular Culture in Dialogue
Religion in Popular Culture

Most of the material already published falls in this category, discussing the appearance, explicitly or implicitly, of religious themes, language, imagery, and subject matter in elements of popular culture, for example the portrayal of Catholic nuns in movies, or the redeemer role played by comic book superheroes, or the many indications of public fascination with angels in the 1990s. How does religion appear in expressions of popular culture? At what points in popular culture is religion strikingly absent? What does it mean?

Movies, which have received more attention from religion scholars than any other feature of popular culture, can provide helpful illustrations of how religion might appear in popular culture, both explicitly and implicitly. First, there are those films that explicitly focus on religion: *The Passion of the Christ, The Ten Commandments, The Chosen, Gandhi,* and *Little Buddha* are obvious examples. In addition, many movies include explicit representations of religion or religious figures, although they may not be the focus of the films: priests, monks and nuns, rabbis, evangelists, sun dancers, gothic cathedrals, Muslim prayer rugs, exorcisms, and so on. In all such cases, one might attempt to discern patterns in these portrayals of religion, asking what the patterns reveal about the creative forces behind the images and the audiences who respond.

Religion also makes implicit appearances. For instance, note allegorical Christ figures in movies, such as the extraterrestrial in *E.T.*, a special being with healing powers who came to earth, was loved by many, was misunderstood and feared by authorities, and finally experienced death and resurrection. Charlton Heston, in *Omega Man*, played the role of the only remaining human being with uncontaminated blood in a doomed world, eventually dying in a crucifixion pose. Similar comparisons can be made with Neo in the *Matrix* movies. Providing a non-Christian example of allegory, Eric Greenberg has argued that Superman, a comic book character who also made it to the screen, is deeply rooted in the Western Jewish experience. Jerry Siegel, one of Superman’s co-creators who grew up in a Reform Jewish home, created a character whose Kryptonian name was Kal-el, sounding much like biblical names (Michael, Gabriel) and incorporating the Hebrew “el,” which means “God.” Superman was forced to leave a destroyed planet, reminiscent of Jews leaving Jerusalem after its destruction by the Romans. Superman’s pursuit of “truth and justice” and his assistance to the less fortunate parallel major Jewish ethical themes.

Such religious allegories are found not only in characters like E.T. or Superman, but also in plot structures. Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence make such an argument in their book *The American Monomyth*. They note that Joseph Campbell wrote about a “classical monomyth,” a single archetypal plot in which a hero “ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.” This plot is based on rites of initiation and is seen in the stories of Ulysses, Aeneas, St. George and the dragon, and countless others. Yet Jewett and Lawrence are convinced that most of American popular culture follows a different singular plot, a distinctively American monomyth:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil: normal institutions fail to contend with this threat: a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task: aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisal condition: the superhero then recedes into obscurity.

Western movies in which the hero rides into the sunset at the conclusion, as well as the stories of comic book superheroes, provide ready illustrations of this plot. Jewett and Lawrence note that the American
monomyth is essentially a secularization of Judeo-Christian redemption dramas: “The supersaviors in pop culture function as replacements for the Christ figure, whose credibility was eroded by scientific rationalism,” they write. “But their superhuman abilities reflect a hope of divine, redemptive powers that science has never eradicated from the popular mind.”

_The American Monomyth_ is only one example of what might be called a mythological approach, borrowing from the study of comparative religion. Films can be examined for “cross-cultural forms, including myth, ritual, systems of purity, and gods,” and studied for “the ways Hollywood reinterprets, appropriates, invents, or rejects” these archetypes.

Finally, in addition to characters and plot structures, there are also implicitly religious themes in products of popular culture. Theologians, often Christian theologians, have for years been eager to discuss what they see as implicit theological themes in film: love, meaning, forgiveness, sin, and death and resurrection. Through the arts and the responses of their audiences, human beings ask questions of identity and purpose and wrestle with possible answers to these questions. Many theologians are interested in viewing movies to see how “the world” poses the questions, are intrigued when the answers seem to parallel their own faith traditions, and offer critiques when they disagree with the implicit answers. A considerable body of theological literature takes this approach. Andrew M. Greeley goes a step further, seeing popular culture in general, and film in particular, as a locale in which one may encounter God. “The film is the sacramental art par excellence; either as a fine or lively art nothing is quite so vivid as film for revealing the presence of God.”

Movies have been the focus here, to illustrate how religion might appear on several different levels: through explicit representations, allegorical parallels, and implicit theological themes. Of course, the same variety of manifestations can be found in country music, television comedies, music videos, comic strips, spy stories, science fiction, romance novels, and much more; religion is represented or expressed in many ways in all of these popular cultural forms.

**Popular Culture in Religion**

This category refers to the appropriation of aspects of popular culture by religious groups and institutions. For instance, when churches or synagogues borrow popular musical styles, or organizational or advertising techniques, or popular-culture slogans and icons, what are the dynamics and influences involved?

These influences can be subtle. The thesis of Neil Postman’s _Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business_ provides an interesting example of a cultural influence that is both pervasive and yet largely unrecognized. Postman argues that American culture has moved from a print-dominated age to the Age of Television, and that the shift has literally changed our ways of thinking and the content of our culture. Echoing Marshall McLuhan’s aphorism that the medium is the message, Postman maintains that print culture (the Age of Typography, of Exposition), by the very nature of its mode of communication, encouraged coherent, orderly, serious, rational discourse with propositional content. Television, he says, shifts us to an image-based culture that features explosions of images, fragmented rather than coherent, emphasizing sensation and feeling rather than rationality. Postman calls the television era the Age of Show Business, because entertainment is its highest value. He devotes an entire chapter to television’s impact on religion, arguing that religion on television is presented simply as entertainment, not because of deficiencies in the televangelists but because of the nature of the medium itself: anything presented on
television becomes entertainment. Furthermore, because the pervasiveness of television has shaped the expectations of the entire culture, even when a religious practice (such as a small local church’s weekly worship service) is not on television, it is pressured to measure up to entertainment standards. When religion is presented as entertainment, does the basic content and character of religion change? “The danger is not that religion has become the content of television shows,” Postman writes, “but that television shows may become the content of religion.”

What are other ways that religions consciously or unconsciously borrow examples, images, language, themes, and assumptions from popular culture as tools for religion’s purposes? Does such borrowing influence the religion, sometimes in ways it may not recognize? For example, what does it mean when the supposedly distinctive music of an evangelical Christian youth subculture is expressed in hard rock, heavy metal, alternative, or meditative (“new age”) musical styles? What is involved in the process, currently so popular in the culture, of casting religion as a wellness program (for instance, Leonard Sweet’s *The Jesus Prescription for a Healthy Life*)? When churches adopt “the strategies and techniques of modern marketing” from the business world, and “the audience becomes a market and the gospel is transformed into a product,” should religious people view these influences as effective adaptation or a threatening transformation? Of the four relationships between religion and popular culture, this one, the impact of popular culture upon religion, has been the least examined.

**Popular Culture as Religion**

A third category involves the argument that popular culture serves as religion or functions like religion for many people. Crucial to these discussions, of course, is one’s definition of religion, which we already have considered in a preliminary way. Catherine Albanese has provided a helpful, concise summary of three types of definitions: substantive, functional, and formal.

Substantive definitions of religion focus on the inner core, essence, or nature of religion and define it by this thing-in-itself. They tend to emphasize a relationship with a higher being or beings (God or the Gods) and to be favored by theologians and philosophers. Functional definitions of religion emphasize the effects of religion in actual life. They stress the systems of meaning-making the religion provides and how it helps people deal with the ills, insecurities, and catastrophes of living. Functional definitions are favored by scholars in the social sciences. Lastly, formal definitions of religion look for typically religious forms gleaned from the comparative study of religions and find the presence of religion where such forms can be identified. Religious forms include sacred stories, rituals, moral codes, and communities; and formal definitions of religion tend to be favored by historians of religions.

Most claims about popular culture as religion are based upon functional or formal definitions, but it is possible to find some appeals to substantive definitions as well.

Two general categories of popular culture that many think provide a functional religion for their enthusiasts are sports and television. Do sports or television provide public rituals, private rites, myths and symbol systems through which their followers interpret the world, just as religions do? Other more specific features of American popular culture also invite comparisons with religion: the belief systems, community, and reenactments of *Star Trek* fans; the pilgrimage and religious devotion of those who followed the Grateful Dead; Graceland as a shrine for religiosity surrounding Elvis.

In addition to such comparisons with specific features of popular culture, one might also assert that the sum total of American popular culture expresses an overall cultural religion. John Wiley Nelson, in *Your God Is Alive and Well and Appearing in Popular Culture*, makes just this claim: “Popular culture is to what most
Americans believe as worship services are to what the members of institutional religions believe.” Nelson, a professor of Christian theology, describes what he sees as American cultural religion, with a belief system regarding the nature and source of problems (evil), the source of deliverance, the nature of a resolved situation, and the proper path to the future. The beliefs of this American cultural religion may or may not be consistent with the formal religions that many Americans claim. He argues that the western movie “is the classic ritual form, the ‘High Mass,’ of the predominant American belief system.” Unlike high art, he says, which “challenges one’s self-understanding towards self-criticism and insight,” the primary function of popular culture as “worship” is “to affirm already held beliefs and values.” The mythic pattern of a western, which may appear in Casablanca or television police shows as well as stories set in the pioneer American West, reveals and reaffirms what the dominant culture really believes, such as the general public’s conviction that they are relatively innocent and that evil comes from an external source. “Those institutions normally called ‘religions’ are explicit in announcing precisely what they believe and in scheduling the ritual dramas of reaffirmation, that is, the worship services. American cultural religion is much less recognizably explicit, but no less powerfully persuasive in our lives,” Nelson writes. 23

When Nelson describes what he sees as an “American cultural religion,” he focuses upon its beliefs, especially its assumptions about what is unsatisfactory in our present existence and the source of our eventual deliverance. Other scholars give more emphasis to the forms of religion, and the parallel forms that appear in popular culture: rituals, symbols, myths, and icons. Yet another approach is to notice that popular culture and traditional religions function in similar ways, providing meaning and helping people cope with life’s problems. Whether the emphasis is upon essential religious beliefs, religious forms, or religious functions, each avenue of discussion makes it possible to claim that aspects of popular culture (sports, weight loss programs, celebrities, and more) constitute a religion for their most devoted followers.

Religion and Popular Culture in Dialogue

Other interactions between religion and popular culture do not fit well in the three categories considered thus far. The issue of violence in the media, briefly mentioned earlier, is a good example. When church or synagogue leaders become involved in the debate about whether portrayals of violence in movies and on television are harmful to society, it is not a matter of representations of religion in the media (Religion in Popular Culture), nor is it directly a matter of popular culture shaping religion (Popular Culture in Religion). Most of the discussions do not claim that violence has become a sort of religion (Popular Culture as Religion), although it might be possible to make that case. Rather, violence in the media and in society is an ethical issue which concerns both religions and religious people and the general population as well. Religion wants to take part in the broader discussion.

Violence is only one example. Popular culture represents and sometimes advances values and perspectives about gender roles, race, sexuality, economic objectives, definitions of success, the relative importance of youth and the elderly, and so on. These issues are not directly about religion, but they are ethical arenas to which religious values pertain, and thus religion enters into dialogue with popular culture and its creative forces. The meaning of “dialogue” may need to be arbitrarily broadened here, because, from the perspective of religious participants, this dialogue may take several forms:
listening to the voices of popular culture, being challenged and/or inspired by them;
philosophically comparing and contrasting values between a religion and the general society represented by popular culture;
condemning and opposing the influence of popular culture;
viewing popular culture as an ally in promoting certain causes;
attempting to transform popular culture when it is not already an ally.

These various responses to popular culture blend into one another, and most critics would identify with more than one.24

A wide spectrum of voices is engaged in this dialogue. Within Christian circles alone, they range from Neil Hurley, a Jesuit who sees films as liberating, to Donald Wildmon, the leader of the American Family Association, who sees television as “the most destructive instrument in our society.”25 Others fall somewhere in between, including Michael Eric Dyson and William Fore. Dyson is a minister, university professor, and prominent African American commentator on popular culture, who criticizes gangsta rap for violence, homophobia, and misogyny but who also calls for open lines of communication with gangsta rappers to understand “what conditions cause their anger and hostility”; Fore is a mainline Protestant who has worked in communications for the National Council of Churches, and who seeks to reflect critically on the “central myths” of popular culture, so that religiously committed people “can both clarify their own value system and search for the roots of their faith.”26

In the United States, Jewish and Christian representatives are predominant in these exchanges. The dialogues can be enriched by the addition of voices from other religious traditions, more direct conversations (even face to face) between creators of popular culture and religious representatives at conferences or workshops, and scholarly assessments of the shape of the dialogue.

CONCLUSION

These four relationships between religion and popular culture are not exclusive categories; in fact, they might better be seen as interactive, helpful in highlighting four directions of scholarly discussion, even though discussions of one aspect can and often do shade into discussions of another. For example, R. Laurence Moore’s Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture describes not only how religion has borrowed commercial practices to promote religion (Popular Culture in Religion), but also how business leaders have employed religion to advance their commercial purposes (Religion in Popular Culture).27 Christian theologians who highlight the presence of implicit theological themes in novels or television shows (Religion in Popular Culture) often include comparative discussions of religious and cultural assumptions (Religion in Dialogue with Popular Culture).28 There is fluidity among the relationships between religion and popular culture, but if one’s attention tends to gravitate in one direction, the outline of four relationships can be useful in suggesting additional possibilities.

Many of us come to the analysis of popular culture with a particular special interest, related to our own private enthusiasms (comic books, the Beatles, soap operas, or whatever), and we sometimes hesitate to reveal our interest and even fandom to our more “sophisticated” friends. To enter into reflection on the meanings and influences of popular culture out of simple curiosity or because “it’s fun”
is an effective starting point that requires no apology, and it easily leads to the conviction that we have stumbled upon something that holds promise for significant insight in understanding ourselves, and in understanding religion in the context of our culture.

This volume is intended to survey and widen the discussion, which many of us know only in narrow slices. A broader view allows us to share and borrow methodologies, detect wider patterns, and stimulate our curiosity about new subject areas. The possibilities for research and reflection are endless, because the multifaceted and constantly changing nature of popular culture, and the changing faces of religion as well, assure that there will be no final word.
NOTES


3. Ibid., 11.


6. Ray B. Browne, “Popular Culture: Notes Toward a Definition,” in Nachbar and Wright, Popular Culture Reader, 1–9, quotation from 1.


14. In addition to the four relationships between religion and popular culture considered here, one might argue for a fifth possibility: “Religion as Popular Culture.” If popular culture sometimes functions as religion, can the inverse be true as well? Can religious activity or production not only take on the features of popular culture, but function fully as popular culture? This might apply especially to historical situations where a single religion is central to a culture as a whole, prior to the complications of secularization and religious diversity. Pre-Lenten carnivals in medieval Europe or camp meetings in nineteenth-century America could be viewed as examples of religious activity and popular culture at the same time; the widespread wearing of crosses or Taoist symbols as jewelry might be cited as modern examples. Yet all of these could be considered extensions of “Religion in Popular Culture,” although they near the limits of the category. We recognize the fluidity of these categories and the possibility that at
various points others would find additional categories possible.


24. While not identical to H. Richard Niebuhr’s five relationships between Christ and culture, his typology is certainly influential in constructing lists like this, and reflection on Niebuhr’s discussions in *Christ and Culture* is valuable for general considerations of the relationships between religion and popular culture. See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951).


PART ONE
RELIGION IN POPULAR CULTURE
When the topic of “religion and popular culture” is introduced, people typically think first of the mention of God in the lyrics of a popular song, the portrayal of Jewish rabbis in network television series, or some similar example of the way popular culture expresses religious values or portrays religious figures. Such examples represent the first of four relationships between religion and popular culture considered in this volume: Religion in Popular Culture. This section features essays which discuss the explicit or implicit religious content of popular culture, and offer suggestions about what we might learn from these representations of religion.

Jane Naomi Iwamura considers the portrayal of a figure she calls the Oriental Monk, in American film, television, and advertising. The Monk initiates a westerner, and that westerner serves as a bridge figure who integrates Western and Eastern wisdom. Iwamura argues that rather than being an accurate portrait of oriental religious values and practices, the Monk of American popular culture is a product of Western neocolonial assumptions.

Robert J. Thompson examines the religious content of television Christmas specials. He maintains that in such programs the religious content of the holiday is carried by traditional hymns. However, this theological content is constrained by the surrounding images of hearth and home in ways which subvert religion to serve the interest of American consumerism.

Jennie S. Knight argues that the popular novels The Da Vinci Code and The Secret Life of Bees have gained such widespread popularity in part because they offer new myths of the divine feminine within a Christian symbol system. Drawing from ethnographic research about the Christian feminist spirituality movement and discussions of popular culture, she demonstrates how understandings of the divine as feminine are incorporated into popular literary formulas.

Mark D. Hulsether investigates the religious imagery in certain of Madonna’s music videos. In response to those who read these images as sacrilegious, he argues that Madonna’s combination of eroticism and religious imagery in videos such as “Like a Prayer” delivers messages consistent with liberal and liberationist theologies.

These essays look at religious content in a range of popular media: film, television, literature, and music. They are diverse in ideology and approach. Though Christian symbols and theology predominate, as they do in wider American culture, Iwamura’s account of the Oriental Monk demonstrates that other
religious traditions are also reflected, if not always very accurately, in American popular culture. What unites the observers and critics is their interest in the way that popular culture draws on, and comments on, traditional religious themes, images, and concepts.
Jane Naomi Iwamura
THE ORIENTAL MONK IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

Driving down a busy street in Oakland, California, I was met by the larger-than-life presence of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. He appeared to me in a vision of unparalleled clarity and grace. His direct gaze was gentle, yet intent, and his spiritual repose arresting. For that one moment, the hectic pace of my life was interrupted, and I was transported to another time, another world, another possibility.

Many others who passed that same spot shared a similar vision. To each of us, the Dalai Lama’s silent message reverberated: Think Different.

The unexpected appearance of such a prominent spiritual figure, in olden days, would undoubtedly be taken as nothing short of a miracle. But in contemporary times, a miracle it is not. The Dalai Lama’s “visitation” had been made possible by the Apple Corporation and the spiritual power of advertising. The vision derived its meaning not from a single epiphany, but rather through a series of mass media orientations: glossies in magazines; newspaper photos and references; images in film, television, and the internet. Indeed, at times, His Holiness seemed to be everywhere at once.

The Dalai Lama has become one of the most recognizable spiritual figures of our times. As a non-Christian religious leader, the interest he holds for millions of Americans is unprecedented—save by the Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1980s. And rather than signaling political threat and religious zealotry, as the Middle Eastern patriarch once did, the Dalai Lama represents an admirable pacifism and spiritual calm ripe for esteem and emulation. Indeed, Americans love the Dalai Lama.

It is this American love and fascination for Eastern spiritual figures such as the Dalai Lama that I am most interested in understanding. Rather than simply recounting the religious and moral qualities these spiritual individuals possess, it is important to discuss the social context from which their attraction emerges. How did the Dalai Lama come to represent all that he does for Americans? Indeed, what exactly does he represent? How have we come to “know” him? Is our ability to embrace someone and something (Tibetan Buddhism) once considered so foreign anything other than a testimony to a newfound openness and progressive understanding?

I’d like to tackle these questions by critically analyzing the history of representation which has contributed to the current image of the Dalai Lama. We “know” the Dalai Lama not simply because of the fact that we may understand his views and admire his actions, but also because we are familiar with the particular role he plays in the popular consciousness of the U.S.—the type of icon he has become—the icon of the Oriental Monk. To get a sense of what makes the Dalai Lama (and others like him) so popular, we need to get a sense of the history of this icon and how it has been used to express and manage our sense of Asian religions.
The Oriental Monk has enjoyed a long and prominent sojourn in the realm of American popular culture. We have encountered him under different names and guises: as Mahatma Gandhi and as D. T. Suzuki; as the Vietnamese Buddhist monk consumed in flames; as the Beatles’ guru, the Maharishi Mahesh; as Kung Fu’s Kwai Chang Caine and as Mr. Miyagi in the Karate Kid; as Deepak Chopra and, as well, as the Dalai Lama. Although the Oriental Monk appears in these various forms throughout American pop culture, we are always able to recognize him as the representative of an alternative spirituality that draws from the ancient wellsprings of “Eastern” civilization and culture.

Compared with the negative stereotypes of Asians which have historically circulated in the American media (sinister Fu Manchus, inscrutable gangsters, the Yellow Peril, and so on), the icon of the Oriental Monk seems like a noteworthy advance. And indeed, it demonstrates an air of increasing tolerance and respect. But to look at this representation as nothing but admirable progress precludes us from seeing ways in which positive portrayals may reinscribe certain racist notions of the Eastern “other.” Indeed, it is important to analyze the icon of the Oriental Monk within the phenomenon of orientalism—as part of an orientalist network of representations. According to Edward Said, this network is “framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire.” As a “created body of theory and practice,” orientalism divides the world into “two unequal halves, Orient and Occident.” Its “detailed logic [is] governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments and projections,” as well as a “whole series of ‘interests.’” Hence, rather than offering a clear and unbiased representation of Asian religions, this system of representation reveals the interests and concerns of the Occidental subjectivity from which it emerges.

The Oriental Monk, drawing from this network of representation, includes within its iconic scope a wide range of religious figures (gurus, sages, swamis, masters, teachers) from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (South Asian, Japanese, Vietnamese, Chinese). Although individual figures point to a diverse field of encounter, they are homogenized within American popular consciousness and culture. Racialization (more correctly, “orientalization”) serves to blunt the distinctiveness of particular persons and figures. Indeed, recognition of any Eastern spiritual guide (real or fictional) is predicated on their conformity to general features paradigmatically encapsulated in the icon of the Oriental Monk: his spiritual commitment, his calm demeanor, his Asian face, and oftentimes his manner of dress.

In an analysis of the icon of the Oriental Monk as American, we will see a complex dynamic unfold in which orientalist notions of Eastern spiritual heritages and Western disillusionment and desire converge. These notions are configured in a conventionalized narrative with formulaic aspects that demonstrate the specific nature of America’s engagement with “Eastern,” non-Christian traditions, and its use of the Oriental Monk as a means to symbolically express, manage, and work through its troubled spiritual sense of self. Hence, the Oriental Monk as pop cultural icon and narrative tells us a great deal about the religious ethos of twentieth-century America: he details the fears, hopes, and desires of a society in spiritual turmoil and search. In the following discussion, I will follow the Oriental Monk on his journey through American popular consciousness (or rather, follow this consciousness as it journeys through him), and discuss certain highlights along his spiritual path—his mass media “initiation” through silent film (D. W. Griffith’s Broken Blossoms), his “prominence” in 1980s film and television, and his current “reign” in the form of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. We will discover that although the monk travels under different guises, primarily dictated by the geopolitical terrain, his basic mission and tale remain strangely the same.
The Oriental Monk makes his on-screen debut in D. W. Griffith’s classic, *Broken Blossoms or The Yellow Man and the Girl.* The tale begins in an undesignated Chinese port town where we find the Yellow Man—a devout individual who becomes “convinced that the great nations across the sea need the lessons of the gentle Buddha.” He journeys West to “take the glorious message of peace to the barbarous Anglo-Saxons, sons of turmoil and strife.” The remainder of the movie chronicles his life in the Limehouse district of London and his encounter with Lucy, a gutter waif (played by Lillian Gish), whom he shelters from her brute of a father, Battlin’ Burrows. The Yellow Man is portrayed as the only one who recognizes Lucy’s “beauty which all Limehouse missed.” But tragedy ensues: Battlin’ Burrows discovers his daughter’s whereabouts, beats her to death, and then is shot in turn by the Yellow Man. The story ends with the Yellow Man, a knife between his ribs, slumped before Lucy and his Buddhist altar.

Griffith’s “masterpiece,” produced in 1919, offers a tragic adaptation of Thomas Burke’s short story, “The Chink and the Girl.” The changes which ensued in the translation of text into film are noteworthy. Most significant is the transformation of Burke’s “Chink,” a “worthless drifter of an Oriental,” into Griffith’s “Yellow Man”—noble and pious in his sense of mission. Indeed, Griffith’s main contribution resides in the revised introduction of the story, where he locates the Yellow Man “in the Temple of Buddha, before his contemplated journey to a foreign land.” Here, the Yellow Man gains inspiration and guidance not only from the environment of the temple, but also from the Oriental Monks who reside there and provide “[a]dvice for a young man’s conduct in the world—word for word such as a fond parent or guardian of our own land would give.” Indeed, the motif of the temple which both begins and ends the story offers definite spiritual overtones to the tragic tale.

In his essay, “Modernizing White Patriarchy: Re-Viewing D. W. Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms*,” John Kuo Wei Tchen cites the “modernized cultural patriarchy” promoted in the film. This new form of dominance and oppression channels the views and prescriptions of the cultural elite into stereotypical representations set in place and reinforced by character and plot development. Tchen exposes the view which undergirds both early silent films such as *Broken Blossoms* and their successors: “Proper society should be managed so Blacks [can] be segregated and kept in their place, and poor whites, immigrants and native alike, [can] be acculturated into bourgeois society.” Within a framework of modernized cultural patriarchy, *Broken Blossoms* can be read as the cultural elite’s commentary on the marginalized elements of its society in urbanized areas. More specifically, it marks the filmic origin of a device through which this is accomplished—the figure of the “good Asian”:

If anything, [Griffith] eschews the standard stereotype of the “heathen Chinee” already well established in the previous century, and adapts the alternative image of the good-for-the-West “John Chinaman.” “John” was the image of the tame, aristocratic, clean, honest, and often Christianized Chinese man promoted by traders, missionaries, and the wealthy who had direct personal interests in promoting good relations with China.

This positive portrayal serves a number of functions: (1) as a “symbolic foil to complain about the abusive, immature authority of lower-class white men” (Battlin’ Burrows); (2) to appease China, which the U.S. has “interests” in maintaining good foreign relations with; and (3) to discipline immigrant Chinese who reside in Chinatowns of the West, by providing a representative *measure* and *standard* for the moral behavior of these communities. In these multifarious ways, films such as Griffith’s provide a means by which to manage diverse groups via cultural representation rather than through bodily force or direct polemic—a strategy which is the hallmark of the “modernized cultural patriarchy.”
For our purposes, it is interesting to note that Tchen emphasizes the “Christian” nature of the Yellow Man’s moral and spiritual orientation, since the character is portrayed as definitively Buddhist. I think Tchen is correct in pointing out the “proto-‘Christian’ values” that the representation masks; at the same time, this easy identification of the Buddhist Yellow Man as Christian in essence misses a significant dimension of Griffith’s film. Indeed, Tchen’s critical analysis does not account for the brief but crucial encounter between the Yellow Man and two missionizing clergymen in the desolate Limehouse streets:

Christian: “My brother leaves for China tomorrow to convert the heathen.” Yellow Man: “I wish him well.”
(The clergymen then offer the Yellow Man a pamphlet entitled “Hell.”)

Unbeknownst to the Christian proselytizers, the Yellow Man is a missionary himself, albeit jaded and discouraged by his own experiences in a foreign land. Hence his well-wishing is cast in a sympathetic, yet ironic, tone. The above exchange can be viewed as a brilliant foreshadowing of the Yellow Man’s tragic end (“Hell”), but it also serves as a commentary on Christian mission. The viewer is meant to identify with the Yellow Man’s disillusioned response. Through this identification, one can read Griffith’s (and perhaps the audience’s) own relation to institutionalized Christianity as ambivalent at best.

Hence, we must struggle with Griffith’s portrayal as such. The fact that Griffith associates peace, gentleness, sensitivity, and altruism to the Buddha and his followers in the film constitutes a significant moment in popular consciousness. At the very least, it must assume that a “heathen” religion stands on par with its “non-heathen” counterpart, although I believe much more can be read into this moment: *Broken Blossoms* expresses an already established disillusionment with Christianity and quite possibly a budding fascination with alternative modes of moral and spiritual understanding. Griffith, as “cultural midwife,” inadvertently ushers this desire into popular consciousness through the Oriental Monk figures of the Yellow Man and his Buddhist teachers.

Of course, *Blossoms* concludes in tragedy, not hope. This ending reinvigorated the film’s elite audience—infused them with “a sense of mission” and justified their “paternalistic efforts” within national borders and without. The film’s moral lesson rests on a threat: *If the Christianized West is unable to care for its children, the noble Buddhist East will.* The tone and import of this message is conveyed by the dire consequences of the Yellow Man’s intervention (the death of the three main characters); the message is to be taken as a warning for the Christian West to “practice what it preaches.” Although this constitutes the intentional aim of Griffith’s work, it does not preclude other contrary effects as well: Eastern spirituality has been representationally idealized and operates kindly in its new Western home. In this way, *Broken Blossoms* sets the groundwork for the West’s further engagements, and later spiritual identification, with the East. As we will see, the message will be transformed from one of threat and consequence to one of desire and hope: *If the Christianized West is unable to care for its children, the noble Buddhist East will!*

**PROMINENCE**

Times have obviously changed since Griffith’s day, and, along with them, attitudes towards non-Christian religions. This transformation is for the most part due to the events of the 1960s, which embodied a refreshing challenge to the American Christian establishment (in the form of “alternative” lifestyles and spiritual experimentation) and a new tolerance towards “peoples of color” (in the form of the Civil Rights Movement and 1965 Immigration Act). At the same time, this transformation was underwritten by a sense of loss—a loss configured by the wounds of war (the World Wars, the Vietnam War), the impact of
technology and global capitalism, domestic racial strife, and growing disillusionment with traditional forms of religious faith and worship. Out of this context emerged the archetype of the American religious subject as a “spiritual seeker” who journeys in search of new religious ground for reconciliation and healing.\(^\text{12}\)

The cultures of Asia offered the unparalleled promise of finding such ground. The search for spiritual renewal in the East found popular expression in *Kung Fu* (1972–75), the first popular offering to make explicit the spiritual underpinnings of Eastern martial arts practice. It is thus the progenitor of both the many martial arts movies that were produced from the early 1970s through the late 1980s, and later representations such as *The Karate Kid* (1984) and *The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1990), which transformed the adult entertainment of *Kung Fu* and its more violent martial arts successors into family-oriented fare.

*Kung Fu, The Karate Kid, and The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* all share a similar narrative: lone monk figure—oftentimes with no visible family or community, unrecognized by the dominant culture—takes under his wing a fatherless, often parentless, child.\(^\text{13}\) This child embodies a tension: for example, *Kung Fu*‘s Kwai Chang Caine is half-American, half-Chinese;\(^\text{14}\) Daniel in *The Karate Kid* hails from a working class, ethnic background; and, of course, the turtles are mutant. Although these figures half-signify the dominant culture in racial terms, they have an ambivalent relationship with that culture; this allows each to make a break with the Western tradition radical enough to embrace their marginalized half. The Oriental Monk figure seizes this half, develops it, nurtures it. As a result of this relationship, a transmission takes place: oriental wisdom and spiritual insight is passed from the Oriental Monk figure to the occidental West through the *bridge figure*. Ultimately, the Oriental Monk and his apprentice(s) represent future salvation of the dominant culture—they embody a new hope of saving the West from capitalist greed, brute force, totalitarian rule, and spiritless technology.

Hence, the modernized cultural patriarchy set forth decades ago in *Broken Blossoms* becomes firmly established in the ’70s and ’80s. Like *Blossoms*, these contemporary films enact a commentary on and prescription for ethnic and working-class communities built upon the ideological figure of the spiritual Asian male. But in these later renditions, the Oriental Monk travels down a path not foreseen by Griffith. If *Blossoms* were rewritten in more contemporary terms according to the above narrative, the Yellow Man would arrive as noble and pious as before, but this time as a kung fu master with magical powers. He would rescue Lucy from her depraved, abusive father, care for her, and finally train her in the spiritual ways and practices of the East. Battlin’ Burrows, now a frustrated blue-collar worker obsessed with war and guns, would then attempt to reclaim his estranged daughter, and the film would culminate in a final showdown between the two father figures and their respective forms of combat and defense. Lucy would get into the act as well, employing her new talents to disarm her father as gently as possible. The Yellow Man and the girl, through superior human insight and bodily discipline, would triumph over their unruly counterpart. After his definitive defeat, Battlin’ would lay aside his weapons, be reunited with his daughter, and the three would join forces to fight evil and corruption in *Blossoms II*. So ends Griffith’s classic rewritten for a late-twentieth-century audience—one a cautionary tale and now transfigured into a narrative of spiritual hope and progress.

Indeed, it may appear as if this narrative shift represents a positive trend. Asian religions are no longer portrayed as spiritual systems incompatible with the West, but rather as transformative and life-enhancing influences. But the fact that a particular narrative and representation of Asian spiritual traditions and Asian peoples has become so conventionalized attests to its ideological nature and force. The Oriental Monk figure is portrayed as a desexualized male character who represents the last of his kind.\(^\text{15}\) Passing on his spiritual legacy to the West through the *bridge figure* represents his only hope for
survival. Hence, this narrative implicitly argues that Asian religions are impotent within their racial context of origin, and are only made (re)productive if resituated in a Western context and passed on to white practitioners who possess the daring and innovative sensibilities that their Eastern counterparts presumably lack. In this way, the icon of the Oriental Monk and its contemporary narrative—a construction of “racist love”—may be more insidious than negative stereotypes informed by “racist hate,” as it allows for the recognition of peoples and cultures of Asian heritage while simultaneously subjecting them to a narrative of their own obsolescence.16

Although its characteristic features have remained consistent over the past two decades, the Oriental Monk narrative has become increasingly condensed over time. We have traveled from the more complex narratives of Kung Fu and Karate Kid to the extremely concentrated signifiers found in Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Alice. In the original Kung Fu, at least half of the movie is given over to explaining Shaolin practices and philosophy. All that remains in Ninja Turtles are a few anecdotes thrown in for good measure, and in Woody Allen’s Alice of the same year (1990), we find the symbol of the Oriental Monk in its cruelest form: Allen ironically employs stereotypical “oriental” music and opium den darkness to situate Dr. Yang. Even though Dr. Yang’s chain-smoking, caustic persona can be read subversively, he and Chinatown still signal in the viewer’s mind Alice’s entry into an alternative sense of self. For all the seeming self-reflexivity demonstrated in Allen’s ironic invocation of the Oriental Monk figure, Dr. Yang remains merely a symbolic device in the larger plot of Alice’s transformation, made productive by a still unchallenged orientalist network of associations.

Along with his condensed form, the Oriental Monk has also acquired more and more fantastic powers in his recent manifestations. Dr. Yang can induce certain states of consciousness and connections with the past through his herbal medications. In Kung Fu’s resurrection—Kung Fu: The Legend Continues (1993–97)—the extended flashbacks exploring Caine’s Chinese philosophical and spiritual training have been replaced by “otherworldly” plots and martial arts scenes filled with implausible stunts. United Paramount Network’s Vanishing Son, which aired during the same time period (1994–95), did not escape this tendency. Over the course of its short run, the show’s protagonist, Jian-Wa Chang, developed supernatural abilities demonstrated by glowing aural meditation scenes and his capacity to connect with the realm of ghosts where his recently deceased brother now resides.17

Shifting his disciplined exercise and “grounded” approach into the supernatural arena attests to the full appropriation of the Oriental Monk as America’s spiritual “other.” Within the categories introduced by early anthropologists to account for the variation in belief systems around the world—magic, science, religion—the Oriental Monk offers an additional alternative: wisdom.18 This schema, which still resonates in the popular realm, carries with it an implicit racial coding, and in film representations this coding becomes more evident: black magic, white science, oriental wisdom.19 But as the Oriental Monk narrative becomes more and more conventionalized, the icon condenses and enters the magical realm, to be managed along with other spiritual “alternatives.” Indeed, as the Oriental Monk takes on more and more (supernatural) “powers” within the narrative, he seems to enjoy less and less “power” outside the narrative (i.e., as an antihero and counternarrative challenge).

A final dimension of the Oriental Monk narrative should also be taken note of. Many of the above films and television programs entail a return to the East in some fashion or another: Kwai Chang Caine liberates a camp of his fellow Chinese railroad workers; Mr. Miyagi and Daniel return to Japan in The Karate Kid II (1986), to prevent Miyagi’s home village from being overrun by a greedy capitalist Japanese gangster; the Turtles and Splinter return to seventeenth-century Japan in Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles III (1993); and Alice heads for India to work with Mother Theresa. Here we find that the East also suffers despair.
and corruption and requires the help of the protagonists. Asia cannot save itself, but looks toward the powers of the newly “enlightened” Westerner: the bridge figure has come to signify salvation not only for Western culture, but for “the Orient” as well. In this way, the modernized cultural patriarchy of the U.S. uses the Oriental Monk and his narrative to transform its disillusionment into a new spiritual imperialism and a renewed sense of mission. The proven success of the Monk now establishes it as one of the reigning icons in American popular cultural consciousness.

REIGN

With much acclaim, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989. In the tradition of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., he continued a line of world peacemakers whose vision was shaped by a mixture of profound spirituality and political awareness. The Nobel Peace Prize hurled the Dalai Lama and the small Asian country of Tibet into the public eye, and what happened next only solidified the Dalai Lama’s status as an American popular cultural figure. Hollywood actor Richard Gere personally adopted the Dalai Lama’s spiritual and political mission as his own, promoting the cause at the 1993 Academy Awards and becoming the Founding Chair of the Tibet House in New York. Many of Gere’s contemporaries followed suit: “the Power Buddhist/Free Tibet contingent” includes Harrison Ford, Willem Dafoe, Sharon Stone, Steven Seagal, and Adam Yauch of the Beastie Boys. These celebrity endorsements, along with the long history of the Oriental Monk in American popular culture, offered a Buddhist way of life unprecedented Western exposure and initiated the most recent stage in the development of the icon of the Oriental Monk.

With the Dalai Lama, we witness how the disruptions made by actual teachers are continually minimalized by the overpowering representations which have accrued in American popular cultural consciousness. The teacher of Asian origin instantaneously enters the popular culture realm and is transformed into a celebrity; that realm then exploits the reception of his physical and spiritual presence by marketing it for mass contemplation and consumption. This last stage is exemplified by the big movie productions centered around Tibetan Buddhism and/or the life of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama which have emerged in the 1990s: Bernardo Bertolucci’s Little Buddha (1993), in which a small Euro-American child from Seattle is selected as one of the subsequent reincarnations of the Dalai Lama; Jean Jacques Annaud’s Seven Years in Tibet (1997); and Martin Scorsese’s biopic of the Tibetan spiritual leader, Kundun (1997).

In his physical manifestation, the Oriental Monk is now modeled after the Dalai Lama (note the Tibetan, saffron-robed, shaved-head versions in IBM’s OS/2 commercials, who are miraculously able to communicate with each other telepathically). Psychically, this new Monk continues the work of its predecessors in the critiquing of American society—its religious and secular preoccupations:

We don’t need these Buddhist temples, we don’t need these Christian Churches. What we need, [the Dalai Lama] says, are the values of the human heart. . . . There’s a lot of talk about [the baby boomer] generation being materially satisfied, but the next level of need is not satisfied and that’s the spiritual level.

Buddhism is seen as one way that we might re-create a sense of spiritual meaning and purpose within a directionless society. Amid widespread despair, those who have found Buddhism have a sense of joy and inspiration.

But this version also constitutes a shift in geopolitical focus and mission. The long history of the icon of the Oriental Monk has demonstrated a preference for the Japanese or Chinese model. Indeed, Japan and
China were viewed as cultures possessing great spiritual richness, but their challenge in the arena of international politics and the world market in relation to the U.S. was perceived as fairly contained; this combination of factors made them suitable representatives of the East in the American popular imagination from 1970 to the mid-1980s.\(^\text{24}\)

In the 1990s, however, Japan and China appear too formidable, with contemporary patriarchies of their own in place which greatly resemble those of the West, whereas Tibet poses less of a threat and offers Americans a new mold.\(^\text{25}\) The Tibetan version of the Monk paradigmatically signifies, through his dress and religious practices, a mythic spiritual past. This Oriental Monk also provides his charges with a concrete political mission: Free Tibet. As the inaugural issue of *Tricycle* succinctly summarizes:

- 1.2 million Tibetans have died (one sixth of the population)
- 70% of Tibet’s virgin forest has been clear cut
- More than 6,000 monasteries, temples and historic sites have been looted and razed
- All religious practices have been outlawed.\(^\text{26}\)

This scenario includes a third world people who are fighting against a global power (China) for their very physical, cultural, and spiritual existence—a noble cause to align oneself with. Hence the Japanese and Chinese variations of the Oriental Monk have for the most part been traded in for the less compromised Tibetan model.

But unrecognized desires underlie the American interest in this politico-spiritual mission. It is interesting to note how Tibet’s predicament mirrors and emerges from America’s own guilt within and outside its own borders—the millions of human lives it has taken, the deforestation it is responsible for, and its judgment on ways of life foreign to a democratic, secular, capitalist model. Indeed, Tibet represents a manageable cosmos where sins—past and present—can be atoned for. Hence, the Tibetan variation of the Oriental Monk enacts an exchange: a model of ethical behavior and spiritual direction for political and economic support. But this exchange serves the West well: America gains not only psychic resolution and healing, but also unchallenged economic and political patriarchal influence over the exiled nation.

The new regime, which the Oriental Monk and his narrative support, operates according to a uniquely twentieth-century system of domination: the “psycho-spiritual plantation system.” Sau-ling C. Wong has introduced this concept to speak of “a stratified world of privileged whites and colored servers/caregivers.”\(^\text{27}\) She elaborates:

> people of color collectively become “ideological caregivers” for whites, in addition to being their literal caregivers. . . . “Ideological caregiving” is typically depicted in a benign light in mass culture, with emphasis placed on the benefits accruing to the care-receiver, the volitional participation of the caregiver, and the general mutuality of the exchange. This wish-fulfilling picture expediently flattens the complex social and emotional dynamics generated when mothering is performed by those who are stigmatized and disenfranchised, in virtually every other context, by the care-receivers.

This “ideological caregiver” “functions mainly as a resource, subject to appropriation to salve the insecurities of the master/mistress.”\(^\text{29}\) Wong focuses on American films and novels whose stories take place in the U.S., and astutely details the domestic presence of the “psycho-spiritual plantation system.” But the operations of the Oriental Monk as spiritual caregiver and guardian demonstrate that this new form of cultural patriarchy and spiritual imperialism reaches far beyond our borders, into Asia.
I have examined the historical development and complex workings of the icon of the Oriental Monk in a variety of American popular cultural representations. Although the icon transmutes according to the geopolitical situation operating at the time, the narrative he is associated with remains amazingly similar throughout. The icon reflects a disillusionment with Western frameworks, and the hopes and fears attached with alternative spiritualities of the East. American consciousness plagued by the demands of modernity—imperialist strength and will, Christian progress, disembodied instrumental reason, capitalist accumulation and greed—finds peace and resolution through the Oriental Monk. Also present in the narrative is the vision of the “new man,” or, more accurately, the “new West,” which has learned its lessons well and combines Western initiative with Eastern spiritual know-how. This bridge figure represents salvation, not only for America, but also for Asia. Armed with a new consciousness and mission, the U.S. justifies carrying on its (imperialist) work with renewed vigor and purpose around the globe.

So what am I and others to make of our sighting of His Holiness on that busy street in Oakland? Mass media images surround us in our daily lives—inundate our imagination and reinforce certain associations—without us really taking into account the power of their repetitive force. Religion, race, class, sexuality, and gender make the representations we encounter meaningful. To understand these dimensions of the popular images we encounter, as well as the sociopolitical contexts in which they are lodged, will inevitably determine whether we will be able to heed the vision to Think Different or simply drive on by.

NOTES

The first version of this article was originally presented as part of a panel sponsored by the Religion and Popular Culture Group at the 1995 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Philadelphia. I would like to thank Bruce Forbes and Jeffrey Mahan for their always encouraging and patient editorial support and guidance. Others whose comments, suggestions, and care have been invaluable throughout include Rudy V. Busto, Judith Butler, Carolyn Chen, Vivian Chin, Elizabeth Goodstein, Russell Jeung, David Kyuman Kim, Luís León, Marie Lo, Michael Mascuch, Sandy Oh, Young Mi Angela Pak, Greg Thomas, Sau-ling Wong, and Desmond Smith.

1. The genealogy I have constructed (which is far from complete) purposely intertwines historical persons with fictional characters. In a mass-mediated age, “real” figures can no longer be clearly distinguished from imaginary ones, creating a “hyperreal” effect (to use Baudrillard’s term) in which both types of representations inform and interact with one another to form a common understanding of “Eastern spirituality” in the U.S. context. This understanding congeals in the icon of the Oriental Monk. For a compelling example of how iconic representation functions in the contemporary U.S., see S. Paige Baty, American Monroe: The Making of a Body Politic (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).


3. D. W. Griffith, renowned as a master of early American film, gained notoriety for his visions of America in works such as The Birth of a Nation (1915). Although Broken Blossoms is set in London, it too enacts a commentary on American life. Scott Simmon, in his exploration of The Films of D. W. Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), discusses how Griffith posited “Anglo-Saxon superiority through
British medieval ideals” (143). This romantic link between Britain and the U.S., forged in the filmmaker’s mind, intimates his use of Blossoms’s London and its degeneracy as a reflective metaphor for the woes of urbanized America.


5. Ibid., 143.

6. The character of the “good Asian” prefigures the myth of the “model minority” so prevalent in contemporary American discourse. Similar to Griffith’s deployment of the Yellow Man as a figurative device through which to lodge his commentary and critique of “unruly” sectors of society, the popular press and political leaders valorize and uphold Asian Americans as “model” students and citizens which other racial-ethnic groups (including lower- and middle-class whites) are urged to emulate. In a particularly stereotypical example, Ronald Reagan praised Asian American success and attributed it to “[Asian] values, [Asian] hard work.” This assumed ethic falls closely in line with Griffith’s representation of the Yellow Man as the uncompromised embodiment of the traditional values of his Asian culture. For an accessible introduction into the “model minority myth,” see Ronald Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 474–84; Reagan’s comment above is quoted on 475.


8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., 135.

10. For a number of Asian American cultural critics, including Tchen, “Christian” is used with a derogatory overtone. These authors work with a particular view of Christianity in which its exclusionary practice and its imperialist tendencies are highlighted. For an especially incisive deployment, see Frank Chin, “Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake,” in The Big Aiiiiieee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature, ed. Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong (New York: Meridian, 1991), 1–92. The hegemonic view of America as a “white Christian nation” certainly deserves to be dismantled. But a too-easy association between these dimensions—“white,” “Christian,” “nation”—obscures the complex and changing ways in which this vision generally persists (e.g., liberal pluralism, religious tolerance, multiculturalism). In the particular case of Blossoms, Tchen’s reliance on this association does not allow him to speak about the contradictions in Griffith’s sympathetic portrayal of the Buddhist Yellow Man.


12. Wade Clark Roof uses the term “spiritual seeker” to refer to the “baby boomers” who came of age in the 1960s. Most notable about the religious sensibility and practice of this generation is their “pastiche-style of spirituality” which draws upon an “expanded number of religious options” including Eastern spirituality (A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993], 245). See also Steven M. Tipton, Getting Saved from the Sixties (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

13. The martial arts films from the intervening decade make passing reference to the spiritual dimension of their fighting practice, but this dimension is almost always merely assumed, and its presence is used to delineate the “good guys” from the “bad guys.” Take for instance Enter the Dragon (1973) in which
martial arts legend Bruce Lee does battle with an evil drug lord. The superior fighting skills and heroic stance of Lee’s character are taken as signs of his spiritual integrity. A brief but memorable quote affirms his moral rectitude: “You have offended my family, and you have offended a Shaolin temple.” Since such films simply presuppose Eastern spirituality, they are less useful for my purposes of showing how this representation gets established and codified for American audiences.

14. Bruce Lee competed with David Carradine to play the role of Kwai Chang Caine, and the reason why he did not receive the part still lingers as a site of controversy and contention. According to David Carradine:

There are two stories about why Bruce Lee didn’t get the part. One: that he was turned down because he was too short and too Chinese; which is a way of saying he was, ironically, a victim of the same prejudice we would be dealing with as our theme in the film. Two: that, for some reason I can’t fathom, he was advised by his people not to take the part.

I was told by someone in the production company that they weren’t sure he could act well enough to handle the complexities of the character. I don’t know. Whatever the reason, it caused him to quit Hollywood, go home to Hong Kong and embrace his destiny. (Emphasis added; note that Bruce Lee was a Chinese American born in San Francisco.)

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who claims Lee as a good friend, notes that Lee “would have been perfect, a master working his art before the national audience, but whoever it was that decided such things made it clear to [him] that they didn’t think a Chinese man could be a hero in America. They passed over Bruce and gave the part, and the stardom, to David Carradine.” David Carradine, The Spirit of Shaolin (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle, 1991), 18–9; Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Peter Knobler, Giant Steps (New York: Bantam, 1983), 188–9; see also Darrell Y. Hamamoto, Monitored Peril: Asian Americans and the Politics of Representation (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 59–63.


16. For a discussion of “racist love” and “racist hate,” the dynamic between them, and how they operate through racial stereotypes, see Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan, “Racist Love,” in Seeing through Shuck, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Ballantine, 1972), 65–79.

17. The pilot and early episodes of Vanishing Son did not contain these “supernatural” dimensions, but rather seemed to model themselves after the genre of Hong Kong cinema which is becoming increasingly popular in the U.S. One can speculate that the spiritual references were added in order to serve as a more conventionalized cultural marker and boost ratings for the new series.

18. Sir James Frazer and Bronislaw Malinowski—two forefathers of modern anthropology—grappled with these categories in their respective classic works The Golden Bough (1890, 1937) and Magic, Science, and Religion and Other Essays (1925). Although they held different understandings of these three domains, their analyses both relied upon the integrity of these categories. Frazer’s conception, which plots magic, religion, and science in a linear evolutionary scheme, was particularly insidious, and his view is still popularly embraced to a certain extent. For a critical discussion of these categories and the legacy of Frazer’s and Malinowski’s thought, see Stanley Jeyaraya Tambiah, Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

20. For a synopsis of Gere’s view, see his editorial, “Tibet a litmus test for U.S. moral resolve,” *USA Today*, 13 March 1997, 15A.

21. See Edward Silver, “Finding a New Path,” *Los Angeles Times*, 11 April 1995, E1, E8. This contingent has formally expanded into the “Committee of 100 for Tibet” (see the Committee’s home page at http://www.tibet.org/Tibet100/).


24. It is significant to note that the production of *Kung Fu* in 1971 coincided with the U.S. rapprochement with China, and Nixon’s much heralded visit to the People’s Republic of China took place in 1972, the year of the television film’s debut. Although China has been viewed as a “communist threat” ever since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, it was never figured as America’s primary adversary in Cold War and post-Cold War political rhetoric, the way the Soviet Union was. See Stephen Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, 2d ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1996).

As for Japan, the U.S. enjoyed a friendly alliance with that country from 1946—the date of the American Occupation in Japan—into the late 1970s. Even when Japan emerged as an economic power in the 1980s, relations between the two nations remained conciliatory in the first half of the decade. During this period, the Reagan administration sought Japanese support in its determination “to rebuild American defences and to confront the ‘challenges’ of the Soviet Union” and emphasized the “shared destiny” of the two as “true global partners.” This optimistic rhetoric eventually gave way to the popular view of Japan as an economic threat and unfair trading partner. See Roger Buckley, *U.S.-Japan Alliance Diplomacy, 1945–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 138–151, quotations from 140.

25. The American conception of Japan’s position in the world economic market is readily expressed in survey polls and popular press headlines, e.g., “The Pacific Century” (Bill Powell, *Newsweek*, 22 February 1988, 42–9). From the mid-1980s into the early 1990s, American political rhetoric increasingly figured economic relations with Japan as a nasty “battle,” a “challenge” in which the small island nation engaged in unfair play (e.g., imbalanced trade practice, investment binges, appropriating U.S. invention, political corruption, ecological exploitation). Japan’s style of “judo-economics” no longer appeared the model to emulate. Instead, “to our own selves be true”—America felt the need to “fight back” in its own way against “the seemingly unstoppable giant.” See Philip Elmer-DeWitt, “Battle for the Future,” *Time*, 16
While Japan was transformed into America’s economic adversary, China emerged as its political one. In 1989—a year that included the fall of the Berlin wall, as well as the Tiananmen massacre—a “giant, powerful, merciless China” was inaugurated. Richard Bernstein, in his analysis of “Hollywood’s Love Affair with Tibet,” remarks: “The answer [to why Tibet has become the cause du jour for celebrities and non-celebrities alike] has several factors. There is the ferocity of China’s actions in Tibet, and China’s status in the post-cold-war world as the most important large country still holding another land in subjugation” (B1). It is also interesting to note how this “cold war” has turned into one primarily fought on the playground of commercial representation; the conflict is no longer one expressed solely in terms of national interests (U.S. vs. China), but rather involves a multinational corporate ally (Disney vs. China). See Bernard Weintraub, “Disney Will Defy China on Its Dalai Lama Film,” New York Times, 27 November 1996, C9, and Jeffrey Ressner, “Disney’s China Policy,” Time, 9 December 1996, 60.


29. Ibid., 82.

Robert J. Thompson
CONSECRATING CONSUMER CULTURE

Christmas Television Specials

Until about ten years ago, God more or less stayed out of prime-time television. Religion could be found around the fringes of the broadcast schedule, on Sundays and early mornings, where televangelists, masses for shut-ins, and other low-budget devotional programs were mainstays of the syndicated lineup. Television’s big time, though, was prime time, and there you would find the most recognizable shows with the largest audiences and the biggest stars, but not much talk about God.

This was no cause for surprise. In an industry based on popularity and advertising revenue, network executives before the cable era were in the unenviable position of trying to please all of the people all of the time, or at least trying never to offend anyone. Even the mildest controversy was shunned in entertainment programming until the late 1960s. Television bosses took seriously the old saw that any talk about religion or politics would get you into trouble, so they avoided both. Gomer Pyle was a prime-time marine from 1964 to 1970 and he never once uttered the word “Vietnam”; Sister Bertrille, in her three-year novitiate at the Convent San Tanco, was never seen taking communion and seldom prayed. Even after shows like All in the Family (CBS, 1971–79) brought contemporary political issues into prime time in the early 1970s, the networks largely steered clear of religious material, with its talk of death and duty.

When television did present clergy as principal characters, there was always a dramatic twist or character quirk to divert attention away from the subject of religion itself, as in The Flying Nun (ABC, 1967–70). Father Murphy (NBC, 1981–84) was about a frontiersman who ran an orphanage in the Old West, but he was just posing as a priest so as not to lose the school’s funding. Trying to play against the stereotype of clerical piety, Hell Town (NBC, 1985) presented Robert Blake as an ex-convict priest, Amazing Grace (NBC, 1995) offered Patty Duke as an ex-drug addict minister, and In the Beginning (CBS, 1978) and Amen (NBC, 1986–91) brought us MacLean Stevenson and Sherman Hemsley as a pompous and unlikable priest and deacon, respectively. In Lanigan’s Rabbi (NBC, 1977) and The Father Dowling Mysteries (NBC/ABC, 1989–91), yarmulkes, collars, and habits did little more than dress up formulaic television mystery series.

Religious devotion was implicit on wholesome and comparatively unusual series like The Waltons (CBS, 1972–81) and Little House on the Prairie (NBC, 1974–83), and it even served as a foundation of sorts for the “I can walk again” melodramatics of Highway to Heaven (NBC, 1984–89), but in none of these shows—nor anywhere else, from when Bishop Fulton Sheen’s Life Is Worth Living (Dumont/ABC, 1952–57) left network television until very recently—did anything approaching a thoughtful discussion of the nature of God and our responsibilities toward that God appear during prime time.

Except at Christmas.

If, at most other times, talk about God was considered too delicate or solemn for the timid and escapist
mandates of network television, the Christmas season was a notable exception. From its earliest years, television, like radio before it, offered an assortment of special programming for the holiday. One of the most beloved broadcasts from the “golden age of television,” Amahl and the Night Visitors, was aired on Christmas Eve, 1951, launching the still running Hallmark Hall of Fame series. By the mid-1950s, the network schedules for the month of December were filled with special Christmas offerings and Christmas-themed episodes of regular series. This essay will concentrate on one of the most enduring types of special Christmas programming, the musical variety show, but most of what characterizes these programs also applies to other Christmas-themed shows.

The variety show was the dominant genre in the early years of network television. In the first seasons of the 1950s, well over half of the top-rated programs were musical variety series, most of which included extravagant Christmas-themed production numbers and comic sketches whenever the holidays rolled around. Even as the variety genre became nearly extinct in the early 1970s, leaving behind only a few remnants like The Carol Burnett Show (CBS, 1967–79) and The Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour (CBS, 1971–77), the form would enjoy a brief resurrection every December with a flood of Christmas variety specials. Golden Age veterans like Perry Como, Andy Williams, Bob Hope, and Bing Crosby returned to the air again in the weeks after Thanksgiving, establishing a new Christmas tradition.

Regardless of nineteenth- and twentieth-century mass culture’s attempts to reinvent Christmas as a secularized, national season of consumption in which everyone in the melting pot can participate, Christmas does remain a religious holiday, and Christmas television specials are built around a nexus of traditions devised to celebrate an important event in the modern Christian calendar. What gives Christmas television its overtly religious essence is the music. Christmas music constitutes a substantial body of work, and one that is crucial to the experience of the holiday. A Christmas show without traditional holiday music would be like a western without horses. One might argue, in fact, that the subject matter of most of the Christmas variety specials of the last three decades is relatively unvarying. An hour’s worth of the same old songs are simply repackaged with different stars in different geographical backdrops, from Johnny Cash’s Christmas in Scotland to John Denver’s Rocky Mountain Christmas to Dean Martin’s Christmas at Sea World.

Although the twentieth century has supplied a selection of secular standards about snow, Santa, and sleigh riding, many of the season’s favorite songs continue to be hymns, and the simple act of singing them in prime time is an unusually religious statement for the medium. The lyrics of “Silent Night,” “Joy to the World,” or any of the familiar Christmas hymns that are sung so frequently on television specials are strikingly explicit about religious belief compared to everything else in prime time during the rest of the year.

In weaving together material to present between songs, some Christmas variety specials come close to becoming Sunday school pageants. In 1980, Perry Como’s Christmas in the Holy Land, a musical–variety special that is still being rerun on the Family Channel, presents a re-creation of the Nativity, which Como introduces by saying, “We like telling this story because of what it says—and because we know it’s true.” In the same show, Richard Chamberlain dons New Testament garb and delivers the Beatitudes on the mountain where Biblical scholars speculate that Christ might have delivered them. He sits on the ground, children listen entranced, and we cannot help but see that Chamberlain, with his hair, beard, and cheekbones, looks a lot like Christ as we know Him through paintings, sculptures, and devotional images. (The unbridled hubris of this presentation makes the segment appear a little strange, almost as though Christ were one of the guest stars, there to do his number and get off, yielding the stage to the next guest. But having already seen Chamberlain in a plethora of historical roles in miniseries, seeing him as the Son of God is not as disorienting as it might have been.) Como wraps it all up with a rendering of Ave Maria.
performed with his unique brand of understated reverence.

Similarly, in the *Christmas in Washington* specials, which have aired annually since 1982, the separation of Church and State seems to be temporarily annulled. In one of the first of these specials in 1981, Ronald Reagan read the greeting-card poem “One Solitary Life,” a popular inspirational piece about the life of Christ. After emphasizing the veracity of the story, he intoned: “If we live our lives for Truth and Love, because that’s what He told us to do, and for God, we never have to be afraid. God will be with us. He’ll be a part of something larger, much stronger, and much more enduring than any force that has ever existed on Earth.” Not surprisingly for the early 1980s, the president celebrated only one aspect of Christianity here—the even-better-than-nuclear power of its God. In the 1995 installment of *Christmas in Washington*, President Clinton played a 1990s Democratic variation on the theme by calling Christmas a time when we celebrate “the birth of a homeless child whose only shelter was the straw of a manger.”

These sincere and explicit professions of belief, however, are fairly uncommon, even on Christmas specials. While for many years network executives did not seem terribly concerned about the lack of non-Christians on the shows they aired during the year, they did seem to be wary of alienating non-Christians with overtly Christian Christmas specials. Most of these programs are designed in the perhaps overly optimistic hope of appealing to those who grew up in traditional Christian homes as well as to those who did not.

One common way of attempting this is to secularize the presentations, and characters like Santa, Rudolph, and Frosty are enthusiastically employed toward this end. Many of the songs, images, and stories of Christmas are now safely secular, and many Christmas television shows choose to stick with these. The indictments of Scrooge, the Grinch, Rudolph’s exclusionary reindeer pals, and the people who tease little Virginia for believing in Santa communicate warm values associated with Christmas without the gravity of obvious religious belief. *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, which communicates a holiday “message” using characters that are not specific to any particular faith, is much more typical of network television than *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, which communicates a similar message by reading from the New Testament.

Granting religions equal time is another way Christmas programming tries to avoid estranging non-Christians. The Holy Land location of the Perry Como special mentioned above allowed Como to explore Jewish and Islamic traditions alongside his familiar renderings of Christmas carols and stories. In a similar vein, a 1995 Christmastime advertisement announced that “Whether it’s choirs or Kwaanza, you can count on the U.S. Postal Service to handle the holidays.”

Finally, producers often soften the religious content of the Christmas special by reading a religious theme into secular material. A striking example of this strategy occurred in the early 1980s in Anne Murray’s special, *Christmas in Nova Scotia*, on which she sang her hit song “You Needed Me.” Murray gives the viewer a verbal cue before she begins to sing: “This wasn’t written about Christmas,” she says with knowing solemnity, “but it could have been.” Right from the start, the audience is invited to hear a new message in the song. As she sings, she sings not to a lover, as the lyrics might have suggested (“I sold my soul, you bought it back again”), but to a beautifully panoramic Nova Scotia sunset, a sort of archetypically divine image, the kind of place one would go to pray. And casual attention to the lyrics reveals how easy it is to place a spiritual interpretation on the song. Yet those who do not want to take Anne up on her cue, “This wasn’t written about Christmas, but it could have been,” can just sit back and enjoy the piece as a popular song illustrated by pretty scenery.

Aside from hymn lyrics, practically none of the network Christmas programming is overtly Christian.
Instead, the specials contain the vague trappings associated in the popular imagination with religious life: traditional values, moral living, nostalgia. Christmas programming in general is nearly always characterized by a very heavy emphasis on the home and the extended family, and on the virtue of generosity. Together these are expressive of a faith which Americans—whether Christians, believers of other faiths, or secularists—share.

This American cultural Christmas is a perfect match for television. Christianity itself, a religion based on the word, not the image, and one which rejects wealth, acquisitiveness, and conspicuous consumption, is not well suited for a commercial medium like television, but Christianity as it is reconfigured in Christmas specials to match American expectations is a different story. By focusing on home, family, and generosity, Christmas specials create an uncomfortable emotional state that can easily be comforted by shopping, by patronizing the advertisers of the shows that made the viewer uncomfortable in the first place. This, in the end, is the genius of Christmas television.

The Christmas variety specials may be shot on locations all over the world, but, like most Christmas programming, they are obsessed with a nostalgic reverence for the idea of home and the family. Nearly every location in which a Christmas variety special takes place is somehow tied to the concept of home. Anne Murray went to Nova Scotia because it was where she had grown up, and there she was reunited with parents, aunts, and others in her family tree; Johnny Cash’s special returned to his ancestral roots in Scotland, where he too was surrounded by relatives; Perry Como’s *Christmas in Williamsburg* tried to identify that city with the collective roots of our country; Dolly Parton eschewed famous guest stars and cast her own friends and family in a special shot in her home town of Sevierville, Tennessee. This strategy continues into the 1990s. Kathy Lee Gifford’s entire family gathered around the fireplace and the tree for a special set right in her own house in Colorado, in 1995’s *Kathy Lee: Home for Christmas*, and Martha Stewart enlisted the help of her sister and mother in her 1995 special, *Martha Stewart: Home for the Holidays*, shot in her tastefully decorated home. The hearth as well, an archaic symbol of home, still appears over and over in Christmas variety specials, usually with a large family (biological, institutional, or otherwise) singing around it.

This validation and affirmation of a mostly outmoded view of the family has significance beyond mere nostalgia, however. What Anne Roiphe wrote in *The New York Times* about *The Waltons*, one of the key precedents for this type of nostalgia, applies as well to most Christmas television:

> [W]e identify with the Walton family . . . not so much from recognition as imagination or mythical cultural memories of the way it ought to be. Since we think of ourselves as outsiders and we wish we were part of the cohesive, good, happy family, we eagerly sink into the story, two sides of ourselves playing against each other, and in the end we feel pleasurably sad—even though, of course, everything has turned out all right. We are sad because we know things aren’t that way at all and yet we’re not angry or provoked because we’ve enjoyed playing around with the images of family life as they might be (we determine, not consciously, to bring our own families closer together), and as with New Year’s resolutions the lack of accomplishment is nothing compared to the sincerity of the attempt.³

Dinah Shore, who hosted one of the *Christmas in Washington* specials, unwittingly demonstrated some consciousness of the ephemeral nature of the resolutions Roiphe writes about when, at the end of the show, she invited everyone to sing along “while the glow is still upon us.” That “glow,” of course, is not only the glow of the “Christmas spirit” but a glow of guilt. These television shows suggest that maybe Christmas spirit is guilt—a temporary, annual, emotional affliction awakened and encouraged by the programs themselves. Television Christmas specials provide the means by which this emotional phenomenon can be harnessed and used for enormous profits. Right after the broadcast of Perry Como’s *Christmas in Paris*, following the show’s touching finale, a commercial for a national flower delivery service
suggested that viewers send a gift of flowers to loved ones by phoning in an order now. The company’s advertising agency must have recognized the fleeting nature of the spirit a Christmas special can generate, and they wanted to get our Visa or MasterCard numbers “while the glow [was] still upon us.”

This brings us to another defining characteristic of the genre: Christmas television shows are tumescent with presents. Many of the traditions and stories of Christmas have been adapted to support one mandate: the expenditure of capital. The Magi brought gifts to Christ, Santa Claus brings gifts to everyone, and the very definition of a “scrooge” comes from the character in the most well known semi-secular Christmas tale of all, whose hellish descent into his own id is caused by his unwillingness to spot Bob Cratchett a few shillings until payday. After his visits from the ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Future, Scrooge is redeemed only when he wakes up and starts tossing money around like there was no Christmas Tomorrow. Nearly every television series, from Mr. Magoo (NBC, 1962–65) to Family Ties (NBC, 1982–89) to Melrose Place (Fox, 1992–), has done an episode based on the Dickens classic, and nearly all dramatic Christmas specials resonate with the spirit of giving. On the variety specials, stories are told and songs are sung about giving: gifts are ceaselessly distributed to cast and crew; guest stars frequently make their exits, after performing, with excuses that they have shopping to do. Scripts from the old Perry Como specials reveal a sequence called the “Gifts Montage,” in which Perry’s sack of presents runneth over. The preponderance of children in Christmas variety specials should be understood in this context: they sing, they decorate trees, but most of all they get presents. Most Christmas television demonstrates that kids like to toys, and lots of them, and that we should plan our shopping strategies accordingly. Whether representing frankincense or a sausage basket from Hickory Farms, the mythopoetics of Christmas’s cultural traditions have systematically conditioned most Americans to give until it hurts.

In an ingenious sleight of hand, then, popular Christmas stories encourage the purchasing of gifts at the same time they preach of how unimportant material things are. From the Protestant work ethic, which kept pious noses to unrelenting grindstones, to church dress codes, which provided milliners with annual windfalls from the sales of expensive Easter bonnets, Christianity has a long history of being an effective lubricant of the American economic machine. The tradition goes so deep that few recognize the contradiction, even in utter non sequiturs like this coffee advertisement from December, 1995: “As long as the best gifts come without ribbons or tags, Maxwell House will be good to the last drop.”

Thematically, these programs set the tone for the commercials within them. Nearly all of the advertisements are designed especially for the season, ready to cash in on the special “glow” that Dinah Shore invoked and that the show tries to create, and featuring the same elements that are in the show’s themselves: hearths, families, and emotional, guilt-inspiring incentives to buy. A few years ago, for example, a commercial for a greeting-card company opened with the image of a sweet but very lonely looking old woman sitting on a rocking chair, knitting pathetically. A narrator then offered the interrogative, “Remember Aunt Hildy? She made your first party dress. We wonder who you forgot to remember this year.” Hallmark’s “When You Care Enough to Send the Very Best,” when packaged in a special Christmas commercial, implies an aggressive challenge: “Do You Care Enough to Send the Very Best?” Even the Public Broadcasting System, a supposedly noncommercial venue, has shamelessly used this strategy. After the PBS station in Chicago aired a musical special, A Pavorotti Christmas, an announcer broke in as the end credits played, asking, “Now that you have been inspired by the spirit of giving, why not call and pledge your support to Channel 11?”

The connection between shows and their commercials goes even deeper, however. In 1980, the Christmas in Washington special played an audio tape of Winston Churchill from December, 1941, in which
Churchill addressed the problem of how people might get in the mood to give gifts with a war on: “Let the children have their night of fun and laughter,” Churchill said. “Let the gifts of Father Christmas delight their play. Resolve that by our sacrifice and daring these children shall not be robbed of their inheritance or denied their right to live in a free and decent world.” This comment elevated gift giving to a symbolic prerequisite for living in a free land. And if Churchill’s listeners could buy gifts less than three weeks after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, surely a mere recession shouldn’t stop us.

In short, commercials thrive in the healthy environment that Christmas television provides. The shows are designed to appeal to many people, and the moods they set are those that will open wallets as well as hearts. The old complaint that “Christmas is too commercial” is a tired cliché, and the claim that “television is commercial” is redundant, but the identity between these two statements is significant. In contemporary American society, the style of Christmas and the style of television are both dictated by consumption.

This was not always the case. Some of the programming of television’s “golden age” was serious and moving enough to make the commercial interruptions seem trivial and ridiculous. Other shows were so well liked that sponsors worried that the commercials would get lost in the enthusiastic response. Television critic Mark Crispin Miller points out that commercials are most effective when their messages “are not overshadowed, contradicted, or otherwise threatened by programming that is too noticeably different from the ads,” and he cites an ABC executive who wrote that television must attract huge audiences, but must do so without emotionally moving viewers so much that the shows “will interfere with their ability to receive, recall, and respond to the commercial message.”

At Christmas, such interference is seldom a problem. The message of the program and the message of the commercials are identical, right down to the music and symbols and characters they each employ. Will the lovers on “The Gift of the Magi” sell their hair and watch for combs and a watch chain? Will the indebted son “reach out and touch” his mother over AT&T lines? They’re both the same question.

Once a year, the so-called crass commercialism of television is justified. The advertisements continue to interrupt the programs the same as ever, but the messages are sacred ones. Business as usual is absolved—indeed sanctified—when surrounded by the icons of a holiday which identifies the purchasing of gifts with the achievement of spiritual grace. Television can afford to be reverent at a time of the year when reverence and spirituality take on a consumerist mandate. If the program presents the problem (greed, selfishness, lack of “Christmas spirit”), the advertisements provide the solutions (buy presents, send greeting cards). The consistent popularity of the Christmas television special might be due, at least in part, to the fact that at no other time do the dramatic and thematic features of the commercials line up so nicely with those of the programs.

As sleazy as this all sounds, though, good things are possible in this profitable bonanza of the ecumenical-industrial complex. Santa, Scrooge, and shopping, while effectively harnessed by national advertisers, also carry messages not entirely hostile to the Christian system. While filled with commands to buy, network television is also filled, for an entire month every winter, with stories and songs that ask us to be nice, not naughty. The messages are for the most part terribly unsophisticated, but they are also a lot kinder and gentler than in the rest of the year. The Grinch, Santa Claus, and even Perry Como can suggest a crude first step in a direction seldom encouraged by television. “For all the billions of dollars in sales that the modern Christmas generates,” Leigh Eric Schmidt writes, we should acknowledge the bathwater as well as the baby: “the holiday bazaar has remained a realm of contest, not fiat, a place of disaffection and estrangement as well as joy and excitement, a site of not a little ambivalence, paradox, and contradiction.”
It is hard to predict the future of Christmas programming. Despite the growing number of cable channels catering to specialized musical tastes, the network musical variety show is still holding its own each December. The first generation of classic Christmas hosts has been replaced by a new group that includes Kathy Lee Gifford, Martha Stewart, and Vanessa Williams, but the format of the shows is usually strikingly similar to what we have been seeing for decades.

Christmas television is no longer the only place to see religion on prime time, however. In March, 1997, TV Guide ran an extensive cover story on “Prime Time’s Search for God,” but the trend had been in place for several years before that, most notably in CBS’s Touched by an Angel (1994–) and its spinoff, Promised Land (1996–). Both of these shows remain firmly in the Highway to Heaven tradition while at the same time presenting more aggressively religious content.

Surprisingly enough, however, the most innovative use of religion in prime time is now found not in family oriented shows but in series “for mature audiences.” The same circumstances that introduced “adult” language, explicit sexuality, and controversial subject matter to prime-time television have, paradoxically, brought religion along as well. Around 1980, with the increased competition brought on by cable and wireless remote control, prime-time network television started to scramble for something new, to keep its viewers from defecting to the vast assortment of choices suddenly available to them. Networks started looking for programs that were different, programs that would arrest the fickle channel surfer. In an attempt to entice an audience that was shrinking rapidly throughout the 1980s, network executives began searching for programming that would break the very rules that they had been enforcing for decades.

As the creators of television searched for new and original ideas, for something that had not been done before, religion loomed as one of the final frontiers. It provided virgin narrative territory, it had the potential to appeal to a wide variety of audiences, and it was easily integrated into standard genres like cop shows and medical dramas, where a character’s confrontation with the meaning and purpose of God’s will could be seamlessly incorporated into the life-and-death situations that are so frequent in these programs. St. Elsewhere (NBC, 1982–88) flirted with some heady religious discussions, as did thirtysomething (ABC, 1987–91), and Northern Exposure (CBS, 1990–95) employed spirituality as one of its central themes. Picket Fences (CBS, 1992–96) went the furthest, however, featuring both a doctor and a cop among its principal characters, but more concerned with God and religion than with solving crime or saving lives. Rather than the vague, “natural” religion of Northern Exposure, Picket Fences actually treated issues of doctrine: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Mormon, Christian Scientist, and more. The show included clergy—two of them—in the regular cast of characters. Hardly an episode went by without a mention of God, and often religion was at the center of the story: detailed discussions centering around lapses in faith; the nature of prayer; the extent to which the stories in the Bible are literally “true”; the place of miracles in the mind of a modern, thinking Christian; even the sign of the stigmata.

With the possible exception of The Simpsons (Fox, 1989–), the subject of religion has not made as much headway into comedy—Norman Lear’s Sunday Dinner (CBS) lasted only a month in 1991—but in serious dramatic programs it has become almost a defining feature of the genre. Homicide: Life on the Street (NBC, 1993–1999) and Chicago Hope (CBS, 1994–) rely especially heavily on these stories, and Christ was portrayed as a character on an episode of NYPD Blue (ABC, 1993–). Oz (HBO, 1997–), the television series that has gone the furthest to date in its portrayal of graphic violence and “adult” language, features a Muslim leader and a prison chaplain as principal characters, and frequently confronts complex religious questions and problems. That television’s most serious, we might even go so far as to say reverent,
Discussions of religion are being held right next to scenes featuring on-screen rape proves once again that American popular culture is full of surprises.

Turf to which Christmas specials used to have an exclusive claim is now being occupied all year long by regular series programming. Unlike the Christmas specials, however, which for the most part stripped religion of all but its most market-friendly elements, some of this new programming is slouching toward a real and mature conversation about the nature of God.

NOTES

1. A quick overview of this programming can be found in the second chapter of Steve Bruce, Pray TV: Televangelism in America (London: Routledge, 1990), 24–53.


5. Schmidt, Consumer Rites, 191.

Jennie S. Knight
The Da Vinci Code by Dan Brown and The Secret Life of Bees by Sue Monk Kidd have both been on the New York Times best-seller list for more than one and a half years for several reasons. Both books are exceptionally well-written. They both tell engaging, even riveting, stories. They both engage controversial issues such as sexism and racism. However, there are many well-written, engaging stories that address these issues that do not gain the widespread popularity, often passionate allegiance and word-of-mouth advertising that these novels have. It is my contention that they are both so widely popular because they offer new myths of the divine feminine within a Christian symbol system. They allow readers from a Christian background to image the divine as feminine through icons of their own tradition, rather than through goddesses from traditions perceived as alien to Christianity. This opening to new images of the divine as feminine, mediated through popular fiction, has profound implications for Christian spirituality and practice.

In The Da Vinci Code, Brown tells a compelling, mysterious tale of Mary Magdalene as the lost Goddess, who has been suppressed throughout Judeo-Christian history, but never fully eradicated. The main character is a “symbologist” from Harvard University and is therefore often mistakenly seen as a completely trustworthy source of information for many devoted readers. He and others associated with him argue that Mary Magdalene was married to Jesus and bore his child. Drawing on the Gnostic Gospels, particularly the Gospel of Mary Magdalene, they explain that she was Jesus’ closest disciple, the one to whom Jesus gave secret instructions about establishing the church. The early Christian community that abided by those teachings worshipped the divine as both Mother and Father, as both feminine and masculine. In the novel, Mary Magdalene is the Holy Grail. The “symbologist,” Robert Langdon, argues that the symbol for the Holy Grail, which looks like a chalice or a cup, is the ancient symbol both for women and for the Goddess. Langdon’s friend, Leigh Teabing, a devotee of the Grail, explains that Mary Magdalene represents the suppressed feminine in Christianity, on both human and divine levels. Thus the image of the Grail as a chalice is a metaphor for Mary Magdalene. Teabing argues that the quest for the Holy Grail, therefore, is actually the quest for the tomb of Mary Magdalene, where one could “pray at the feet of the outcast one, the lost sacred feminine.” In the mythology that Brown creates in his novel, drawing sometimes on respected scholarship of religion, while at other times playing quite loosely with the history of Christianity, Mary Magdalene comes to represent not only the human wife of Jesus, but also the Goddess herself.

In The Secret Life of Bees, Sue Monk Kidd creates a myth about a particular Black Madonna that is worshipped by a community of African American women in segregated South Carolina in the 1950s and
1960s. She draws upon stories of the Black Madonna in Brazil, Poland, and other sites where a particular statue or icon of the Black Madonna has come to represent the solidarity of the divine Mother with those who are oppressed. From these stories of actual worship of the Black Madonna, she creates a new story of a statue of the Black Madonna who has been worshipped by this African American community since slavery. She is called “Our Lady of Chains” because, as the story goes, she broke free from her chains when the slave master tried to keep her chained up away from the slaves. She serves as a symbol of hope and resistance, inspiring many to escape from slavery and many others to live “with a raised fist in their hearts.” Kidd weaves this story of the Black Madonna into a larger story of a young white girl trying to heal from the tragic loss of her own mother and develops an overarching metaphor of the lives of bees, who cannot live without their queen.

The popularity of both books coincides with the growing intensity of movements in the United States to re-image the divine as feminine, both within and outside Christian contexts. Neopaganism, much of which involves worship of “the Goddess,” as well as multiple gods and goddesses, is a fast-growing religious movement in the United States. In her book Living in the Lap of the Goddess, Cynthia Eller documents and analyzes the feminist spirituality movement, much of which is neopagan. She focuses almost exclusively on people who have left behind the traditional religions of their childhoods, usually Christianity and Judaism. These women have sought spiritual communities that affirm their feminism, especially through representing the divine as female. As a result, a particularly feminist spirituality has evolved out of feminist adaptations of neopagan beliefs and practices, as well as out of appropriations of Asian religions, Native American religions, and African religions. In defining feminist spirituality, Eller says, “Feminist spirituality is unique in its determination to remain true to the concerns of women, both politically and spiritually. And it is religiously innovative, always pushing beyond tradition, and often leaving it altogether in its search for spiritual resources that will prove powerful and transforming for women.” For most of the women that Eller interviewed, their discovery of feminism led to their break with Christianity and Judaism.

CHRISTIAN FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY MOVEMENT

However, there is also a large population of women who do not feel that leaving the religion of their family and community behind is a viable option. They are profoundly attached to their tradition, even while they recognize the harm that it has done and continues to do to them as women, both through discriminatory beliefs and practices as well as through exclusively male God-language and imagery. There is a growing movement of feminist Christian women who are passionate about re-imaging the divine as feminine. Many of them participate in extra-church feminist spirituality centers or women’s spirituality groups while also struggling to participate in Christian churches, most of which still use exclusively male language and imagery for the divine. I have been interviewing women from an extra-church nonprofit organization in Atlanta that provides study of feminist theology as well as feminist rituals for Christian laywomen. It is one of a growing number of such centers throughout the United States, all of which were founded and are directed by women clergy from a variety of Protestant denominations or by Catholic nuns.

In addition to my research, a comprehensive study of approximately 4,000 women involved in Christian feminist spirituality groups entitled Defecting in Place: Women Claiming Responsibility for Their Own Spiritual Lives, was conducted by Miriam Therese Winter, Adair Lummis, and Allison Stokes in the early 1990s. At
the time of their study, the Christian feminist spirituality movement involved almost exclusively small, informal groups. The growing number of Christian feminist nonprofit centers today demonstrates that this movement has gained stability and strength. For many of these women, the tension between their feminism and the masculine language and imagery in their churches is excruciating. Most of them feel alone in their congregations and afraid to speak out about their feminist convictions. They wonder if they are “crazy” for having questions and often blame themselves for being different from the apparent norm in their faith communities. They experience profound tension in their relationships with their churches, often using language such as “one foot in, one foot out,” “back and forth,” and “push-pull” to describe their relationship with the institutional church. Each woman in the Christian feminist spirituality movement works continually to resolve that tension in her own creative ways. Women’s spirituality groups and Christian feminist spirituality centers provide a “safe place”—a phrase used repeatedly by the women I have interviewed—to voice their questions, frustration, and pain and to explore a new, more life-giving spirituality among other like-minded and like-spirited women. For many women, these safe places allow them to continue their relationships with their churches.

LONG, SLOW PROCESS OF RE-IMAGING

All of the women I have interviewed and many women quoted in Defecting in Place find that it is a long, slow, difficult process to challenge their own internalized male image for God. Even when they have embraced a feminine image for the divine, they find that when they go to pray, a male image, usually white, with a beard (kind of a combination of Santa Claus and Charlton Heston as Moses in Cecil B. DeMille’s film The Ten Commandments) is there to greet them. One woman explained in her questionnaire response for Defecting in Place: “While my image of God is definitely expanding to include the feminine, I can’t say I’m totally comfortable with it yet. It’s difficult to let go of what has been culturally engrained for years.” A Presbyterian minister in her thirties from the Southeast offered, “God ‘the father’ still dominates my image of God, even though I try very much to change that to a more female image. I regret that my gut-feeling image of God is male. Intellectually, I reject a completely male image of God, but twenty years of indoctrination is hard to overcome.” One woman I interviewed, whom I will call Julie, told me that she had grown up actively trying not to image God. She grew up in a feminist, activist household, and she knew that the white, male God that she saw in cultural images and that she heard about in church was not an adequate image for the divine. Yet, she finds that now, when she prays, there He is. Her years of worship in the Episcopal Church, with its exclusively masculine language and imagery, engrained in her a deep emotional image of God as male and white.

Julie explained that it is not enough to endorse intellectually multiple images for the divine as feminine and as represented in nature. She explained that her relationship with the male God had developed over years of rituals and stories in church that evoked Him as her God. Therefore, intellectual, academic feminist theologies/or theologies cannot do the work of dislodging the deeply rooted white male image. She explained:

I don’t have the years of story to go along with the Goddess. So, it’s kind of like thinking of a picture of someone you don’t know, you know . . . I find it really refreshing and just easier on me to have the gender neutral language or language that is actually feminine and looking at ways that God is female, but it feels very intellectual to me still and not in my heart. I think it will probably take years of those kinds of rituals to create in me a real sense of the divine that’s feminine or without this very paternalistic side.
While the maleness and whiteness of God can be challenged effectively through intellectual theological analysis—and feminist theologies have been a main source of inspiration and impetus for the Christian feminist spirituality movement—they are not adequate for doing the deep work of transforming internalized images of the divine that are evoked in ritual and in story. Transformation requires new rituals and stories that evoke new images for the divine, as well as critical reflection about internalized childhood images.

STORIES AND RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION

It is for this reason that the stories of the divine feminine in The Da Vinci Code and The Secret Life of Bees are being received as so profound. They allow readers to engage imaginatively and emotionally with particular manifestations of the divine as feminine, and, in the case of The Secret Life of Bees, as black. Eller explains that almost all of the women in the feminist spirituality movement first learned about the divine feminine from books. For many readers, these novels are their first introduction to stories of the divine feminine within Christianity. For example, a woman in my Baptist church recommended that we start an adult Sunday School class about the divine feminine after reading The Da Vinci Code. Reading the novel had awakened in her a passionate curiosity about the topic. When we first assembled the class, most class members had not read any feminist theology. However, many of them had read these two novels, as well as Sue Monk Kidd’s autobiographical account of her awakening to the divine feminine entitled The Dance of the Dissident Daughter. These books became our starting points for discussions in relation to class members’ own experiences and spirituality. The novels and Kidd’s memoir provided them with stories of the divine feminine in relation to Christianity. They challenged them to question the exclusively male language and imagery in their tradition and the effects that this exclusivity has had on their lives. At the same time, they allowed them to imagine the divine through the lenses of their experiences as women.

As these examples demonstrate, the genre of popular fiction is more accessible and appeals to a wider audience than books in religious studies, yet it can have a similarly life-changing effect. Fiction also allows readers to engage imaginatively with the images of the divine feminine without having to claim any “belief” in the images presented. Like the women I interviewed, many Christian readers initially might be afraid to admit that they are inspired by feminine images for the divine or to challenge the teachings of their churches. However, when engaging these images in fiction, they are in a “safe place” of imagination. For example, one woman recounted that her eighty-four-year-old, staunchly Southern Baptist, white, anti-feminist mother “loved” The Secret Life of Bees. In spite of herself, she was deeply moved by the story of a young, Euro-American girl finding her spiritual home in worship of a black female image for the divine.

Imaginative engagement with alternative images can have a profound iconoclastic effect. For women who previously have been unable to see themselves as created in the image of a white, male God, the introduction of imagery of the divine as feminine and as black can have a powerful impact on their self-image, spirituality, and patterns of relating with other people and with the divine. My interviews with Christian feminist women confirm this. One woman I interviewed, whom I will call Marie, described how her first introduction to feminine language for the divine in seminary led her to explore corresponding feminine imagery in her spiritual practices. She discovered that she not only experienced a more intimate relationship with the divine but also came to experience herself as representative of the divine. Through identifying God as Mother with her own experiences of mothering young daughters, she
recognized that her previously held male image of God, taken largely from characteristics of her own father, as well as from the cultural image of the royal, white male God, had not allowed for the kind of intimate relationship that she experienced with her own children. Marie explained:

I remember in my prayer life, trying to think about the things that I would think about as a mother of a child. And to try to understand God’s love for me as I love and was intimate with my children. You know everything about your little baby. When they’ve got a dirty diaper, when they need to eat. It is an amazingly intimate relationship when you have a young child. And there had never been any images, for me, of my relationship to God that would have that kind of intimacy. Because God was distant and had a throne and was difficult to approach... never changing diapers, and never cleaned up anybody’s throw-up. And so, to somehow value my relationship with my children and to use parental-child language, which is readily available between Jesus and God as father and son, but to begin to see this as mother and daughter. That just opened up a whole new identification of myself—of myself—as God-person. Because I was representing God to my child. I was the one that was taking care... I gave my child life, I took care of my child, I fed my child with my own body. But also, some kind of understanding of how I might relate to God and God might relate to me, if God were mother instead of father.

Through re-imaging the divine as mother, she experienced transformation in her self-image, her relationship with the divine, and her understanding of her relationship with her children. She began to honor herself as truly representative of divine love to her children, and, through that realization, recognized the possibility of a new level of intimacy between herself and God.

RE-MYTHOLOGIZING THE DIVINE FEMININE IN FICTION

The feminist spirituality movement is characterized by a freedom to imagine and to experience the divine in multiple forms. Laurel Schneider explains in Re-Imagining the Divine that practitioners of feminist spirituality experience the divine feminine as profoundly real even while recognizing the role of imagination and the limitations of images. They recognize that the divine is ultimately a mystery larger than any one image can contain. However, they also experience divine presence as mediated through particular imaginative forms. This paradoxical understanding of images of the divine feminine is reflected in the myths by Brown and Kidd—and is why I characterize their work as “re-mythologizing.” The genre of mythic storytelling in both The Da Vinci Code and The Secret Life of Bees allows for freedom of the imagination while at the same time evoking spiritual insights, much like feminist spirituality. Because of the absence of the divine feminine—particularly in Protestant Christianity (Catholic practice at least involves prayer to Mary and female saints, while Protestantism does not)—popular fiction authors such as Brown and Kidd, like practitioners of feminist spirituality, are engaged in creating new myths of the divine feminine.

Christian feminists who long for stories of the divine as feminine within Christianity are frustrated to find so few references within the books of the Bible considered the “canon.” While many historical details are misrepresented in The Da Vinci Code, the assertion that early Christian writings that referred to God as both Mother and Father, as both feminine and masculine, were suppressed and excluded from the scriptural canon by the communities that considered themselves “orthodox” is correct. Elaine Pagels explains in The Gnostic Gospels that many early Christians believed that “the divine is to be understood in terms of a harmonious, dynamic relationship of opposites—a concept that may be akin to the Eastern view of yin and yang, but remains alien to orthodox Judaism and Christianity.” Others referred to the Holy Spirit as the divine Mother, while others preferred to refer to the feminine aspect of the divine as Holy Wisdom, or Sophia. Pagels argues that every one of the texts revered by these early Christian groups (known as gnostic Christians), was excluded from the New Testament. She explains, “By the time the
process of sorting the various writings ended—probably as late as the year 200—virtually all the feminine imagery for God had disappeared from orthodox Christian tradition.” She argues that this was largely politically motivated; by the year 200, the majority of orthodox church leaders wanted to create a church more adaptable to the larger culture, in which women were subservient to men, and in which men, and not women, were seen as created in the image of an exclusively male God. While references to Sophia remain in some canonical scriptures (fewer in Protestant scriptures than in Catholic), her significance as a symbol of the female personification of God has been ignored until recent feminist retrievals. Christian practice does not allow for additions to the scriptural canon through commentary in the way that Judaism allows for the ongoing revelation of God through the Talmud. Therefore, contemporary Christians are left with scant references to or stories of the divine as feminine within Christian scripture. As a result, fictional writings about the divine feminine carry powerful significance. They offer new myths of the divine feminine when scripture does not.

In her book *Models of God*, feminist theologian Sallie McFague urges theologians to re-mythologize theological concepts so that they can provide new metaphors and images for the divine that are relevant to contemporary concerns about ecological and gender justice. She explores images for God such as lover, mother, and friend, and of the world as God’s body, each of which carries particular emotional and symbolic meanings that she wishes to symbolize about God’s relationship with the world. She argues:

One of the serious deficiencies in contemporary theology is that though theologians have attempted to interpret the faith in new concepts appropriate to our time, the basic metaphors and models have remained relatively constant; they are triumphalist, monarchical, patriarchal. Much deconstruction of the traditional imagery has taken place, but little construction. . . . The refusal to deal with the constructive task results in either a return to anachronistic models—a conservative retreat—or a move away from all images toward abstract language. The first ghettoizes Christianity; the other renders it sterile. In this situation, one thing that is needed . . . is a re-mythologizing of the relationship between God and the world.

In spite of her passionate call for re-mythologizing through new images, however, her discussions of the different “models” of mother, lover, friend, and body remain analytical and abstract. Because McFague carries out her theological project within the conventions of the discipline of systematic theology, her theological writing fails to provide embodied, mythical stories of particular images in the way that fictional writings can. Therefore, I believe that stories convey the meaning of “re-mythologizing” more adequately than academic, abstract writing can.

### THE DIVINE FEMININE EMBODIED

Both novels reflect central themes of the feminist spirituality movement. They represent the divine feminine as both internal and external, as embodied within human women, while at the same time larger than a particular woman can embody. In *The Da Vinci Code*, the symbologist explains a myth that women embody the divine through their ability to bear children. Men can only touch the divine feminine and realize spiritual wholeness through sexual union with a woman. At the same time, the “Goddess” represents a divine feminine that is larger than just one woman can convey. It is the larger feminine principle of divinity that is balanced by the masculine.

In *The Secret Life of Bees*, the Black Madonna is represented within a particular black female image, yet she is also understood to be within all of creation and all people. The leader of the community of women, named August, explains that, while the “spirit of Mary” is concentrated in the statue, her spirit is also
everywhere—“inside rocks and trees, and even people.” She goes on to tell Lily, the young protagonist, that Mary lives within her own heart as both power and love. She explains:

When you’re unsure of yourself, when you start pulling back into doubt and small living, she’s the one inside you saying “Get up from there and live like the glorious girl you are.” She’s the power inside of you, you understand? . . . And whatever it is that keeps widening your heart, that’s Mary too, not only the power inside you but the love . . . This Mary I’m talking about sits in your heart all day long, saying “Lily, you are my everlasting home. Don’t you ever be afraid. You are enough. We are enough.”

This panentheistic view of the divine as both embodied within women (and within all of creation) and, at the same time, larger than creation, represents the spirituality and “thealogy” of the Christian feminist spirituality movement. The belief that the divine is embodied within women, and therefore can be represented through female images—yet is also always larger than any one image can convey—allows women to experience themselves as in the divine image in a way that they were unable to with only male images.

In addition, imaging the divine as feminine allows women to experience the divine as present within themselves and in others, rather than as completely external and “other” in relation to their experiences. Exclusively male God-language leaves women feeling that God is only external to them. One woman I interviewed, whom I will call Rosalyn, explained that imaging the divine as feminine, and as immanent within (as well as greater than) all of creation, allowed her to recognize that she is working in cooperation with Spirit rather than in conflict with an external male deity. She explained:

Imaging that’s more internal has to do with felt and known experiences as opposed to experiences that you may be imagining or receiving from somewhere else. . . . As there are other divine feminine images, it does seem like there’s more of a natural valuing of one’s own experience instead of trying to constantly fit your experience into what it’s supposed to be. That, as there are more of those images available, it’s more of a trusting that what I feel and what I experience and what I know may be in cooperation with the Spirit, as opposed to being something other.

Before imaging the divine as feminine, she had struggled with the feeling that an external, demanding male God wanted her to do something difficult with her life—something contrary to the urging of her internal voice and sense of vocation. She felt that her passions and concerns were in conflict with God’s will for her life. After recognizing the divine feminine as working within herself and in others, she now honors her feelings, experiences, and passions, and trusts that the divine is working in cooperation with her.

Cynthia Eller writes that “feminist spirituality’s unique contribution to individual women is empowerment, and empowerment in a particular form: empowerment as a woman.” She explains that this empowerment is largely found through identification with the Goddess. While the women that I interviewed experience empowerment in recognizing the divine within themselves and in seeing themselves as reflective of the divine image, they also recognized that, in seeing power as the primary characteristic of divinity, they had denied the other divine attributes that remind them more of the women in their lives. They realized that their image of the divine needed not only to include power and strength, but also vulnerability, compassion, love, beauty, and creativity. Several women reflected that they had devalued their own mothers’ creative work in providing beauty in the home for their families or in daily, intimate nurturance of their children. In re-imaging the divine as feminine, they are now incorporating characteristics that they associate more with the women in their lives, and in doing so, are honoring those women and themselves. As Marie recounted, feminine imagery allowed her to see God as interested in creating “butterflies and babies’ eyelashes” in addition to the work of creating majestic mountains. Eller reflects:
Part of the reason spiritual feminists keep coming back to female imagery (apart from its obvious feminist appeal) is that the goddess is representative of many qualities that have long been regarded as “feminine,” not only by spiritual feminists or their comrades in the alternative religious tradition, but by Western society in general. The nexus of values gathered around the goddess’s skirts include the sanctity of nature, the earth and the moon, the life of the body, and sexuality. The goddess is a deity that is close to hearth and home, who cycles with the seasons, whose presence is tangible in things that traditional religions have considered profane. She is a deity that bestows respect and admiration upon the spheres women have traditionally occupied. She is an invitation to human women to proudly claim a special female identification with nature and the body, with sexuality and childbirth, and to see this as a source of women’s strength rather than their weakness. Her femaleness is not solely a matter of biological sex (or some spiritual counterpart), but is an identification with things denigrated as feminine and an opposition to ideals uplifted as manly.  

The purpose of feminist spirituality is not to essentialize these characteristics as more feminine than masculine. However, because they have been associated with women—and thus devalued—for millennia, raising them up as representative of divine creativity and being gives value to these aspects of women’s (and men’s) lives.

“RACE” AND RE-IMAGING THE DIVINE

Imaging the divine as feminine can be empowering for women. In addition, however, any image that is gendered is also “raced” in a highly racialized culture like the United States. To image the divine as black as well as feminine can be particularly empowering for black women. In The Secret Life of Bees, Lily asks August why she puts a picture of the Black Madonna on the labels for the jars of honey that she and her sisters sell. August explains that the Black Madonna image demonstrated to the women for the first time that “what’s divine can come in dark skin.” She explains that it was a powerful experience for them to recognize that they were in fact in the image of God and that God could be imagined like them. She says, “You see, everybody needs a God who looks like them, Lily.”

In Western culture, where the divine has been represented as a white man, to image the divine as a black woman is a powerful reversal. However, when white Americans or Europeans re-image the divine as both black and feminine, there is a danger of re-inscribing racist stereotypes of black women that are pervasive in the culture. In the United States, stereotypes of black women as self-sacrificing Mammy figures, as “earth mothers,” as “strong black women,”—stronger and more powerful than white women in spite of their actual lack of social and political power in relation to white women—or as highly sexualized, can influence the white imagination when imaging the divine as a Black Madonna or Goddess. All of these stereotypes of black women, based upon their forced roles during slavery, are still very alive in U.S. culture. Delores Williams explains:

From the mammy tradition has emerged the image of black women as perpetual mother figures—religious, fat, asexual, loving children better than themselves, self-sacrificing, giving up self-concern for group advancement. . . . The antebellum tradition of masculinizing black women by means of their work has given rise to the idea that black women are not feminine and do not desire to be so.

In addition, she argues, the masculinization of female slaves was justified by the slaveholders’ attitudes that “blacks could stand any kind of labor, could not be overworked and were ‘comparatively insensitive to the sufferings that would be unbearable to whites.’” This has led to the stereotype of black women as “superwomen,” with significantly greater physical strength and capacity to bear pain than white women. This stereotype of the superwoman or “strong black woman” has caused many black women to be isolated
in their vulnerability and pain. Because they are expected to be strong, the larger culture does not provide them with proper resources and opportunities to be vulnerable and to receive much-needed support to overcome the many wounds from racist, sexist oppression as well as from other life struggles.  

In addition to the images of black women as the strong black woman or as self-sacrificing mother, the stereotype of black women as over-sexed also results in the denial of the vulnerability, full humanity, and legal protections for black women. Williams explains that the stereotype of black women as “Jezebels”—as highly sexed and more sexual than white women—resulted from the inability of slave women to refuse sexual violation by their white slaveowners. She argues:

One of the most prevalent images of black women today has its roots in the antebellum slave-woman/slave-master sexual liaison. Black women as “loose, over-sexed, erotic, readily responsive to the sexual advances of men, especially white men” derives from the antebellum southern way to putting the responsibility for this sexual liaison upon “immoral” slave women—black females whose “passionate” nature was supposed to have stemmed from their African heritage.  

She cites bell hooks’s argument that “this kind of white, antebellum image-making about black women’s sexuality has contributed greatly to the process of devaluing black womanhood that continues to this day . . . The rape of slave women led to the devaluation of black womanhood in the American psyche.” This devaluation is reflected in images of black women on television as “the ‘fallen’ woman, the whore, the slut, the prostitute.”

In her discussion of sentencing for rape convictions in Dallas, based upon a study published in 1990, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw demonstrates that these stereotypes of black women have a dramatic influence upon legal decisions. She proves the continued horrible impact of the stereotypes of black women when she says that, while the average sentence for raping a white woman was ten years, the average sentence for raping a Hispanic woman was five years, and the average sentence for raping a black woman was only two years. The longest sentences were for black men convicted of raping white women. These statistics demonstrate that women’s bodies and lives are valued differently in this society, depending upon their race. The stereotypes that black women and black men are highly sexed lead to the belief that the rape of a black woman is not really rape. Thus, the consequences of the stereotypes of black women, created to justify the practices of slavery, continue to be very real in the lives of African American women.

For European Americans, worship of a Black Madonna might serve to worsen rather than to challenge these stereotypes. An image of a woman who is unconditionally loving and giving (like Mammy) and, at the same time, strong and powerful beyond the expectations of strength and power for white women, might serve to reinforce stereotypes of Mammy and of superwoman, rather than to allow an awareness of the sacred humanity of black women—in vulnerability, in refusal to sacrifice themselves and their well-being for others, and in the complexity of their full humanity. In addition, if “the Goddess,” who is associated with sexuality and fertility, is imaged as black, that image might serve to reinforce the stereotype of black women as more closely associated with sexuality and fertility than white women. Therefore, it is crucial that all images for the divine be examined critically in relation to gender and race. In re-imagining the divine as a Black Madonna or Goddess, white Americans must be very careful to critically interrogate the stereotypes and emotional associations that they may be bringing to the imaging process.

In The Secret Life of Bees, Sue Monk Kidd provides a story of a black female image for the divine and of a community of African American women that avoids stereotypes. While the novel is a story of a young white girl finding a mother in the Black Madonna, and new mothers among a group of African American
women, Kidd avoids stereotyping the women as “Mammy” figures. They are each complex, full characters. In addition, the symbolism of the Black Madonna in the story is multivalent. She is a symbol of resistance against slavery and racist oppression, as well as an image of the divine mother, and the practices of worshipping her include the re-enactment of the story of her breaking free from her chains.

Kidd’s image of the Black Madonna is shaped by Kidd’s identity as a white Southern woman and by her involvement in the feminist spirituality movement. In her autobiographical book, The Dance of the Dissident Daughter, she recounts her journey from Christian devotional writer, through a painful exploration of the history of sexism in Christianity and in her own life, and finally to her embracing of the divine feminine in herself and in all of creation. Like other women in the feminist spirituality movement, her spirituality and theology allow for a mystical awareness of the divine as present in both the particular and the universal. She explains in this book that her connection to the divine feminine inspired her to begin to write fiction. In her foreword to the devotional book Prayers and Seven Contemplations of the Sacred Mother, written by Mary Kingsley, Kidd describes her process of embracing the Black Madonna. She explains that, during her process of discovering the feminine aspects of the divine, she had a dream in which Mary came to her. In her dream, Mary appeared to her as a “weeping black woman, sitting on a porch of a quarantined slum, wearing an African headdress.” Kidd recounts that, although this Mary looked sad, “she looked like she could straighten you out if necessary.” Kidd promised to come back for her. She recognized that Mary had been “living impoverished and quarantined” within her soul. Kidd began to explore stories about the Black Madonna as part of her journey to reclaim the divine feminine, and she began to explore practices of devotion to her. She recounts, “I began to meditate on her, and it was not long before she had taken up residence not only in my heart, but within my creative life as well.”

Kidd writes in The Secret Life of Bees of the Black Madonna living in every person’s heart because of her personal experiences of Mary within her own heart. The fact that Mary first appeared to her in a dream as a poor, weeping black woman, wearing a red African headdress, and looking like, “despite her sadness,” . . . “she could straighten you out if necessary” demonstrates that black women figured in her white, Southern, female imagination as women who are oppressed and weeping, yet also self-protective and proud of their heritage. She did not see this black Mary as superwoman, as a Mammy figure, as an earthmother, or as a sexualized figure. While an image of a black woman as poor, living in a “quarantined slum,” could be seen as stereotyping black women as symbols of oppression, and Kidd’s mission to “come back for her” could be seen as a white woman offering patronizing assistance to a poor, black woman, the dream carries more complexity than those stereotypes allow. The oppression of black women served, in her imagination, to symbolize the suppression and segregation of the divine feminine in herself and in the larger culture. Through her exploration of the divine feminine and her reclamation of Mary within herself, she claimed the Black Madonna as symbolizing the divine spirit of love, power, and opposition to oppression within black women, within herself, and within all of creation. She then re-mythologized this belief in her novel, allowing readers to experience the divine in new ways.

THE DIVINE FEMININE IN POPULAR CULTURE

The writing and release of both The Da Vinci Code and The Secret Life of Bees has occurred during a time when interest in the divine feminine has skyrocketed in popular culture. The connection between women’s self-esteem, women’s embodiment, and the divine feminine has not been lost on advertisers. The commercial appeal of the concept of Goddess is evident in the fact that the term “goddess” is being used in television
advertisements to sell items ranging from razors for women named after the Greek Goddess Venus, to hair color for “brunette goddesses,” to body washes. One store for women’s body products has large posters with the word “Goddess” and a painting of a generic Goddess of sorts in their mall display windows. When I went into the store to look for the line of “Goddess” products, I could find none. The word “Goddess” and the Goddess image stand alone, inviting women to enter the store and to discover how the products sold there can allow them to discover their inner and embodied Goddess. Similarly, a hair salon for a clientele of primarily African American women in Atlanta has posters hanging on salon mirrors with pictures of African American models and the word “Goddess” across the top of the posters.

Popular musicians have also begun to sing about their experiences and imagings of the divine feminine. Country/pop star Shania Twain and the rock group the Indigo Girls sing of discovering the divine feminine within their own lives. The themes of the songs reflect the spirituality of the feminist spirituality movement. In her song “Juanita” (the name she has given to the feminine divine), Twain envisions the divine feminine to be within herself and within all women and girls. As in The Secret Life of Bees, Twain represents the divine feminine as living within the heart—as power and as love. Her power and love allow women to embrace their own power with self-love. Similarly, in “She’s Saving Me,” Indigo Girl Emily Saliers sings of the divine feminine within herself and in creation—in her experiences of internal peace, in experiences of the beauty in nature, in times of grief, and in premonitory dreams. In Saliers’ song, the divine feminine is represented as working within women’s experiences. In contrast to the traditional male image of God, “She” works within people’s lives in subtle ways. She brings freedom from fear and doubt and freedom to be vulnerable and open in the world.

**POPULAR CULTURE AND INSTITUTIONAL RELIGION**

The rise of divine feminine language and imagery in popular culture and the resistance to those images in traditional religious institutions raises questions about the role of popular culture in influencing institutional religion. Recently, the dean of the Episcopal Cathedral in Atlanta held a five-week class about The Da Vinci Code. Several hundred people attended. Interestingly, the Cathedral does not use inclusive language in their worship services. However, the popularity of the novel and the questions it raised for parishioners about the suppression of the divine feminine caused the dean to discuss a topic that otherwise has remained unaddressed. Recently, a priest at the national office for the Episcopal Church has initiated a program devoted to the divine feminine.

Scholars of religion could critique these novels for their loose, sometimes inaccurate, appropriation of religious traditions and portrayals of history, which can mislead readers. However, putting these concerns aside, both novels serve important purposes. They introduce the divine feminine, in the form of Mary Magdalene and Mary as the Black Madonna, to a wide, diverse audience. They offer the possibility for Christian women and men to reclaim the divine feminine within the symbolism of the Christian tradition (while also pushing that tradition to answer difficult questions and to account for the suppression of the divine feminine) rather than having to leave their tradition altogether. They spark the imagination and engage the emotions in a way that academic writing does not, thus allowing the possibility for emotional, spiritual, and even socio-political transformation. They raise questions about the sexism of Christian history and theology and the racism of the United States, and they offer new myths of the divine as feminine and as black that serve to inspire resistance, self-love, and hope for personal, religious and social change among their readers. It is for these reasons that these novels are so popular.
popularity reflects fast-growing movements in the culture toward re-imaging the divine as feminine. At the same time, because they are so popular, they are contributing significantly to the growth of those movements within the larger culture.

NOTES


2. In the novel, Kidd does not name her sources for research about the Black Madonna. However, the story in the novel of a statue of a black woman found in the ocean by an oppressed, black community, being seen as a Black Madonna, and breaking free from its chains and inspiring resistance among oppressed people is very similar to the story of the statue of the Mother of the Excluded, Madonna Aparecida, in Brazil. In addition, the Black Madonna in Poland, Our Lady of Czestochowa, served as a symbol of resistance for the Solidarity movement against totalitarianism. See China Galland, *Longing for Darkness* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), chapters 10, 11, 15; and China Galland, *The Bond Between Women* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), chapter 14.


5. Ibid., ix.

6. Ibid., 31.


8. Ibid., 160.


13. Ibid., 52–55.

14. Ibid., 57.

15. Ibid., 59–69.


21. Ibid., 135.

23. See Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, “Social-Role Surrogacy: Naming Black Women’s Oppression,” chapter 3, for a powerful analysis of the stereotypes of African American women as “Mammy,” “Superwoman,” and “Jezebel” and the ways that these stereotypes have grown out of the roles African American slave women were forced to inhabit during slavery.

25. Ibid., 70.
26. I am grateful to students in the course “Issues for Women and Theology in the Christian Tradition” at the Candler School of Theology, which I taught in the spring of 2004, for sharing their struggles to overcome the stereotype of the strong black woman in order to acknowledge their own pain and vulnerability, and to find healing.

27. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 70.
32. “She’s Saving Me,” words and music by Emily Saliers, from the album *Become You* (Epic Records, Sony Music Entertainment, Inc., 2002).
Mark D. Hulsether
LIKE A SERMON

Popular Religion in Madonna Videos

STUDYING MADONNA AFTER
THE ACADEMIC MADONNA BOOM

This essay argues that some of the most important and interesting texts in recent U.S. culture which have overlapping concerns with liberation theologies are by Madonna. There . . . I said it. Anyone who wants to turn the page in disgust can do so now. I only ask that before you begin a jeremiad about the nihilism and vacuity of scholars these days, you let me clarify what I am—and am not—attempting to establish.

As I explain below, I am not making global claims about all liberation theologies or speculating about Madonna’s conscious intentions; I am simply exploring how a select handful of her videos relate to black and feminist theologies in specific contexts during the years around 1990. My goal is not to single out Madonna as especially exemplary. In fact, she is only one among many high-profile stars—some of whom are better musicians—who articulate strong religious themes in their work. A short list of such musicians, drawn only from consensus superstars whose music overlaps with Christianity, might include the Artist formerly known as Prince, Bob Dylan, Aretha Franklin, Bob Marley, Stevie Wonder, and many country artists. A list drawn from lesser known performers and encompassing both Christian and non-Christian spiritualities could be virtually limitless.

Nor do I claim that the videos I address are “typical.” Just as no one can walk into a bookstore and choose a good book at random, one must be selective to find popular music with interesting religious content, especially the sort of oppositional political-religious content that interests me the most. I do maintain that much popular music has a strong religious content which goes underappreciated. Only someone who is not listening or has an extremely narrow definition of faith could say, with Christian Coalition leader Ralph Reed, that “one searches in vain for a positive portrayal of faith in popular culture.” Listening to Madonna suggests what can be gained if we pay more attention to religion among a wider range of popular musicians.

It is important to clarify how this article relates to what Simon Frith calls the “boom in the academic Madonna business—the books! the articles! the conferences! the courses!” If you have managed to remain unaffected by this orgy of analysis, I can bring you up to speed in four easy steps. Most of this writing—however emotionally overheated when written for television or bloated with jargon when written for academia—fits somewhere within the following ideal conversation.

At level one, the Madonna-hater (or MH) says “Popular culture is morally bankrupt, flagrantly licentious, and utterly materialistic—and Madonna is the worst of all.” (Thus the Parents Music Resource
Center says that Madonna teaches girls to act “like . . . porn queen[s] in heat.”\(^4\) The Madonna-lover (ML) retorts “Can’t you cultural conservatives see what she is trying to do—to annoy people like you! If you don’t like it, don’t listen to it. Stop trying to police my morality.”

At level two, the MH responds “I don’t mind rebellion against conservative teachings on the family, but she does it in a way that reproduces sexist stereotypes. Jeesh, look at her dress up like Marilyn Monroe, name her company ‘Boy Toy, Inc.,’ and celebrate being spanked. What kind of rebellion is that?” The ML replies “Can’t you see that her Boy Toy jokes are ironic, that they use ridicule to tweak conventional gender roles?” (Thus when Madonna was asked whether she really enjoys being spanked, she replied “It’s a joke . . . it’s play. I say I want to be spanked, but it’s like ‘Try it and I’ll knock your fucking head off.’”)\(^5\)

By level three, any honest critic who has not seriously studied Madonna’s videos should keep silent, although few of them do. The MH says “All well and good, but can’t you see that irony is not enough? It is too thin as a foundation for oppositional politics.” (One writer says that “the postmodern entices us to enjoy nothing more than the free play of our own chains.”)\(^6\) The ML retorts “Can’t you see that irony is a lot?—especially about issues of gender and sexuality. Granted it is not everything, but who can address everything?” The MH and ML argue into the night: “But she’s too compromised.” “Is not.” “Is too.” “Is not.” . . .

At level four, the academic Madonna boom takes off, feeding on endless debates about which cultural discourses she reinforces and which ones she destabilizes. The key to unlock this debate is simple once you get the hang of it. If you are speaking to anyone who perceives more ironic destabilization of conservative traditionalism than you do, you say “What’s the matter with you white middle-class postmodernists, get a life, write about something really important!” (Then, since you are certain that postmodernists are the enemy, feel free to quote them out of context.) If you are speaking to someone who sees less destabilization, you sniff “You old stuck-in-the-mud Marxist—and/or Christian, essentialist, bourgeois feminist—you just don’t get it! How can you even think about building the revolution—and/or church, theory, movement—without incorporating a postmodern cultural aesthetic?” (Then, try to explain why you were quoted out of context without digging yourself deeper into a hole.) When in doubt you can flip-flop, carrying on a conversation with yourself about the pros and cons of particular videos.\(^7\)

By the time all four levels were fully engaged in the early 1990s, Madonna’s videos were a standard locus for debating philosophy and social theory in the field of cultural studies.\(^8\) They became a takeoff point for asking what the words “postmodern cultural aesthetic” mean anyway, whether stable identities of things like gender actually exist, and so on. Meanwhile, as this process snowballed at the hip cutting edge of academic theory, Madonna moved deeper and deeper into the cultural mainstream. Even Norman Mailer could write that “music videos [bear] the same relation to feature films as poetry does to novels” and that Madonna was “our greatest living female artist.”\(^9\) (The closest religious analogy was Madonna’s embrace by Andrew Greeley.)\(^10\) This created a backlash from scholars who were originally attracted to her because they saw her as transgressive, and the Madonna boom lost some steam. It remains unclear whether ongoing developments, notably her becoming a mother, will breathe more life into this scholarship. Given her reputation as a whore, the tension between images of whores and images of mothers in our culture, and her continuing skill as an artist, it seems premature to close the books on Madonna Studies.\(^11\)

When the editors of this volume asked me to reprint my article on Madonna—first written in 1991—this request came after a lot of water had passed under the bridge.\(^12\) Although my project has snowballed
far beyond my original expectations, it began with the modest goal of persuading liberals in religious circles to pay attention to Madonna’s anti-racist theology in her hit video “Like a Prayer.” Today, there are two senses in which this essay may seem dated. First, it reappears a decade after the videos it discusses, and during this time I have increasingly noticed my students responding to Madonna much as I responded to Elvis Presley when I first heard him in the 1970s: understanding little about his earlier career, I wrote him off as irrelevant. It takes effort to remember when Madonna videos were not moldy oldies on VH-1 and she was a feminist insurgent by the standards of mainstream popular music. Second, this essay was not designed to intervene in high-level theorizing in cultural studies, although it does presuppose some of this theory. In particular, it was never intended to address what became a major locus of Madonna scholarship in the first half of the 1990s: her representation of lesbianism and erotic tastes such as sex toys and sadomasochism in relation to poststructuralist theories of gender.13

In a third sense, my article remains fresher. Recall that its goal is to highlight religious nuances in popular music—nuances that are easy to find, if only the critics have ears to hear. Unfortunately, the antennae of critics are rarely tuned to religious bandwidths. A recent call for papers for a national cultural studies conference suggested twenty-nine topics: disciplines from history through art to media studies; categories like class, sexuality, and geography; and subjects including sports, folklore, science, social movements, the internet, and nineteenth-century studies. Nowhere did this list suggest religion as a general subject, nor specific religions, miracles, church-based activism, astrology, feminist spirituality, or millennialism as subtopics. No doubt some speakers addressed religion under rubrics like history and ethnicity, but the list remains revealing, since they could also speak about music under the rubric of gender, art under nineteenth-century studies, and so on.14

To appreciate what is lost through this mindset, consider Sinead O’Connor’s haunting antiracist lament, “Black Boys on Mopeds.” I first heard it with one of the brightest critics I know in the field of cultural studies. Yet when O’Connor sang “Remember what I told you / If they hated me they will hate you” and “Remember what I told you / If you were of the world they would love you,” my friend did not realize that O’Connor was quoting Jesus, placing an antiracist understanding of Christianity at the heart of the song.15 Oblivious that she was missing anything, she was in no position to understand the song’s preferred reading, nor the historical resonances and future possibilities it was (at least potentially) suggesting. Obviously, it would not occur to a critic in this position to explore the audience reception of these meanings or their impact on a larger religious landscape.

True, critics do comment on religious themes that are impossible to miss—but this does not guarantee subtlety and nuance. Most people know that O’Connor tore up a photo of Pope John Paul II on Saturday Night Live, after singing Bob Marley’s antiracist anthem “War” with a new verse about abortion rights. For many commentators, that says it all: this is an open-and-shut case of secular feminist rock star versus monolithic patriarchal Catholicism. A similar framework is typical for approaching religious references by Madonna. No doubt this mindset illuminates some issues and matches the experiences of many fans. However, it keeps major nuances of Madonna’s music and its possible meanings in the shadows. Madonna, too, quotes the Bible. One mix of “Justify My Love” features an extended reading of passages from Revelation over the music—both affirmations of grace, such as “To the thirsty I will give water without price,” and anathemas rarely heard in decorous churches, like “They are a synagogue of Satan.”16 How many critics, even the types that can polish off two volumes of Lacan before lunch, are willing to read one scholarly book on the politics of Biblical interpretation to inform their interpretation of this song?

E. Ann Kaplan provides a good example of these dynamics in an article that meticulously explores
connections between Madonna videos and the history of film: “Express Yourself” signifies on *Metropolis*, “Oh Father” alludes to *Citizen Kane*, and so on. The ambition and nuance of Kaplan’s investigation are typical of the work of many other critics, who expend great effort investigating Madonna’s impact on fans and the dynamics of her popularization of voguing, in which black and Latino gay men imitate and parody conventional gender roles in elaborate theatrical balls. Just as knowing the Bible helps one appreciate “Black Boys on Mopeds,” these connections deepen the resonance of her videos.

Kaplan does briefly note that “Oh Father” a video she calls a typical “adolescent story in Western cultural terms,” foregrounds Madonna’s “repressive Catholic upbringing and her conflicted relationship not only to her literal father but also the symbolic one—the Holy Father, the Law, Patriarchy.” But beyond this comment, Kaplan pays little attention to religious issues in “Oh Father” that cry out for elaboration and investigation. The particular way that Madonna tells this story about adolescence is through an elaborate comparison of a literally abusive father, Catholic priests, and the first person of the Christian trinity—all of whom haunt her psyche and undermine her attempts to relate to her lover. The video draws on Madonna’s childhood experience and dramatizes her efforts to renegotiate these relationships, both psychically, in daily interactions with her lover and father, and in relation to Catholicism, which she references by singing “Oh Father I have sinned” and sitting in a confessional. At all these levels, she seeks peace not through submitting to repression (she sings, “You can’t hurt me now, I got away from you”) but by transforming the relationships.

Madonna’s vision of reconciliation in both “Oh Father” and “Papa Don’t Preach,” her most famous video about conflict with her father, are grist for the mill at level three of Madonna Studies. (“Too compromised.” “Is not.” “Is too.”) The references to her childhood spark debate on level four. (“Is autobiographical realism passé given the instability of postmodern identities?”) But these videos are not merely about rethinking families in general, nor about the “Holy Father, the Law, Patriarchy,” if this implies a quick trip from Madonna’s body to Lacanian theory with no stops in between. They also reconceptualize Catholic teachings about families and bodies, making them usable in the life of an Italian Catholic taught by nuns—and perhaps by extension usable for fans in a nation where half of the people attend church and 85 percent accept the Bible as divinely inspired. But most Madonna critics simply do not care enough about religion to carry on a nuanced discussion of such matters. After Kaplan’s sustained attention to film and German surrealism, for example, she quickly drops the subject of religion. Her footnote captures the priorities of Madonna scholars at large: “Although Madonna’s subjectivity is multiple and involves Catholicism, class, and ethnicity as well as gender, my main focus here will be on the latter.”

Of course there is nothing wrong with that focus. But what follows is an attempt to shift the focus through analyzing two of Madonna’s most famous videos. I seek not to replace a focus on gender with an unrelated turn toward religion, but to integrate attention to religion with race and gender.

**WHAT WOULD JESUS DO (IN A VIDEO ABOUT RACISM AND RAPE)?**

Critical attention to religious issues in popular music is essential at a time when many young adults build their cultural identities around popular music and express their view of left-liberal Christianity by voting with their feet. In this context, it would be important to analyze popular music in religious terms, even if
all this music were diametrically opposed to left-liberal Christian values. But in fact there is often a strong overlap between the concerns of liberation theologies and popular music.

Of course there are many issues critical for liberation theologies—in black, feminist, Third World, and other forms—that Madonna’s music does not address. However, liberation theologies analyze religion in relation to specific sociopolitical contexts; they promote ideas and practices designed to overcome specific injustices. Thus they evaluate any given text, like a sermon or song, not in the abstract, but in relation to the problems of particular people. The famous sermon by Archbishop Oscar Romero, in which he commanded Salvadoran soldiers in the name of God to stop killing, does not have universal meaning. It might not strike U.S. youth as relevant to their concerns about racial and sexual identity. Similarly, battles over music censorship and the representation of women on MTV are low priorities for the popular church in Central America. All this is to be expected. What matters is how Romero’s sermons and MTV videos function in their respective contexts. MTV’s realm of influence is limited, but far from trivial. Even in the shantytowns of Latin America, U.S. television is pervasive, and it matters a great deal to the U.S. peace movement whether MTV promotes shifts from military spending to education and social services.

Since Madonna works in the context of the music industry, it is instructive to compare her work to another video from the 1980s which addresses gender and race in a way that is perhaps more typical. “The Way You Make Me Feel” features Michael Jackson and a few black male peers accosting a woman on an inner-city street. She looks perky yet vulnerable, with a vaguely anorexic figure and an extremely short and tight black dress. Jackson sings about her appearance and his lust above a driving dance beat. He invades her personal space, pursues her as she tries to escape, and makes pelvic thrusts as he faces her. The camera takes his point of view, encouraging viewers to leer at her. She briefly joins a group of female friends who face the men in a somewhat more balanced power relationship. But Jackson chases her away and the climax ensues. She stands alone in the dark as the men surround her. They snap their fingers, make sounds like switchblades, and hump the street, as a fire hydrant squirts water into the air behind them. This can be interpreted as her imagined nightmare or as a come-on which she is supposed to enjoy. Jackson emerges from the shadows to embrace her. In the nightmare reading he is protecting her from rape; in the come-on reading he has successfully worn down her resistance. Either way he wins her and she likes it.

As cultural studies theory stresses, no one can state definitively what any song means, since it can be interpreted in different contexts by various people. Yet songs, like other texts, do have a range of interpretations which have greater or lesser plausibility, especially when considered within specified contexts. It seems fair to say that one context for Jackson’s video is the pervasive reality of male supremacy and sexual violence, and that his video promotes images which help to glamorize and perpetuate these problems. Another context is use of images of violent and lustful black males to distort national policy toward minority and low-income people, such as George Bush’s demonizing of Willie Horton in the 1988 election and neoconservative laments about the black “underclass.” Jackson’s song does little to combat this discourse, and may help perpetuate it. I would not stress these points too much, because Jackson’s overall impact on race and gender relations is complicated: he is widely lauded as the first African American artist to break into MTV, and is known for his androgynous sexual persona.

Moreover, it is possible for musicians to draw on stereotypical images and transform them in helpful ways. In the hands of the best rap artists, such as KRS-One and Public Enemy, “gangsta” images have been used effectively within an antiracist discourse. It seems clear, however, that the pro-black and feminist meanings of “The Way You Make Me Feel” are limited at best.
Thus it is interesting to compare Jackson’s video to Madonna’s “Like a Prayer,” which also represents the threat of sexual violence on an inner-city street and interacts with the stereotype of the black rapist. Before turning to this video, let us imagine the ideal song that a group of liberation theologians might desire, if by some miracle MTV offered them equal time to address Jackson’s video. Like most Christian theologians, they would seek a song that drew on stories like the Good Samaritan to side with victims of injustice, and which differentiated itself sharply from racist forms of Christianity such as the Ku Klux Klan’s. Like a more select subset of theologians, their ideal song would be capable of focusing on the specific injustice and the possibilities for transforming it, as opposed to asking whether “it was all her fault” or if “he could help himself” given the tragic and ineluctable realities of original sin.

The ideal song for a group of liberation theologians would not stop there. It would distance itself from theologies which conceptualize Jesus’ death on a cross mainly as individual atonement for individual human sin. Without necessarily rejecting this idea completely, their song would emphasize Jesus’ human solidarity or identity with victims of oppression; place the cross in the context of sociopolitical persecution; and call Christians to “take up the cross” and turn toward solidarity. It would envision churches as places of collective empowerment in concrete struggles toward greater social justice. In the context of racism, their model church would promote black culture and combat both police violence and the scapegoating of black males. In the context of sexism, it would promote female leadership and practical responses to sexual violence. Like much feminist theology, their church might stress the importance of the erotic, and human passion and mutuality more generally, for conceptualizing faith. Certainly it would not place human bodies in opposition to “real issues of faith,” as if sexuality and spirituality were antithetical.

“Like a Prayer” includes every element of this wish list, endorsed by one of the world’s most popular artists. The song gained saturation play on MTV, VH-1, and pop radio stations during 1989. For a brief and bizarre moment, it even became the theme song for Pepsi, whose market strategists apparently hoped that Madonna could make them the hip and antiracist cola. (They quickly bowed to voices from the religious right which pronounced Pepsi the blasphemous cola.) Through it all, the video was largely ignored by left-liberal church people. Although I cannot prove this, I suspect that the lack of response Madonna received from this sector of her public is one reason she gave less attention to religious themes in subsequent years.

As the video opens, Madonna flees for safety to a church because she has witnessed three white males attack a white woman, then stare menacingly at Madonna. Inside the church she prays in front of a shrine with a statue of a black male, perhaps a saint, who is clearly marked by his dress as a Christ figure. She soon falls into a dream which lasts for most of the video, and within the dream the statue comes to life. It begins to cry, then leaves the safety of the church for the dangers of the street. Madonna sings that she hears a voice which calls her name and makes her “feel like home,” but at this point it is unclear whose voice it is—that of Christ or that of a lover.

The music and images intensify, and we see a flashback to the assault. We learn that as the attackers escaped, a young black male aided the victim. The Christ figure who left the church and this “Good Samaritan” are the same person. At this moment, the police arrived, accused him of the assault, and hauled him away—and everyone knows what happens to blacks accused of raping white women. Urgently Madonna sings “I hear you call my name,” and it seems clear that “you” is the Christ figure and the “call” is to solidarity. If so, this makes sense of an earlier scene which is initially shocking. As Jesus leaves the church and Madonna debates whether to follow, she cuts her palms; this reference to Christ’s stigmata has fueled charges of blasphemy, but is easily read as a call to “take up her cross and follow.” In any case, it
remains unclear how she will respond.

The camera comments on the assault and unjust arrest by cutting abruptly to burning crosses. Madonna dances defiantly in front of them as the music builds to an extreme tension. Then, in a striking musical shift akin to putting a car in overdrive, a black gospel choir (Andrae Crouch’s group) takes over the musical mix and the video church. In scenes of joy and collective empowerment, Madonna dances with the choir. The black female preacher who is presiding lays hands on her head in a commissioning scene. A prone Madonna kisses “Jesus.” Like many saints and songwriters before her, her faith includes an erotic dimension.  

Thus we learn the answer to our earlier question. She is not choosing between Christ or a lover, but singing about Christ as a lover, linked in a relationship which balances his call (which is mediated through the gospel music as Madonna sings “you are a mystery” and “no choice, your voice can take me there”) with her active response (“I’ll take you there”). As a powerful gospel chorus repeats and fades, Madonna awakens from her dream and goes to the police station. The camera cuts from the statue of Christ, now inanimate again behind the steel bars of the shrine, to the arrested Christ in a jail cell. Madonna testifies on his behalf and he is released. A curtain falls on the stage where the passion play has been acted and the actors take their bows.

Clearly, this is a sophisticated, antiracist statement, far removed from Jackson’s vision of gender roles. Indeed, it is among the more powerful statements of some major themes of liberation theologies that I have ever seen in the mainstream U.S. media. But, like any text, it has limitations as well as strengths. First, it is so complex that parts may be unclear to its audience, or open to negative interpretations—thus compounding the general problem of indeterminacy in interpretation. However, this objection might also be used against exposing teenagers to the Hebrew scriptures or to Romeo and Juliet. In each case, a competent reader can gain a relatively clear understanding, and parts of the message will get through to most readers on some level (even if this is not verbal or self-conscious).

Perhaps more seriously, the video centers too much on Madonna and her good deed to be a fully satisfying vision of the collective empowerment of oppressed groups, despite its focus on combating sexual violence, its call for solidarity against racism, and its heavy emphasis on the gospel choir. For bell hooks, who perceives the video “mocking” Christianity, this concern completely undermines any positive message. Although I agree that questions about agency are fundamental, hooks’s critique seems unnecessarily harsh. Madonna can play the role of victim in relation to sexual violence in a fairly unproblematic way, and within the video she is represented as risking her life. As hooks notes, the issue of interracial solidarity is more complicated because of Madonna’s privilege as a rich white in relation to most blacks, as well as the ways that white female sexuality has been used in racist discourses. In this context, for Madonna to play the role of “the oppressed” and attempt to merge herself with black self-empowerment would make no sense. On the other hand, using racial difference as an excuse to ignore the problem would make her complicit in it. Madonna’s only plausible approach is owning up to her privilege and trying to use it constructively. The video represents her trying to do just that, even as it places her under the authority of the black community as represented in the gospel choir. The choir calls and commissions her; through participating in its music, she taps into an empowering cultural tradition and helps push it forward. Within this context, she uses her power (derived in part from institutional racism) in ways which might otherwise be purely self-aggrandizing: she helps rescue the black victim (in the video narrative) and makes her own use of gospel music within her video (as a businesswoman).

However much these two limitations of “Like a Prayer” reduce its overlap with liberation theologies, they are limits largely imposed by Madonna’s race and the genre of music video. Five-minute videos featuring white stars are obviously not the only important genre for articulating liberation theology! But
within those constraints, what could she have done better?

**DOES ANYONE GET BEYOND WATCHING HER CLEAVAGE?**

Well, there is the matter of her dancing in her underwear. . . . Does her sex-goddess image dominate so strongly that viewers can see nothing else? Clearly it does for some people, including conservative critic Michael Medved, who manages to see Madonna “reaching for her crotch and simulating masturbation” early in the video as she kneels in front of the statue and then falls asleep.38 Because Madonna consistently uses sexual images, she can be interpreted as a bimbo with only one overriding message: pandering to male lust through stereotypical images of women for the purpose of making a buck.39

However, Madonna did not invent the stereotypes of female sexuality or the idea that women succeed through using them to influence men. She was born into a system which largely presupposes this, and, many critics argue, works from within these expectations to subvert and transform them in helpful ways (this has been a major theme in the four-stage Madonna argument outlined above).40 It is useful to approach “Open Your Heart” with this hypothesis because, whereas “Like a Prayer” represents a best-case scenario for the overlap between Madonna and liberation theology, “Open Your Heart” seems at first glance to be a worst-case scenario. If we can read it as pro-feminist, the argument for other videos follows easily.

Madonna’s path of least resistance, like that of her fans, is simply to reproduce dominant images like those in Jackson’s video. For female musicians, pressure to accept these roles comes with the territory. Throughout the history of rock music, and especially on MTV during its early years, most stars have played the roles and taken the standpoint of rebellious males. It has been difficult for women to create a place except as the groupies of such males or their objects of desire.41 The “autonomous boy wins objectified girl” plot is typical in music videos, with or without the gross objectification of women evident in Jackson’s video or Robert Palmer’s “Simply Irresistible” (which actually did become Pepsi’s theme song). An especially offensive example is “Girls, Girls, Girls” by the band Motley Crue. This video takes place in a bar and celebrates the band leering at women in various states of undress. The camera takes their point of view; it looks through the legs of women or up from below, focusing on crotches and midriffs.

Madonna’s “Open Your Heart” picks up exactly where “Girls, Girls, Girls” leaves off: with men looking at objectified women. Madonna plays a dancer in a peep show. Thus she risks perpetuating her bimbo image—and gains access to an MTV audience. But, in contrast to Motley Crue’s video, this video tells the story from her point of view. The men in her audience are separated in little cubicles. The camera takes her perspective, looking down into the cubicles as she tries to make eye contact with the men, which they are unable to return. (She also looks assertively into the camera, demanding eye contact with the viewer.) In contrast to Jackson’s video, Madonna’s shows her holding power over the men and pursuing them; she is the star they pay to see, and she repeatedly sings “Don’t try to run; I can keep up with you; Open your heart to me.”

The music has a mournful sound on the verses and a dance groove with a hopeful emotional tone on the chorus; it conveys Madonna’s desire to transcend her role and find a mutually respectful relationship. Rather than a man pursuing a vulnerable woman for violent purposes, she presents an assertive woman
searching for a lover who accepts her as a full human being. The men in the cubicles prove unable to do this, and there is an undertone of mockery when Madonna addresses them as “baby,” shaking her body in an exaggerated come-on. By the end of the video they are isolated and sad, with doors closing on them. In powerful visual and musical imagery, Madonna puts Jackson and Motley Crue in boxes and dismisses them.

Meanwhile, the overall mood is hopeful, because of the sound of the “Open Your Heart” music, but a profound tension has been building between the peep show setting and the music. This tension peaks as the song breaks into the compelling dance groove of the final chorus, but Madonna remains immobile on the floor in a pin-up posture. Only a young boy outside the theater dances—a boy whose attempts to enter the show have been rebuffed by an old man in a ticket booth throughout the video. The tension dissolves as Madonna, standing outside the theater, gives the boy a quick kiss on the lips and wakes him from sleep. Both are clad in loose-fitting gray suits, which gives Madonna an androgynous look, and they dance away playfully with the old man pursuing them. Thus she escapes, leading the boy away from the Motley Crue syndrome.

Feminist viewers must decide whether “Open Your Heart” deserves the benefit of the doubt. It is unquestionably open to negative interpretations. At worst, Susan Bordo sees the “leering and pathetic” men in cubicles and the escape with the boy as “cynically, mechanically tacked on, in bad faith, [as] a way of claiming trendy status for what is really just cheesecake—or, perhaps, pornography.” Bordo finds no meaningful reversals in the perspective of the camera, fails to address the music, and argues that “this video is entirely about Madonna’s body, the narrative context virtually irrelevant.” Even at best, the video risks perpetuating a negative stereotype—“There’s Madonna as porno dancer again”—through its attempt to subvert the stereotype. (Rappers who use gangsta images in antiracist ways run analogous risks.) It also risks pandering to pre-adolescent lust. There is no overt representation of anything besides friendship with the boy, but he is trying to enter the show, and he does run off with Madonna as she sings about finding a lover. On the other hand, by escaping with the boy Madonna avoids sexual overtones that would have been stronger if she had run off with an adult male. More importantly, the video clearly contrasts the exploitation of the peep show with the mutuality of the final scene, and—contrary to what Bordo says—makes this contrast basic to its narrative and musical structure.

There are analogous debates about many of Madonna’s videos. Since she often uses irony and promotes controversy, she intensifies the general interpretive problem of texts having a range of meanings. Some critics see “Like a Prayer” as a bald attempt to use blasphemy as a marketing tool—some even believe that it endorses cross burnings. Bordo says that Madonna’s “message . . . is getting through” in a rap by Ice-T celebrating gang rape. To what degree should we hold artists responsible for the least flattering readings of their work? Critics have used similar logic to censor Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn. They argue that when Huck debates whether to do the “Christian” thing and betray Jim or “go to hell” by being loyal, this should be denounced as racist rather than understood as a scathing attack on Christian racism. After all, some people might identify with Huck’s reasoning (or with the men in Madonna’s cubicles).

I believe that these videos, especially “Like a Prayer,” are fine examples of the overlapping concerns between some U.S. liberation theologies and popular musicians. However, we must bear in mind three major qualifications. First, Madonna’s work is obviously not allied with critics who seek alternatives to twentieth-century consumer culture as a whole. There are real concerns, both religious and sociopolitical, about building a culture based on the logic of consumer capitalism. From this point of view, Madonna is part of the problem, not the solution. At another level of analysis (the one I have been
I am not troubled that Madonna makes millions of dollars selling records. So does Michael Jackson, and it matters a great deal which money-making videos gain cultural power.

Second, my discussion brackets a question which holds great fascination, though only secondary importance. What are Madonna’s personal intentions? Behind her shifting images and promotion of controversy, does she understand her work as feminist, antiracist, or theological? Or are her detractors correct? Is she a cynical and shallow performer who simply dances to industry scripts that sell records, like a senile Ronald Reagan reading scripts by his handlers which sell at the polls? I do not find it fruitful to frame a debate between these alternatives. The question about Madonna’s self-consciousness is difficult, perhaps impossible, to answer; she is cagey in interviews and far less articulate in words than when expressing herself through music and images. More importantly, there is limited value in asking who holds ultimate creative control in a company such as Madonna’s or Jackson’s: for example, who wrote the script to “Like a Prayer” or “The Way You Make Me Feel.” There is no reason to doubt Madonna’s claims to significant control over her art, and reason to suspect sexist bias if someone implies that a “bimbo” like her obviously cannot make substantive decisions for herself. But even if we assume for the sake of argument that industry leaders strongly influence her decisions and she delegates major tasks, the whole argument about intentionality remains secondary. We can debate whether “Reagan’s” speeches were scripted by his handlers, but the central question is the meaning that “Reagan” conveyed through these speeches, irrespective of Ronald Reagan’s competence to produce them himself. Similarly, the main question about “Madonna”—even for someone who refuses to grant her any credit for sincerity or talent—is how her music can be understood and used.

Thus the third major qualification to my claim that Madonna’s music overlaps with liberation theologies concerns the variant meanings of her songs in different contexts. I cannot stress too strongly that the interest of her music varies greatly from song to song and across different discourses of liberation theology and feminism. Not all of her songs are like “Like a Prayer.” They highlight issues of race inconsistently, and issues of economic justice and imperialism hardly at all. In the realm of gender, many songs assert female autonomy (such as “Oh Father” and “Papa Don’t Preach”) or use irony to call received gender patterns into question, as when her brilliant performance of “Vogue” at the 1990 MTV Music Awards used outrageously parodic costumes and role reversals to underline the artificiality of received gender roles. On the other hand, many of her songs reinforce sexist stereotypes, celebrate forms of sexual expression that are no improvement over sexual repression, and make ironic comments which strike me as boring. For example, I see little besides bubblegum pop and cheesecake in a video like “Cherish,” despite its somewhat humorous male mermaids. Other videos combine positive dimensions and overall ambiguities: “Justify My Love,” for example, features mediocre music, lots of body parts and heavy breathing, and a representation of lesbianism which is unusually positive and explicit by the standards of television. (Guess why MTV censored it?) Her 1991 documentary film, Truth or Dare, combines brilliant stage shows, some interesting commentaries on society and spirituality, and a huge dose of self-indulgence. Her 1992 Erotica album pushes the theme of liberation from sexual repression to new heights, but seems unpromising from the perspective of most liberation theologies.

Furthermore, the same Madonna songs may be interpreted differently depending on what background theories a feminist critic assumes when approaching sexuality. Insofar as the problem of sexism is identified as male objectification and control of women’s bodies, the corresponding feminist attitude toward most sexual expression is suspicion. For such a critic, the sexual revolution and its associated increase in sexual representation in the media merely represent an easier and more dehumanized access by men to women’s bodies. The core images for sexuality are rape, abuse, and objectifying pornography.
But insofar as the main problem of sexism is identified as the containment, channeling, and repression of sexuality by the “traditional” (i.e., modern bourgeois) family and its associated codes of sexual propriety, then liberation from sexual repression and rigid sexual mores becomes a key to the feminist agenda. The core image is the erotic as the engine of liberation. Many of Madonna’s songs appear disreputable to “anti-porn” feminists, while at the same time potentially helpful for “sex-positive” feminist discourses.

Judged in still other feminist contexts, the value of Madonna’s work is mixed. Even the most incisive satires and strongest images of female autonomy do not provide all that is needed for a liberatory movement. And her work does more to destabilize “normal” attitudes toward sex and gender than to address the feminization of poverty, female political empowerment, and issues of special concern to women of color. These are not trivial limitations. Still, no song (or any other work) can address all political fronts at once. There are always priorities to set and strategic trade-offs to consider. Madonna’s work is no exception.

Thus I do not argue that “Madonna is a liberation theologian,” nor that all of her music overlaps with all liberation theologies. I do maintain that “Like a Prayer” and “Open Your Heart” overlap significantly with the broad agendas of many liberation theologies, advancing these agendas more than they hurt them. I believe that this suggests a need for greater attention to religious dimensions of other popular music, and the possibility of alliances between left-leaning Christians and some popular musicians on issues of mutual concern.

NOTES

1. For more on what I mean by “popular” and “oppositional,” see my “Interpreting the ‘Popular’ in Popular Religion” (American Studies 36, no. 2 [Fall 1995]: 127–37) and “Sorting Out the Relationships Among Christian Values, U.S. Popular Religion, and Hollywood Films” (Religious Studies Review 25, no. 1 [1999]: 3–12), in which I argue that scholars define “popular” in four sometimes contradictory senses: as demographically prevalent, as “authentic” culture uncorrupted by commercialism (similar to what Bruce David Forbes calls “folk culture” in the introduction to this volume), as mass mediated, and as counterhegemonic (as in “popular movements” versus elite groups). For an essay like this one on popular music and liberation theologies, the greatest interest is in the territory where the third and fourth senses overlap—where, in the terms of Forbes’s introduction, religion is in popular music, but the oppositional aspects of this religious-popular music are in dialogue with hegemonic aspects of the larger culture.


7. For a brilliant commentary, see John Champagne, “Stabat Madonna,” in Frank and Smith, *Madonnarama*, 111–38, especially 123, which offers ten readings of the same photograph: Madonna with rapper Big Daddy Kane and supermodel Naomi Campbell in her famous book *Sex* (New York: Time/Warner, 1992). Three of the readings prove that the photograph is progressive, and seven prove it regressive. See also Mandzuik, “Feminist Politics and Postmodern Seductions,” 175, on Madonna’s 1990 “Rock the Vote” advertisement, which featured Madonna and two black male dancers wearing little except combat boots and American flags. Mandzuik finds the spot good because it “subverts the solemn patriotic and military symbols,” but bad because Madonna says “Dr. King, Malcolm X, freedom of speech is as good as sex.” Also, the spot makes jokes about Madonna disciplining the dancers, thus “trad[ing] on the racist stereotype” that “white caretakers must compensate for black immaturity.” A shot of a dancer spanking Madonna signifies that sexual pleasure (good) is “justified even at the cost of subjugation of others” (bad). Madonna’s joke, “If you don’t vote you’re going to get a spanking,” undermines (bad) the ad’s overt message (good). All this is based on a video in which every single shot is ironic; it is hard to see why a satire of flag waving is subversive while a satire of racist paternalism is not.

8. I offer a brief definition of this field and relate it to religious studies in “Three Challenges for the Field of American Studies: Relating to Cultural Studies, Addressing Wider Publics, and Coming to Terms with Religions,” *American Studies* 38, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 117–47.


16. “Justify My Love, the Beast Within Mix,” from *Justify My Love* (Sire/Warner Brothers, 1990). Thanks to Teresa Hornsby for calling this mix to my attention.

17. E. Ann Kaplan, “Madonna Politics: Perversion, Repression, or Subversion? Or Masks and/as


20. Unless otherwise noted, all the Madonna videos I discuss are collected on *Madonna: The Immaculate Collection* (1990).


27. For example, see Simon During, *The Cultural Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993); John
Fiske, Reading the Popular (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989); George Lipsitz, Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1990); and John Storey, Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture: Theories and Methods (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996).


31. Among others who complained, Donald Wildmon’s American Family Association threatened to boycott Pepsi. Madonna was paid five million dollars for the ads anyway. See Brown and Schulze, “Effects of Race, Gender, and Fandom,” 91.

32. Mary Lambert, the filmmaker who directed the video, says the statue is meant to represent St. Martin de Porres (see McClary, Feminine Endings, 209).

33. There is sexual imagery in many standard Protestant hymns, such as “Jesus, Lover of My Soul.” McClary (Feminine Endings, 163–4) also points to classical music such as “Bach’s pietistic bride and groom duets,” and discusses how Madonna is “tapping into” the tradition of Saint Teresa and other female Roman Catholic mystics. She leaves open the question of Madonna’s self-consciousness about this tradition.

34. Mark C. Taylor, Nots (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 199–207, sees Madonna seducing Christ and reads this not as mutuality, but as Madonna usurping power. However, Taylor also says that Madonna “lies seductively on a nearby pew . . . and provocatively rubs her genitals” (200)—in a scene where I see her go to sleep and rest her hand on her abdomen for half a second after kneeling in prayer. He says “the stroke of her hand brings the statue to life” (where I see him responding to the victim’s cries). He says that a shot of Christ crying tears of blood is a symbol of Madonna castrating him, and that the statue’s return behind bars represents “displacement of the savior” in which “this latter-day anti-Christ [i.e., Madonna] repeats the proclamation of Nietzsche’s madman: ‘God is dead . . . and we have killed him’” (202). Thus Taylor abstracts from the major issues structuring the video: the black church and the “mystery” of faith versus racism and sexual violence. He implies that when Madonna “castrates” Christ—in a shot linked to an image of burning crosses—she aligns herself with the KKK and the history of white women manipulating black men. Taylor is more persuasive when he grants that “the most obvious reading of [the bleeding eye] is that one of the bullets or arrows hurled at the suffering
servant hits its mark” (202). Taylor usefully accents how Madonna helps Jesus escape his usual role in churches (which makes sense of her words “you are not what you seem”). However, if there is a castration, the obvious preferred reading is that the police and cross-burners are responsible, with Madonna opposing them.

35. bell hooks, “Madonna: Plantation Mistress or Soul Sister?,” in Black Looks: Race and Representation (Boston: South End, 1992), 157–64, especially 161–2, says that Madonna exchanges white paternalism and that her black characters are as stereotypical as “singing black slaves in the great plantation movies.” She objects to the video’s focus on a white woman and black male, claiming that black women have no role except “to catch (i.e., rescue) the ‘angelic’ Madonna when she is ‘falling,’” which is “a contemporary casting of the black female as Mammy.” (This refers to a shot of the presiding female minister welcoming Madonna at the beginning of her dream.) For a reading closer to my own—despite its dubious contention that the kiss between Madonna and Jesus has no necessary erotic dimension—see Ronald Scott, “Images of Race and Religion in Madonna’s Video ‘Like a Prayer,’” in Schwichtenberg, Madonna Connection, 57–79. See also Stephen Young, “Like a Critique: A Postmodern Essay on Madonna’s Postmodern Video ‘Like a Prayer,’” Popular Music and Society 15, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 59–68.


38. Michael Medved, Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992), 77. Apparently this refers to the same extremely brief shot in which Taylor sees Madonna “rub her genitals”—when after praying by the statue for a long time, she goes to sleep with a hand resting lightly on her abdomen. If one insists on pursuing a sexually reductive reading of this video, it would be much more promising to claim that “the true meaning” of Madonna’s dance in front of the burning crosses is to show off her cleavage. At least most viewers notice this. Either way, such readings say as much about the viewers as they do about Madonna.


40. Major statements include Fiske, Reading the Popular, 95–132; McClary, Feminine Endings; and several essays in Schwichtenberg, Madonna Connection. Lewis, Gender Politics and MTV, argues that Madonna and stars
such as Tina Turner pioneered a “female-address video” which expanded female spaces in rock, laying a foundation for later stars.


42. Similar readings include McClary, *Feminine Endings*, and Lewis, *Gender Politics and MTV*, 141–3. Thanks to Carolyn Krasnow for discussing this video with me at an early stage of this project.

43. Brown and Schulze, “Effects of Race, Gender, and Fandom,” documents a range of student responses: men who enjoyed it as a pornographic spectacle, women who disliked it for the same reason, men who saw it attacking pornography and/or felt uncomfortable watching it, and women who identified with Madonna being trapped in her job and trying to escape.

44. Bordo, “‘Material Girl,’” 674. This article is framed as an attack on McClary’s *Feminine Endings*. It persuasively attacks the tendency for some postmodern theory to dissolve into a celebration of abstract “difference” unrooted in particular contexts of struggle—in which case “difference” reduces to liberal individualism—and Bordo argues this important thesis more fully in “Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Skepticism,” in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 133–56. (Mandzuik, “Feminist Politics and Postmodern Seductions,” attacks Madonna along similar lines.) Unfortunately, Bordo analyzes “Open Your Heart” in an unnecessarily narrow context, saying that “the context in which it is historically embedded” is the “containment, sexualization and objectification of the female body” (674, emphasis added).

45. Lewis, *Gender Politics and MTV*, goes so far as to discover feminist virtues in shots of Madonna’s body at the peep show. For Bordo, this is pornography and cultural support for anorexia, because Madonna flaunts a thinner and more muscular body than in her earlier videos, but for Lewis, Madonna’s new look “gave a physical embodiment to the strength she had already acquired” as an artist. It “attenuat[ed] any impression of abject victimization” and “represent[ed] power” as much as sex (142).


47. Such critics highlight the power of consumerism to dissolve collective traditions and moral visions—whether they stress conservative traditions (as in Bloom, *Closing of the American Mind*), liberal ones (as in Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* [Berkeley: University of California, 1985]), or radical ones (as in Soelle, *To Work and to Love*). Commonly they reduce popular music to a commodity, as when Harper states that “music videos are really nothing more than advertisements for the audio recordings they feature” (“Synesthesia,” 120). Scholars like Lipsitz and McClary are more optimistic about the possibility that radical visions can be mediated through popular culture, although they stress that this is circumscribed. Without denying limits caused by commodification, they stress other dimensions of meaning. For an eloquent statement, see McClary, “Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-Garde Music Composition,” *Cultural Critique* 12 (1989): 77–82.

48. Madonna refuses to be pinned down about her views on feminism or religion, but often throws out suggestive quotes. In Adrian Deevoy, “Madonna Talks,” *US*, 13 June 1991, 18–24, she says “I’ve always known that Catholicism is a completely sexist, repressed, sin- and punishment-based religion” but “I go to church. . . . I love the rituals . . . and the mysteriousness of it all” (20). In Mikal Gilmore, “The Madonna Mystique,” *Rolling Stone*, 10 September 1989, she states “Men have always been the aggressors sexually. . . . So I think sex is equated with power. . . . I think it’s scary for women to have that power—or to have that power and be sexy at the same time” (57). Such evidence does not satisfy those who
interpret her whole career as a set of poses, since her interviews also contain much that is disturbing from feminist and religious points of view.

49. Sexist bias is often built into criticisms of mass culture; see Andreas Huyssen, “Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism’s Other,” in Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 188–207. McDannell, Material Christianity, 163–97, demonstrates how religious leaders often share the same attitude; I believe that she should draw out the implications of this argument for her discussion of Madonna.

50. For an incisive interpretation of this debate, see Alice Echols, Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1989), 288–91. At one extreme, Mary Daly, Beyond God the Father (Boston: Beacon, 1973), 123, compares the sexual revolution to a gang rape by an invading army. At another extreme, Re-Making Love: the Feminization of Sex (New York: Anchor, 1986), by Barbara Ehrenreich, et al., finds a “women’s sexual revolution” in cultural phenomena like Beatlemania and The Total Woman.

51. Bordo’s visceral hatred of “Open Your Heart” can be understood in light of the former approach—recall her statement that “the context” for Madonna was the “sexualization and objectification of the female body.”

PART TWO
POPULAR CULTURE IN RELIGION
The preceding section of this volume explored the first of our four relationships between religion and popular culture, the way religion influences and is expressed in popular culture. But in the relationship between religion and popular culture, influence does not run only in one direction: it is also possible to think about Popular Culture in Religion. Here, the focus is on how traditional religions utilize elements of popular culture, and on how such borrowings have affected the form and content of religion. The three essays in this section give special attention to evangelical Christianity, which has been especially interested in using the tools and motifs of the wider popular culture for evangelical purposes. The essays look at the religious expression and practice produced by these evangelical borrowings, and at the same time consider how evangelical Christianity is changed by its interactions with popular culture.

William D. Romanowski reviews the world of contemporary Christian music, asking how it was changed by efforts to cross over into the world of popular music. His work leads him to examine the claims that evangelism is the primary justification for such music, noting that in fact its principal audience is evangelical Christian youth. Rather than converting the world, contemporary Christian music serves to confirm the faith and identity of its already Christian audience. Yet, in efforts to expand its popular acceptance, contemporary Christian music has been influenced by marketing practices, cultural trends of leisure and consumption, and celebrity adulation.

Greg Peterson looks at the impact of the internet on traditional religions, especially Christianity and Islam. He explores two trends in cyberculture which at first seem incongruous: a new individuality and a new sense of community. He first discusses the individualizing tendencies of cyberculture, advanced by the opportunity for any internet user to sample a wide variety of religious ideas from the isolation of the home, encouraging a “quester” approach to religion. In counterpoint, he also explores the internet as an interactive medium that fosters new types of community (Peterson refers to cyberkoinonia, using the Christian Greek New Testament term for fellowship, and cyberummah, using the Arabic Muslim term for community).

For Stewart M. Hoover, the use, and absence, of the cross at Willow Creek, a prominent megachurch, provides an opportunity to think about how the megachurch movement has adapted to a world created by television and corporate culture, and about how we might study and discuss contemporary religious practice. He suggests that religious prejudice and inadequate critical tools lead us to discount the real
religious depth of the megachurch’s popular-culture-influenced services.

These authors help us to see, in the context of a mass-media culture, the cultural face of Christianity. It should be noted, however, that this influence of popular culture is not found only among evangelicals. Churches in the traditional mainline denominations are also bringing popular music and video projection screens into the sanctuary. Other traditions are also reshaped by their interactions with popular culture: on the cover of a book about the impact of media on traditional cultures (O What a Blow that Phantom Gave Me [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972]), Edmund Carpenter features a picture of a Kachina doll from the 1950s with a Mickey Mouse head, which is just one example of how widespread these influences are. What unites those who study Popular Culture in Religion is their interest in how existing religions are changed by their interactions with popular culture.
William D. Romanowski
The contemporary Christian music industry was established by American evangelicals in the early 1970s as a religious alternative to the mainstream, “secular” entertainment business. It began as a fledgling venture, with members of the youthful Jesus Movement using existing rock and folk music to communicate the gospel message to alienated youth of the Vietnam era. Shaped by evangelistic designs, these evangelical hippies created “Jesus Music,” the precursor to contemporary Christian music, by co-opting existing musical styles and adding “Christian” lyrics in the current vernacular. As a contemporary form of “gospel” music, contemporary Christian music was perceived by the secular media as a curious oddity in American religious life—a strange synthesis of rock (the “devil’s”) music and Bible-based song lyrics. Although the use of contemporary entertainment formats to reach the spiritually lost has historical precedents in earlier American evangelical revival movements, contemporary Christian music is the most extensive attempt to merge religious music with the commercial and industrial apparatus of the entertainment industry.

Throughout the 1970s, the evangelical music industry tried to counteract several common difficulties: a lack of audience acceptance for contemporary musical styles, technically inferior record production, severely limited radio exposure for artists, and a small and inefficient network for distribution, limited mainly to Christian bookstores. The industry scaffolding began to go up as concert halls replaced coffeehouses and church fellowship halls, record labels replaced custom recordings, and contemporary music radio formats replaced prerecorded tapes of local preachers. Increased commercialization and industrialization, justified by expanding opportunities for evangelization, pioneered the growth of a major evangelical commercial enterprise ($300 million to $500 million or more by some estimates). Today, the evangelical music industry has its own roster of “stars” who sell millions of records, appear on national talk shows, tour major arenas across the country, perform at major sporting events and at the White House, and are featured in mainstream magazines, including in People’s annual list of the 100 Most Beautiful People.

This essay investigates the limits and possibilities of the Christian music industry in the marketplace. I examine the coalescing of evangelical interests in spirituality, evangelism, and business, a development that created “religious” popular art out of the forces of leisure and consumption, marketing and profiteering, and the celebrity cult of power. The Christian music industry both influenced and was influenced by trends, practices, and strategies in the mainstream entertainment industry. This does not mean that these evangelical Christians simply “sold out” their evangelical heritage; nor, however, does it mean that the industrialization of contemporary Christian music did not influence evangelicalism. The
contemporary Christian music industry evolved with conflicts and contradictions. It can be understood as a process of incorporation: a general process of change that involves not only industrial and business organization, but also communicative and social relations, including the remaking of cultural perceptions. This evangelical venture in popular music making undeniably created discord and confusion both inside and outside the Christian music industry. Arguably, this is because of tensions in their common assumptions about the Christian life and cultural activity, which in turn, ironically, limited the possibilities of success for contemporary Christian music.

In brief, the Christian music industry existed initially as a separate religious alternative to mainstream business. In contrast to the secular industry, the business of contemporary Christian music, at least in the rhetoric of industry leaders and artists, was ministry and the evangelization of youth. “When you ask somebody what our songs are about there’s no ambiguity,” one of the early Jesus musicians explained. “It’s right there in plain simple language with no deep intellectual vibes. What we’re saying is Jesus, one way. If you want the answer follow it.” This conception shaped the way evangelicals thought about, produced, and consumed culture, emphasizing evangelistic value as the primary evaluative standard. This, in turn, fostered a naive acceptance of assumptions about the entertainment industry and its audience, especially regarding the supposed neutrality of musical styles and the potential effectiveness of popular music for evangelism. In addition, the Christian music industry fostered a movement in churches to consider the weekly gathering for worship as a vehicle for evangelism. To make services more appealing to non-Christians, local congregations debated the inclusion of popular music and entertainment formats, a challenge to cultural tradition for many; some have even used demographic studies to target a potential “audience.”

As the Christian music industry was increasingly incorporated by mainstream industrial practices, however, evangelistic ideals were eclipsed by business imperatives. Intense competition ensued between gospel record companies and independent religious distributors battling for slim profit margins in the small evangelical market. Evangelical record labels and distributors sued each other over contract disputes. Songwriters and publishers battled radio programmers over appropriate licensing fees. In order for Christian artists to be successful outside the evangelical market, gospel companies had to cooperate with secular ones, blurring boundaries between religious and secular both in cultural perception and in industrial reality. Codistribution deals let evangelical artists “cross over” onto the mainstream charts, but with songs “about life experience without any hidden spiritual agenda [emphasis mine],” as Amy Grant said about her Heart in Motion album. The crossover music confused evangelical consumers; there was seemingly nothing to distinguish Christian music from its secular counterpart. In other words, industrial advances necessitated new cultural understandings of the purpose of the music. Gospel executives continue to debate the measure of the industry’s success based on commercial and spiritual standards. “We’ve got the best distribution we’ve ever had, we’ve got the best capitalized companies we’ve ever had, we’ve got more sophistication than we’ve ever had and we’re selling less records,” one executive complained. Another thought that the industry had made a mistake “trying to blend the mainstream culture and the church culture into one. It’s like metric and standard.”

This study also illuminates ways that religious subcultures are co-opted, perhaps even converted, by the dominant American consumer culture. The rise of mass culture in twentieth-century American society both fueled the rise of “democratic” culture and homogenized it, suppressing the personal, ethnic, and religious identities associated with traditional subcultures. Media saturation eventually reshaped society, lessening familial and religious authority and eroding Americans’ sense of time and place. The unprecedented size of the baby boom generation and post-World War II affluence created a national
consumer-oriented youth culture that for the first time cut across social and economic lines. Commercial products—everything from blemish cream to movies—targeted the baby-boom demographic, and rock music was a staple in the post-war youth culture’s consumer diet.

By adopting both rock music and the ethos of the popular culture industries, contemporary Christian music thrust evangelical youth into the new consumer-oriented youth culture, or at least into an evangelical version of it. Clinging to particular religious convictions and cultural assumptions meant isolation in an evangelical ghetto, limited resources and rewards, and an inferior status in the dominant culture. A very successful Christian record, for example, only sells 100,000 copies or more; very few go gold (500,000 units sold), platinum (1 million), or multiplatinum, standard markers in the mainstream business. Religious radio reaches only 2.1 percent of the national audience, compared with the top music formats (Adult Contemporary, Country, Top 40) that account for over 10 percent each. On the other hand, venturing into the commercial mainstream, while it could result in an expanded market or “ministry,” greater financial success, and even “star” status, threatened the loss of specific religious identity to the homogenizing effects of mass culture.

Ecclesiastical purposes originally supplied the “sacred” justification evangelicals needed to record and perform “secular” music and to establish the Christian music industry, but these rules limited acceptable lyrical content to “confessional” themes for worship and evangelism. Such a utilitarian view of music making proved inadequate for gospel artists to thrive in the mainstream business, where evangelical songs with redundant lyrics about “Jesus” were not only unappealing to secular listeners, but perceived by producers and programmers as potentially offensive to large audience segments. Nevertheless, from the very beginning, the effort to create a demand for evangelical rock music committed the Christian music industry to the goals and strategies of the commercial marketplace—industrial growth, increased market share and greater profits. This, in turn, encouraged the popularization and dilution of the evangelical message necessary to build a large mass market. The evangelical artists who have been most successful on the mainstream charts, like Amy Grant and Michael W. Smith, scored with wholesome love songs and not the “confessional” lyrics that originally qualified as contemporary Christian music.

Consequently, the Christian music industry promoted an evangelical popular culture based on the rules of commercialism and not those of churches, elevating consumer values and taste at the expense of doctrine and tradition. In that sense, contemporary Christian music made a place in which the confluence of religion and the marketplace could shape both personal and communal identity for baby-boom evangelicals and their children. The merchandising of contemporary Christian music shifted “ministry” from collective spiritual matters to personal consumer habits, concentrating the practice of faith on the individual instead of the larger religious community. Contemporary Christian music thereby subordinated a church affiliation and denominational creeds to a highly individualistic and personal faith centered in the popular “born again” experience that was perhaps the hallmark of the popular evangelicalism that grew out of the Jesus Movement.

The Christian music industry, then, was forged with a dual purpose that had a decisive impact not only on the creation of evangelical popular music, but also on the establishment and evolution of the industry, its relation to the larger church community, and its fortunes in the world of American entertainment. In religious terms, the music was supposed to be a means of evangelistic outreach, with artists stepping in for ministers and singing “minisermons” to spiritually lost youth. In business terms, gospel artists and record companies competed for a share of the marketplace. The intent may have been to save souls and minister to young Christians, but the Christian music industry brought evangelical religion even further into the free-for-all competition of the consumer marketplace. Ironically, the synthesis of
evangelism and marketing led to the gospel industry’s own co-optation by the mainstream recording business.

THE ART WORLD OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MUSIC

The contemporary Christian music industry is best understood as an art world, an institutionalized social network with established conventions, rationales, and philosophical justifications that serve to identify roles for art and standards for production and evaluation. Perhaps the key feature of this evangelical art world is that it has a stronger religious orientation than it does a particular aesthetic. At first, adding confessional lyrics to imitations of commercially successful styles was the basis of evangelical music making: “Contemporary Christian Music has nothing to do with the musical style. It has only to do with the lyrics,” Sparrow Records founder Billy Ray Hearn said. And, as another Christian artist explained, “My music is not gospel music by the strict definition. It’s contemporary music with a Christian message. If you took the lyrics away and changed them to a secular message, I don’t think you would be able to tell the music apart from pop, contemporary, rock-oriented music.”

Contemporary Christian music became a musical chameleon, adapting existing styles from other commercial music producers. Musical style, seen as neutral, was left to secular innovation and mere Christian imitation; evangelical popular music was literally “not of this world,” but a parasite on secular industrial and artistic achievements, sanitized versions of various secular styles. Contemporary Christian music emerged primarily as religious propaganda—designed to persuade—and became a diluted expression of so many disparate musical styles that it lacked a religious, or even a cultural, home. In addition, the Christian music art world places spirituality and morality over aesthetic and cultural considerations, a feature with little correlation in the mainstream entertainment business. When prominent Christian artists admit to extramarital affairs, for example, many religious radio stations remove their music from playlists and retailers pull their records from the shelves.

No other form of popular music is distinguished solely by its “spiritual” dimension, as displayed in the lyrics (and sometimes an artist’s personal lifestyle), without regard for musical style. Even traditional gospel music—that is, southern gospel and country gospel—have musical uniqueness, as well as followers outside the evangelical church community. This is especially true of black gospel, which has a strong cultural compatibility with other forms of popular music. Differences between sacred and secular music are perhaps more cultural than artistic: music serves different functions in the life of a community and is identified by thematic content, purpose, and physical location—the church as opposed to the dance club, for instance.

Contemporary Christian music also differs from traditional gospel in that it was marketed almost exclusively to a religious subculture, namely the burgeoning evangelical youth culture and not the traditional gospel audience. Contemporary Christian music became the musical mainstream of the reformulated gospel market, 12- to 35-year-old white evangelicals, not the “unsaved youth” for whom the music was allegedly written. The extent to which the industry mirrored the shifting tastes of its consuming public became painfully clear at the Gospel Music Association (GMA) Convention in 1991. In the GMA’s effort to appease its growing constituency of white evangelicals, and to secure and maintain a television sponsor for its Dove Awards ceremony, the black gospel community was overlooked. Black gospel artists and executives complained about a lack of programming and seminars addressing the unique and specific
needs of the black gospel industry. The black gospel “Spectacular” artist showcase was absent from the week-long schedule of concerts, and black gospel categories were excluded from the telecast portion of the Dove Awards. The GMA was charged with tokenism and insensitivity to the black gospel community. “According to scripture, they’re about as non-Christian as you can get,” one black gospel artist said. “What most upsets me is that they consider their music as Christian, and ours as black Christian, but God is a Spirit.”

The powerful impersonal forces of marketing and demographics, rather than musical tradition or religious perspective, had come to largely define the Christian music industry.

The assumption that evangelicals have to compete for people’s attention in the world of popular culture and entertainment fueled the industry’s ambition to take religious music out of the church and into the marketplace. The effect and ensuing controversy matched that of earlier revival movements. Just as eighteenth-century mass revivalist George Whitefield’s fusion of drama and preaching blurred distinctions between the theater and the church, so also the evangelical use of popular music and associated social practices for the purpose of ministry confused the sacred and the profane, soul-saving and entertainment. By fusing religious themes and purposes with secular music, practices, and settings, traditional roles for church music—worship, praise, confession, and evangelism—were mixed with non-ecclesiastical functions for popular music, like dancing, diversion, exercising, enjoyment, or other aesthetic purposes. This may have helped forge an evangelical popular culture, but it also ripped religious popular music from the tradition and cultural life of the church. The lines between sacred and secular became increasingly blurry as the Christian music industry promoted a consumer-oriented culture that copied, even in some sense usurped, many functions of institutional religion. Concerts became worship services or evangelistic meetings. Consumer commodities (CDs, T-shirts, and other paraphernalia) became symbols representing religious faith. For some evangelical fans, social rituals, like going to a Christian concert or listening to a gospel recording on headphones, could qualify as a religious experience as much as attending a church service with a local congregation.

All this was not without effect. Turning mass recordings and rock tours into a form of “ministry” took church pastoring from the world of local, personal relationships, premised on trust and familiarity, into the impersonal world of entertainment, characterized by the market-driven terms of production and consumer choice. Furthermore, the Christian music industry had an impact on traditional worship styles and church ministries, as part of a broad range of changes instituted by the baby boomers who were once evangelical “hippies”: the rise of megachurches, the use of popular music and charismatic styles in worship, and the decline of denominationalism. Ironically, while conservative evangelicals today advocate “traditional” values, they have also incorporated contemporary music and entertainment formats in church services, clearly distinguishing their manner of worship from historic and more traditional styles.

Nevertheless, establishing an evangelical recording network seemed perfectly reasonable to evangelicals in the Christian music industry. To them, the marketing strategy of the mainstream entertainment business matched the evangelistic goals of the gospel industry. The success of evangelism was calculated by the number of souls that were saved; “souls” were consumers, as measured by record sales, airplay, and concert tickets. “What we are are packagers of ministries,” explained one gospel record executive. “We package an artist’s ministries in such a way that it can be multiplied to the greatest number of people.” People in the gospel industry believed that this fusion of marketing and ministry would simultaneously save souls and generate profits. Soon, however, evangelism became industry rhetoric—justifying the propaganda value of the industry’s work—not spiritual reality.

The need for such a spiritual justification for evangelicals’ participation in the production and
consumption of contemporary music was paramount, considering the church’s long history of antagonism with the “worldly” amusements, from the theater and women’s novels in the nineteenth century to popular music, dance, and movies in the twentieth, to name only the most recent examples. Religious groups often perceived entertainment as a threat to familial and religious identity and authority, and were more inclined to ban entertainment as being “on the side of Satan” than to seek to transform it for the service of God and neighbor. The more conservative religious groups denigrated popular culture; fundamentalists even demonized it.

Because of their passion for proclaiming the gospel, however, it was not unusual for American evangelicals to employ contemporary entertainment formats and new communication technologies for the purpose of mass evangelization. The antebellum revivals and camp meetings were probably the first large-scale popular entertainments in the United States. From radio evangelist Charles D. Fuller’s national radio broadcasts in the 1940s, to televangelist Pat Robertson’s Christian Broadcasting Network, evangelical groups have used contemporary idioms in radio, recording, television, film, and advertising. Music, in particular, has been central to the emotional style of evangelical revivals, from post-Civil War preacher Dwight L. Moody, and song leader and composer Ira B. Sankey, to Billy Sunday revivals in the early twentieth century, to Billy Graham crusades beginning in the 1950s. Similarly, the Christian music industry justified its existence and activities on the assumption that contemporary popular music was an effective vehicle for bringing the evangelical message of personal salvation through Christ to the modern youth culture and promoting “traditional” beliefs and values.

Some evangelicals, however, were not sure. One writer in an evangelical magazine observed that, as a communication process, evangelical rock sent conflicting messages. Christian groups, he explained, were “on stage wearing eye make-up and with shirts split open to their navels and with pelvises grinding to a ‘heavy metal’ sound; and they tell teenaged boys who may be struggling with gender confusion how God can fulfill their masculinity, or try to convince teenaged girls that they must cap their sexual urges until they are married.” A *Time* critic referred to contemporary Christian artists as “indistinguishable—except for their lyrics—from their secular counterparts.” Given such mixed signals, many evangelicals concluded that there was little difference between contemporary Christian and secular rock. Pentecostals and fundamentalists who thought rock music was inherently evil and irredeemable for evangelical ministry labeled evangelical versions of rock music “spiritual fornication” and “of Satanic origin.” Christian music apologists continued to argue for the neutrality of musical style as a defense against assertions that the beat of rock was inherently evil. At the same time, gospel artists and executives welcomed criticism that portrayed the evils of secular rock music. The gospel industry had much to gain by encouraging evangelical record buyers to forsake secular recordings and purchase their Christianized versions instead.

Despite harsh criticism from Pentecostals and fundamentalists, a significant slice of the evangelical market accepted contemporary Christian music’s evangelistic purposes, along with the ideas that musical style does not matter and that lyrics alone make the music “Christian.” The result, however, was not exactly what gospel industry people anticipated. Without access to the mainstream’s national and international systems for exposure (radio, television, video channels) and distribution (retail stores, record clubs), the gospel industry had little choice but to use religious broadcasting stations and bookstores to create an alternative evangelical network modeled after its secular counterpart. As a result, contemporary gospel music reached few non-evangelicals. The use of popular music as a means of evangelizing youth entrenched the religious audience in its own impotent subculture.

This was problematic for Christian music entrepreneurs. To be successful, in either business of
ministry terms, contemporary Christian music had to sell. But disparate motives and strategies within the growing industry resulted in an extreme lack of cooperation among bookstores, media, and producers—the different facets of the industry responsible for production, distribution, and exposure. Because of this, contemporary Christian music reached a plateau in the 1980s in terms of musical development, product sales, and market exposure.

First, cooperation among different sectors of this subcultural industry declined during the 1970s, when evangelical artists began using diverse musical styles—from folk and soft rock to heavy metal—which subdivided the evangelical market along the lines of taste groups. This reduced the size of the potential audience for any single recording, thus limiting record sales. Also, this wide variety of musical styles further stymied evangelical radio stations, which were already alienating potential listeners with formats that included, for example, a diverse mix of pretaped sermons and music.

Second, “mom-and-pop” religious bookstores, which were the main retailers for these recordings, initially showed little interest in promoting Christian music merchandise. But as sales of Christian music grew, music became a staple item in religious outlets, renamed “book and record stores.” Despite the industry’s dream for contemporary gospel to reach nonbelievers, however, Christian retailers protested when gospel labels established deals with mainstream distributors. Fear of competition from conventional retail chains also drove retailers’ resistance to the Christian Bookseller’s Association’s adoption of the SoundScan monitoring system, which put contemporary gospel artists on the mainstream sales charts in the 1990s.

Finally, disagreements over the commercial character of the music stymied cooperative efforts among retailers, producers, artists, and even local concert promoters. When Christian artists and record companies began to see increased revenues from concert fees and record sales in the late 1970s, some artists rebelled against the direction the industry was taking, arguing that ministry should be free. They refused to charge set fees for concerts or records and relied instead on freewill offerings and donations. Eventually, a group of musicians protested that the growth of the evangelical music industry actually hampered their ministries: “We who feel called as ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ feel that [the industry] is reflecting an unfortunate trend in Christian music brought on in part by the proliferation of airplay and sales charts and album reviews.” All of these differences and disputes within the industry highlighted growing tensions over the purpose and direction of contemporary Christian music.

Many Christian artists continue to feel that the industry’s altruistic dreams about evangelism and Christian discipleship have become lingering but distant ideals, largely eclipsed by the drive for business success. In 1997, musician Steve Camp went so far as to liken himself to sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther and issue “A Call for Reformation in the Contemporary Christian Music Industry.” In broad generalizations, Camp denounced contemporary Christian music as “a Christless, watered-down . . . God-as-my-girlfriend kind of thing,” and boldly demanded that gospel record labels “return all the money they have received to their respective secular counterparts that purchased them and divorce alliances with them.” This polemic, supported with 107 theses, demonstrates the kind of muddled cultural and aesthetic theorizing that can go on in the industry (as well as poor Biblical exegesis). Nevertheless, it garnered an audience and media attention by tapping into unresolved issues that still haunt the evangelical music industry.
Christian entrepreneurs were building an evangelical entertainment industry that paralleled its secular counterpart not just in musical styles and trends, but in marketing techniques, management, concert production, publicity, and glamorization. Controversy aside, the result was a steady increase in record sales. In 1977, a Warner Communications study put gospel music in the “All Others” category, which accounted for only 3 percent of all record sales. By 1983, gospel had its own category and accounted for almost 6 percent of total industry sales. Gospel was suddenly outselling both classical and jazz recordings.\(^{21}\)

The GMA identified gospel’s market as born-again Christians under 35 with an annual income over $20,000. A Gallup poll found that from 50 to 60 million Americans were in that category. The only significant issue was marketing: how to reach the popular evangelical audience. Although two-thirds of WORD Records’ sales came through Christian bookstores, research revealed that fewer than 10 percent of all evangelicals frequented these outlets. Also, a 1983 survey by the National Religious Broadcasters found that the number of U.S. radio stations with religious formats had increased 13 percent in the previous year, but religious stations had a meager 1.6 percent share of the listening audience in the United States. That put religious programming ahead of Spanish-language, “solid gold,” and jazz and classical stations, but hardly in the big leagues of popular music. A controversial survey report from WORD Records that year “painted a vivid picture of an infant industry still struggling for a significant share of the marketplace—often using antiquated (if any) marketing research.”\(^{22}\) These were harsh reminders of the shabby state of affairs in the gospel music network. Gospel industry people were all the more dissatisfied with the situation and determined to change it.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, several mainstream record companies established joint production, marketing, and distribution deals with gospel labels, hoping to turn evangelical songs into pop records that would capture mainstream airplay and break into national sales charts. “I’ll not pretend that we’re here because of some new burst of religious faith,” a CBS record executive said. “We’re here because of the potential to sell records in the gospel market. We want to put gospel records in stores that don’t currently carry them. We want to transform gospel from a specialty market to a mass-appeal market.”\(^{23}\) Dismal sales and the quick dissolution of these pacts, however, convinced gospel record executives that contemporary Christian music had to be made by and for young evangelicals. The key to crossover success was to reach the larger evangelical audience through mainstream exposure and distribution without estranging apprehensive Christian music followers.

Mainstream record companies renewed their interest in the gospel business when Amy Grant’s *Age to Age* (1982) sold over one million copies in the evangelical market. Grant’s platinum certification was a milestone in gospel music and all the more incredible because it happened without the benefit of national radio or video exposure. How much more business could Christian music’s top artist generate if she were to have access to these exposure media? Executives at A&M Records, who identified contemporary Christian music with the growing population of evangelicals and the conservative social and political agenda of the Reagan era, signed a coproduction and distribution deal with WORD, Grant’s record company. WORD continued to service Christian radio and retailers; A&M worked mainstream radio and marketed to conventional stores hoping to reach the large number of evangelicals who did not shop at religious bookstores or listen to evangelical radio.

This “crossover” affair brought tensions in the Christian music paradigm to the surface, exposing the limitations of both the Christian music aesthetic and the evangelical industry. Grant had achieved unprecedented stardom in the gospel field with religious-oriented songs like “My Father’s Eyes,” “El Shaddai,” and “Praise to the Lord.” Building on her success with the evangelical audience, Grant began
producing music that would appeal to the mainstream Adult Contemporary market. With each successive A&M/WORD project, Grant and her producers heightened her imitation of Top Forty sounds and selected lyrics more compatible with the Hot 100 and Adult Contemporary listings. The “celestial singer,” as *Time* noted, was “shooting for secular success.”

Fueled by the A&M/WORD initiative, Grant’s extraordinary career (by gospel standards) was marked with unprecedented achievements that completely transformed contemporary Christian music in terms of record sales and audience potential. Even prior to her 1991 release, *Heart in Motion* (which alone sold over 5 million copies and generated several Top Ten hits on the Billboard charts), Grant had earned five Grammy Awards and numerous Dove Awards, and sold over 10 million records. A contemporary Christian artist had finally achieved full commercial status and broad popular appeal. But popularity required religiously shallow lyrics, which elicited harsh criticism from Christian separatists. Grant was blasted by fundamentalists. “*Unguarded* isn’t Christian music; it’s moral and ethical humanism with a very slight religious perspective,” one *CCM Magazine* reader wrote of her first A&M/WORD album (1985). “From Amy’s ungodly album cover to her mediocre message, I see no attempt at true evangelism.” A note attached to a bouquet of flowers presented to her at a concert read: “Turn back. You can still be saved if you renounce what you’ve done.” Even people within the gospel industry had to wonder about the effect of contemporary Christian music’s move into the mainstream. When other WORD artists grumbled at not being selected for crossover projects, an A&M promotion director explained, “it could be because they’re too evangelistic for secular listeners.” The evangelistic ideals of Christian music were easily clouded by the business imperatives in the major leagues of popular music.

When Grant became the first gospel solo artist to reach the top of the Billboard Hot 100 in April 1991, *CCM Magazine* (the monthly magazine for evangelical music fans) declared the moment perhaps “the most significant single event in the history of contemporary Christian music.” But Grant “entered the realm of pop-culture history,” as the editor asserted, by topping the Billboard Hot 100 with a jejunie love song entitled “Baby Baby.” Ardent Christian music fans were confused about the message their most popular artist was spreading via the mainstream channels. Most religious stations excluded “Baby Baby” from their playlists. One general manager even removed Grant’s records from the station’s library and started a campaign urging other stations and religious bookstores to follow suit. Much of the controversy was centered on the “Baby Baby” video about a young couple in love, the “baby” being “a flirty, touchy guy,” as *USA Today* put it. An A&M press release rightly called the video clip “teasingly ambiguous.”

Grant’s gradual crossover into the mainstream was interpreted by some evangelical fans and critics as a violation of the spiritual standard for “Christian” music. If Grant was not producing and performing music for the purpose of ministry, they reasoned, then the crossover venture was little more than secular profit making. Even the mainstream press noted the difference. “Has Amy Grant traded in hallelujah for hubba hubba?” a writer in the *Los Angeles Times* asked. “It wasn’t that many years ago that the singer enjoyed an exceptionally demure image and sang almost strictly devotional songs.” Grant was, according to the gospel industry’s own definition, a Christian performing sanitized versions of secular love songs. There was little to distinguish this evangelical project from secular Top 40 fare. To secure mainstream success, contemporary Christian music’s biggest star abandoned explicitly religious lyrics, the sole distinguishing feature of gospel music and the symbolic rock of the entire evangelical music effort in the early days. *Heart in Motion* seemed to signal the assimilation of Christian music’s top artist—and, symbolically at least, the entire evangelical music industry—into the ethos of the mainstream recording industry.

In one sense, Grant’s career can be understood as that of an artist recognizing and overcoming the limitations of one socially constructed definition of popular music. Clearly, she challenged the narrowly
defined concept of “Christian music” as it evolved from the Jesus Movement. But the concerted marketing and promotional strategizing, and the enormous revenues generated by the crossover projects, make it impossible to reduce her musical campaign to simple artistic expression. For, in the gospel music industry, ministry was increasingly subjugated to popularity and financial profits as gospel record executives gradually acquiesced to equating missionary goals and marketing requirements. Grant was one artist in a growing industry of companies and corporations. Whatever she did she could not change the incorporation of contemporary Christian music: she could work only in the world of business and industry if she truly sought to reach millions of people with her music. As one artist manager argued at the GMA Convention in 1989, the goals of ministry and business are “exactly the same—market share.”

To be successful in the mass market, popular music must capture broader myths than those of a particular religious group. In effect, then, as the Christian music crossover trend illustrates, the dominant consumer culture may have a greater impact on religious subcultures in the United States than the other way around.

The success of the Christian music crossover demanded a new, or at least revised, justification for evangelical support. Grant proposed replacing evangelism with a new apologetic for contemporary music made by Christians. “Some feel that if music doesn’t have some kind of evangelical content, it doesn’t have any value,” Grant said. “I feel differently. I want to be able to turn on the radio and hear fun songs where I’m not being pressured materially, sexually or violence-wise.” But it was difficult to remake the cultural perceptions of many evangelicals who, after more than two decades of contemporary Christian music, now believed that confessional lyrics alone distinguished evangelical popular music and that only explicit “ministry” legitimized the industry. To them, such a change in value seemed in retrospect more like rationalizing than reestablishing guiding principles. Consequently, the Christian music crossover caused disarray within the gospel industry; there was little consensus on what constituted “Christian” music, or on the means, motives, and expected outcome of evangelical popular music. The industry was split into two camps: those determined to cross over with “sanctified entertainment,” and purists content to make music for the evangelical market. Try as they might, Christian music apologists seemed unable to escape the very limiting view of culture they had propagated in order to justify evangelical use of contemporary popular music. Moreover, the traditional Christian music industry, from religious radio and television to Christian bookstores, generally sided with the purist, anti-crossover believers.

The debate reached a critical moment in 1997 with the release of Amy Grant’s *Behind the Eyes*, an album that contained no explicit references to God or Jesus. Reviewers, radio programmers, and retailers debated the “Christian” merits of the record, while at the same time an album by country singer LeAnn Rimes, *You Light Up My Life: Inspirational Songs*, settled in for a long run at the top spot on the Christian album chart. The GMA had to launch a re-evaluation of its guidelines for the Dove Awards, and solicited reports from consultants to try to determine just what constitutes “Christian” music. The whole affair showed just how much industry growth had widened the cracks in the contemporary Christian music art world, which had become a confusing mixture of ministry as consumerism, evangelism, and entertainment.

**CONCLUSION**

The commercial success of Amy Grant, Michael W. Smith, BeBe and CeCe Winans, dc Talk, and other popular evangelical artists suggested that contemporary gospel could transcend the limitations of the evangelical market and perhaps even thrive in an age of “family values.” In the early 1990s, amidst predictions that gospel would follow country music as the next breakthrough genre, secular media
conglomerates began purchasing the most salient gospel recording and distribution companies: EMI-Capitol purchased Sparrow Communications and, within days, WORD, the largest gospel company, was purchased by Thomas Nelson (sold to Gaylord Entertainment in 1997). Gospel companies fell like dominos in the next few years; entertainment conglomerates were to exploit the evangelical market niche while giving gospel releases access to conventional retail outlets and overseas markets.

In a short time, however, corporate reshuffling began, along with speculations that secular parent companies were becoming disenchanted with evangelical business prospects. For years, industry executives complained that minuscule production budgets, inferior distribution and retail systems, and inadequate means of product exposure hampered the advance of Christian music, not only in the evangelical market, but also in efforts to penetrate the mainstream. Still, even as it largely overcame these problems, contemporary Christian music never reached the anticipated popularity and music sales. One gospel executive concluded: “Even if the music product measures up on so many levels—creatively, artistically, commercially—there’s still the spiritual dimension, and sometimes at least, our Christian agenda continues to be an obstacle.”

The intermingling of sacred and secular cultures that characterized the contemporary Christian music enterprise became a very complex affair. To the degree that people in the gospel industry drew a line between religious and non-religious subjects or aspects of life, we can talk about a trend toward secularization. The Christian faith might have mattered for church, personal morality, and family life, for example, but people in the Christian music industry relied on secular perspectives in the affairs of business, management, and the production and distribution of popular art. Secular motivations and goals—increased profits and larger market shares—equated with expanding ministries but revealed the divided allegiance of the Christian music industry as it tried to serve both God and mammon.

The results are mixed. The Christian music industry played a major role in popularizing basic evangelical beliefs and values through the commercial apparatus of the entertainment industry. There are plenty of Christian music fans who would testify that they have been edified by contemporary Christian music. Evangelical rock also fulfilled separatist desires, as a safe religious alternative to the vulgarity and rebelliousness of much rock music. Grant’s manager, Dan Harrell, said that “[w]hat Heart in Motion did was give Christian kids something to be proud of. They could say ‘Hey, we’re normal.’” As an imitation of contemporary secular music and fashion, contemporary Christian music bolstered the identity of young evangelicals who feared being alienated from their peers because of their religious faith. At the same time, however, by its incessant promotion of media consumption, the contemporary gospel industry subtly affirmed American materialism as a guide to personal happiness. Evangelical records and videos often were advertised as solutions to family problems, parent-child conflicts, and adolescent struggles.

Despite enlarged commercial success, evangelical artists did not have the impact, spiritual or artistic, that the Christian music community envisioned they would have on the world of secular music. Also, the uniqueness and force of contemporary Christian music was confounded by successful Christian artists like Bruce Cockburn and U2, whose music explored new styles on secular labels. Instead of writing and performing songs that imitated current musical fashions with redundant Christian motifs, they forged distinctive sounds and themes that won both commercial success and critical acclaim. Finally, the Christian music industry was rocked by its share of personal scandals and broken lives, breached contracts and multimillion-dollar lawsuits, competitive battles for larger profits, and ambitious jockeying for increased market shares. The fusion of business and religious values and purposes still plagues the Christian music industry. It remains something that people in the industry apparently have yet to understand, or at least publicly acknowledge, let alone use as a point to begin to critique and transform
NOTES


2. A recent report put revenues from record sales and concert tickets at $1.3 billion. Some people in the gospel music industry, however, question the validity of this figure, since it includes artists like LeAnn Rimes and Barbra Streisand, who released inspirational albums but are not considered contemporary Christian artists. See Adam Sandler, “Christian Music: The Word Is Out,” Variety, 4–10 May 1998, 32, 101.


11. Marv Winans, quoted in “GMA Under Fire From Black Gospel Industry,” CCM Update, 6 May 1991, 1–2, quotation from 1. Ironically, while white CCM artists have had difficulty maintaining the gospel message in their Adult Contemporary offerings, the distinction of the black gospel tradition is recognized in the general market. This acceptance gives credence to religious themes in the work of African American artists like BeBe and CeCe Winans and Kirk Franklin & The Family, and, conversely, allows a pop star like Whitney Houston to keep gospel numbers in her repertoire.

12. Stout even labels Whitefield “Anglo-America’s first modern celebrity” (Divine Dramatist, xiii).


Greg Peterson
In May 2004, the first virtual church service was held on the internet. At the website churchoffools.com, you could create a cartoon character (known as an “avatar,” a word, ironically, of Hindu origin) to attend worship in a virtual church that appeared, again cartoon-like, on your computer screen. You, or rather your avatar, could wander about the church or sit down and participate in the service, which included hymns, prayers, and a sermon. More than one thousand people attended the service, and although they were all in one house of worship, they were physically located thousands of miles apart from one another, from the United States to Scotland to Australia. Sponsored by the Methodist Church in the United Kingdom, the goal of the virtual church was outreach to those who might not feel comfortable in a regular church setting. Attendance at virtual services in the following weeks soared, peaking at forty-one thousand on May 25, 2004. Individuals testified to the oddly transformative experience of attending the church; for some, it was their first church experience in years. The virtual church services were not without glitches, however. Along with the devout came the curious and the disruptive. Satan himself, or at least his avatar, made an appearance, only to be humbled by the church warden, who could “smite” and banish anyone who acted inappropriately.1

Were these church services real? After all, this church existed only in cyberspace. Yet the words heard in the sermons were real, and when time came for the Lord’s Prayer, everyone typed in the words at the same time, so that the prayer appeared in text balloons above the head of each avatar. Were those who attended the services a community, or simply a collection of individuals? Was this real worship, or just a simulation?

Such are the questions raised by the advent of the internet. Not only has the internet become a major force in commerce (think Amazon, Expedia, or eBay); it has also played an increasing role in politics and society. The 2004 U.S. presidential campaign of Democratic candidate Howard Dean owed much of its early success to its ability to raise funds online. Individual webloggers, popularly known as “bloggers,” are now shapers of cultural opinion, playing pivotal roles in the U.S. presidential campaigns of 2004, and were nominated by ABC news as the “people of the year.” The internet has become one of the most important resources for information as well as misinformation, playing important roles as both shaper and reflection of the world’s cultures.

But what of religion? As the churchoffools website shows, religion is on the internet in no small way. Typing the word Jesus into the Google search engine produces millions of hits. A survey conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project suggests that a quarter of all internet users have searched the web for religious material.2 With the click of a mouse, one can flit from the official website of the Vatican (www.vatican.va), to personal testimonies of Buddhist practitioners, to instructions for neopagan
worship. Is this instant accessibility of religious material significant?

From one viewpoint, mass media, whether it be paperback books, popular music, or movies, is simply a reflection of the tastes and proclivities of society at any given time. Movies emphasizing sex and violence are made because that is what people want to see. From another viewpoint, the media does more than reflect society; it also shapes society. The original Star Trek television series was a hit not only because it reflected the American values of the day, but also because it challenged them and painted a positive picture of the future in a period (the 1960s) when the present looked bleak. Moreover, network television, by its very existence, provided a startlingly unifying cultural force. Most Americans in 1969 saw the first man land on the moon. Many children who grew up in the 1970s watched Star Trek, as well as Gilligans Island and The Brady Bunch. Where there was national diversity, television created unity.

Like mass media, the internet both reflects and shapes cultural developments, including religion, in both obvious and subtle ways. I suggest that there are two concurrent but countervailing trends that characterize the interaction between the internet and religion. On the one hand, the internet contributes to the growth of individualism: web surfing, religious or otherwise, is usually a solitary activity. On the other hand, the internet also fosters community, in novel and sometimes unexpected ways. These two trends may seem paradoxical. However, the internet magnifies existing trends in society and sometimes even sends them hurtling into one another. For example, the internet simultaneously magnifies both individualism and community in particular ways, with ramifications for all of us as we go forward into the twenty-first century.

A HISTORICAL DIGRESSION

Although the internet is a new phenomenon, it is preceded by a long history of interaction between religion and technology, especially technologies of communication. While religious communities sometimes oppose the use and spread of new technologies (one might think of the Amish or of modern religious resistance to developments in biotechnology), what is more impressive is the way that religions utilize technologies, which sometimes play an instrumental role in a religion’s adaptation. The technology of the book (which superseded scrolls of papyrus or vellum) was widely adopted by early Christian communities. The printing press, invented in 1450, played an instrumental role in the Protestant Reformation when it began in 1517.

New technologies often do more than further a religion’s development; they also shape religions. The printing press is perhaps the most obvious example. The Reformation leader Martin Luther proclaimed that religious truth was based on scripture alone, which should be interpreted by the individual. The printing press made individualized scripture study possible for the masses by providing relatively cheap Bibles for everyone. For the first time, everyone who was able to read had access to the Bible, making it possible for them to disagree with Catholic authorities and even the Protestant Reformers themselves.

A similar observation might be made regarding television, another technological advancement which, like the printing press, also has the potential to empower and transform religion. Since television is a visual medium that invites the viewer to be passive in the solitude of his or her living room, its successful programs are the more theatrical, more dramatic, more emotionally provocative ones. It is not very interesting to watch Calvinists sing hymns, but it is interesting and personally involving to hear a televangelist speak directly to you, or to watch a pentecostal minister heal the sick. Once television raised expectations that religion would be entertaining, local places of worship struggled to compete with the
new medium and keep up with these new expectations. Television has empowered and transformed religion at the same time.

One of the distinguishing features of the internet, in contrast to both television and print, is its interactive character. Email, instant messaging, and chat rooms allow for a level of communication between users not previously possible in other media. Websites invite the cybersurfer to be an active explorer, with the next nugget of knowledge or inspiration only a hyperlink and a mouse-click away.

Moreover, the internet is a dramatically global phenomenon, now almost universally available. Many users all over the world can log on from home. Or, if home access is not available, there is a good chance people can use a computer nearby. Cybercafes can be found in New York City and Sioux Falls, in Switzerland and Laos. Ubiquity is now a central feature of the internet.

The interactivity and ubiquity of the internet are central to understanding its impact on religious individuals and communities. The average American or European surfs the web alone, often in the solitude of home. But web surfing automatically links one person to others—their attitudes, their feelings, even their innermost thoughts. Despite this connection, you probably have no idea who people you meet on the internet really are.

**THE NEW INDIVIDUALISM**

Religion, the British mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once remarked, is what people do in their solitude. Historically, it seems a dubious claim. Certainly, religion has its important solitary side: the penitent praying, the meditator in the cave, the offering to the ancestors. But religion is also profoundly communal. A Muslim goes on a pilgrimage as an individual, but does so in ways that are regulated by the community, and, once in Mecca itself, performs rituals amidst a crowd of fellow believers. For an evangelical Christian, being born again may be a profoundly personal experience, but it is recognized in the very public adult baptism or “altar call” ceremony in which salvation is offered to all who accept it by walking to the front of the church in full view of the congregation.

Historically, it is the communal aspect of religion that stands out. Privately, Christians may identify themselves as such by virtue of personal piety, but more visibly, Christians are defined by virtue of being part of a church community. Jews gather at a synagogue, Muslims at a mosque. Even Hindus, often portrayed as practicing a very individualistic spirituality, gather at a temple.

But religiosity is not defined solely by its communal aspect, nor even by acceptance of the answers provided by the community. In the 1990s, psychologist C. D. Batson developed the category of *quest religion* to describe religious seeking motivated by dissatisfaction with existing answers. Questers, who may be part of an existing religious community, are seeking the truth on their own and are willing to explore the depths of other religious traditions to find it. Questing, by definition, is a kind of religious individualism, one that refuses to accept pat answers and accepted dogmas.

The internet fosters the faith of those who would not normally consider themselves to be questers. The devout evangelical Christian may go to [www.bible.com](http://www.bible.com) and there see the scripture of the day, search the Bible either in the Revised Standard Version or the King James Version, find answers that the Bible gives to a variety of questions (conveniently listed under the title, “What Does the Bible Say About . . . ?”), and—of course—buy Bibles. Or, a Mormon may choose to check out [www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org), the official website of the Church of Latter Day Saints (LDS). There it is possible to read a sermon by LDS president George Hinckley, watch a video on the need to care for the poor, read the *Book of Mormon*, or find the
The internet enables the individual as an individual. Questions that once may have been pursued in the context of a church Bible study or in consultation with the local minister can now be answered online. In the Pew survey mentioned above, most (84 percent) of those searching religious topics online already belonged to a house of worship and were more likely to be actively involved in a worshiping community than the general populace. And although most (69 percent) were looking to enhance their understanding of their own religion, many others stated that they were looking up information on other religions. While the first stop may be www.bible.com for many Christians, only a mouse-click away is www.quran.org.uk, a site offering Islamic resources. So, too, is the official website of the Tibetan government in exile, www.tibet.com, where you can learn about the 1Dalai Lama, Tibetan oracles, and Buddhist practice.

The internet is an intrinsically quester medium. On the internet, individual mosques, churches, synagogues, and temples which may be separated by thousands of miles are now all available in anyone’s living room. Importantly, religious websites present their religions from the perspective of an insider, not an outsider. It is one thing for a Christian to learn of Buddhism from other Christians, and quite another for that Christian to learn of Buddhism from Buddhists. Indeed, it is the questing character of the internet that is striking. Take, for example, beliefnet.com, one of the most prominent religious portals on the web. On its home page, one may read a news report on Hindu responses to the 2004 tsunami, click on an interview with a Buddhist monk, vote for the most inspiring person of the year, or discover your true religion on the “beliefo-matic.” The belief-o-matic matches you to a religion based on your answers to a series of questions (first question: what is the number and nature of the deity, God, gods, or higher power?). A presumably tongue-in-cheek warning states that belief-o-matic assumes no legal liability for the ultimate fate of your soul.

One feature of the beliefnet website, which is shared by many other religious websites, is the ability to post contributions to an online discussion. You can click the topic of your choice (from gardening to peace and justice), read the previous postings, and make your contribution. Most notable about these discussions is their essentially anonymous and impersonal character. On the internet, your screen name need not bear any relation to your real name. Individuals are free to express their opinions with few consequences. Although discussion boards may at first appear to be communal, they are often the ultimate expression of individualism.

The next step beyond web surfing is to set up your own website. At a site like geocities.com you can set up your website for free, detailing to the world your own personal creed. For example, a website titled One Pagan’s Heart allows the surfer to read about Jarred and his pagan faith. On the site, Jarred, who grew up Baptist, tells the story of his conversion to pagan belief, culminating in his devotion to the Norse goddess Freyja. He espouses a kind of religious pluralism, claiming that there is more than one path to religious truth. Jarred also addresses perennial pagan questions, such as how to deal with spells that do not seem to work.

Jarred, like many neopagans, expresses a highly individualized approach to religion, which he shares with the world on the web. His openness to diverse points of view and learning from other faith traditions are hallmarks of the quest type of religion. However, the claim can be made that the posting of a web page undermines the very individualism it seems to support. To post a web page is to announce to the world your beliefs, and why do this unless you want someone else to view what you have posted? To a certain extent, questing leads to a kind of individualism that the internet uniquely fosters. But this very kind of individualism also leads to community. In the end, people cannot escape each other. The prime question is not whether we interact, but how.
In 1984, Apple Computer announced the arrival of the Macintosh computer with a groundbreaking television ad that was featured during the telecast of that year’s Super Bowl. It opened with a black-and-white scene depicting an Orwellian mass rally where every worker was a slave. Suddenly, a woman—appearing in color—came running forward wielding a sledgehammer, which she threw at a huge screen that depicted the face of some Stalinesque dictator. The image of the leader was smashed. The ending slogan: “On January 24th, Apple Computer will introduce the Macintosh. And you’ll see why 1984 won’t be like 1984.”

Presumably, the Macintosh would make you free. So, too, many argued a decade later, would the internet. The internet, it was claimed, empowers individuals by providing them with instant access to presumably reliable information from across the globe. Much was made of the fact that the internet was not controlled by anyone and, as such, undermined the power of government and other forces in individual lives. The implication was that since we are no longer bound by our bodies on the internet, we can be whoever we want to be. In cyberspace, we have no age, no gender, no race. In cyberspace, we are all equal. Claims were made that the internet would even lead to a new kind of religion, one that changed the very pattern of our thought. MIT sociologist Sherry Turkel stated, “Like it or not, the Internet is one of the most dramatic examples of something that is self-organized. That’s the point. God is the distributed, decentralized system.”

Such prognostications and hype inevitably produced a backlash. Gender, race, and age did not disappear, critics argued; instead they became hidden under the veneer of the male, white culture that dominates the technological elite. Instead of liberating us from our bodies, the internet creates an alienation from our true, physical nature. Instead of community we get pseudo-community; instead of true religion we get a false idol.

The internet has not created a new god, but it has changed the way religious communities act. Neither has the internet eliminated religious community, as the critics feared, as much as it has changed the way religious communities act, identify themselves, and relate to one another. While the internet lends itself to questing and individualism, its more profound impact is that it reshapes and redefines religious community.

Christians sometimes use the Greek word koinonia to speak of community. Historically, Christian community has been understood primarily in terms of the church. That church can be either the local church to which an individual belongs or the church as a whole, meaning (typically) all Catholics, Lutherans, or (more recently) even all Christians. Historically, individual Christians find community at the local church, whereas—limited by time and distance—they find the church as a whole to be little more than an abstraction. In the modern United States, churches are organized into denominations, each with its own national staff, bishops, seminaries, and other tiers of organization.

To explore Christian community on the web, one might first turn to the official websites of Christian organizations. Such websites are plentiful, but they tend to be static and infrequently updated. They do not form community so much as they announce that the community exists. The global nature of the web tends to work against the viability of such institutional websites, since it is difficult for them to stand out among the millions of possible choices. How then does the internet shape religious communities? Is there a cyberkoinonia, a true online community?

Like ordinary space, cyberspace has both its public and private domains. The web can be seen as the public domain, while email and email networks form the private domains. The technology of email is an
important shaper of community. By means of a distribution list, a single email can be sent to many individuals at once. The most familiar abuse of a distribution list is spam. But groups often maintain and form communities by using distribution lists. Some Christians, for example, use distribution lists for what might be called “Christian messaging.”

In its simplest form, Christian messaging consists of an inspirational message, miraculous story, dire warning, or a call to action. Often, messages encourage the recipients to forward it to others. The sender of the email usually has first received it from someone else and is not the author of the email. Content of the emails may vary widely, from scripture passages and inspirational stories to calls for action. The key point, however, is not the content of the email but the community that is formed as a result.

Christian messaging makes it possible to define community not simply by a location, but also by a distribution list. Cybercommunities are formed as a result, but—importantly—they are not merely cybercommunities. Distribution lists are typically composed of people who already know each other, including friends, relatives, friends of relatives and relatives of friends. These individuals may live in the same locale or they may be stretched around the world. Koinonia is no longer defined in terms of a place, but in terms of a network. The network never meets together in ordinary space, all in one place or all at one time. Only in cyberspace are they together all at once, revealed by all the email addresses listed in the “send” row.

Blogging is another form of community shaping. The website www.blogs4god.com (as of March 2005) lists 1,400 blogs, arranged in categories from “apologia” to “pundits.” Blogging fully represents the paradox of the internet, creating greater individualism in religion at the same time that it forms new communities. At first, blogging appears to be an intrinsically individualistic activity. A blog is typically produced by an individual presenting his or her thoughts to the world for any to read, from New York to New Zealand. But blogging also seems to be an intrinsically questing activity. Bloggers do not simply post Bible passages or creedal statements. Rather, they personally reflect on the events of their lives, current events, and social issues that affect them and their readers directly, trying to integrate these events into their own worldview. In short, they are doing theology, asking questions, and trying to provide answers. For example, in the wake of the December 2004 tsunami that killed upwards of 150,000 people in southeast Asia, bloggers wrestled with the question of theodicy. How could God let this happen? What does it mean that this happened on such a grand scale?

The most interesting thing about blogging, however, is the extent to which it has become a community activity. Communities of readers—sometimes quite large in number—follow certain blogs. If the readership of a blog is sufficiently large, advertising links can even be a source of modest income for the blogger. Blogs are most often presented in the form of an ongoing conversation, including links to the standard media and other blogs. Bloggers will typically post links to news stories, photographs, cartoons, and other blogs that they find of interest. Some blogs provide space for reader comments. It is not unusual for bloggers to identify themselves, complete with pictures, giving readers the sense of hearing and seeing a real person.

Blogging once again shifts the form of Christian community and Christian discourse. While Christian messaging sometimes involves personal interaction, bloggers and their readers usually do not know each other. No longer does a Christian need to be a member of the local church; she can interact with (usually) English-speaking Christians around the world. Becoming part of such a community, however, implies a limit on the very questing character that blogging seems to imply. Indeed, a cursory review of the blogs listed on blogs4god.com suggests that most Christian bloggers are white, American males with a conservative/evangelical bent.
However, the very size of the internet guarantees that you can always find someone who shares your view. If you do read something that discomfits you on a blog or website, there is always another website that can reinforce your own view. Indeed, a fair chunk of Christian blogging is devoted to critiquing media reports and pundits. If you do not like what the New York Times says about the movie The Passion, you can find a community of bloggers who share your views. In such ways is online community formed.

With the advent of the internet, community is no longer defined by physical place but by cyberplace. But it is a mistake to think of cyberplace as disembodied. Rather, it is embodied nationally and even globally, creating a new kind of unity amidst the world’s diversity.

**FROM MOSQUE TO CYBERUMMAH**

One can expect that the impact that the internet is having on the lives of Christians and Christian communities will also be found in other religions and religious communities. Islam, like Christianity, is a world religion in the full sense of the term. Even before the advent of the twentieth century and modern forms of transportation, the practice of Islam stretched from Morocco in the west to Indonesia in the east, from sub-Saharan Africa in the south to central Asia in the north. Increasingly, Islam is practiced in North America and especially Europe, as individual Muslims migrate north and across the ocean in search of jobs. Indeed, in some western European countries, Muslim minorities constitute as much as five percent of the population.

6 Muslims generally are united in their devotion to the one true God, the witness of Muhammed as God’s prophet, and the Qur’an as the revelation of God to the Muslim people. A central concept of Islam is the concept of the ummah, the community of Muslims. Although Islam is known for its emphasis on the individual and the individual’s relation directly to God, Islam is also characterized by this valuing of community. The communal nature of Islam is revealed in the practice of zakat, or almsgiving. It is also embodied in the hajj, the expectation that individuals will make a pilgrimage to Mecca once in their lifetime. Although the hajj is often understood in terms of individual practice, it also has a strongly communal aspect: one travels with fellow Muslims to Mecca and there encounters Muslims from every corner of the globe who worship together despite ethnic, linguistic, and national differences. The concept of ummah is also reflected in the historic lack of separation between religion and the state. For many Muslims, the state is the Muslim community, and a primary function of the political leader is to serve as guardian and protector of the Islamic faith.

Despite this historical understanding of Muslim unity, Islam as much as Christianity has been defined by local community and global diversity. In 1800, Islam was practiced differently in all its locales, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, western China, and Indonesia. Today this is less true, in part because modern technologies have facilitated the rise of global forms of Islam. As a result twenty-first-century Islam differs in important respects from nineteenth-century Islam. While these technologies make the dream of one worldwide ummah seem possible, the internet accomplishes this in a way that previous technologies have not. The internet’s impact is most obvious in the case of radical Islam.

Radical Islam has its roots in the experience of colonization, modernization, and Westernization that reached its peak in the mid-twentieth century. Groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, formed in 1928 by Hasan al Banna, reacted negatively to the influence of colonial powers such as Great Britain, as well as to the Arab secular elites that dominated the political culture of Arab states. Radical Muslims reacted by appealing to a new, fundamentalist form of Islam that emphasized a return to Islam as they claim it was
practiced in its original, pure state. For the most part, this appeal was taken to imply a rejection of Western values, including political values, sexual mores and gender roles, Western legal systems, and, importantly, the practice of lending money for interest. Paradoxically, the appeal did not include a rejection of technology. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of radical Islam (and fundamentalisms) is its facility in using Western technology to further its own ends. This technological skill was perhaps first demonstrated in the lead-up to the 1979 Iranian revolution, where resistance speeches by Ayatollah Khomeini were mass-produced on cassette tapes and smuggled into Iran from Paris, where the Ayatollah then lived in exile.

Because cassette tapes, television shows, and movies can be massproduced, they have had a globalizing effect on local Muslim communities. It was not until the development of satellite news networks that the idea of a truly global Islam became a reality. Stations such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya provide round-the-clock offerings for Arabic-speaking audiences. But if one does not have a satellite dish or does not speak Arabic (an important point, since most Muslims are not Arab), one can still visit the television network’s websites. Al Jazeera provides a full English-language version of their content, available alongside its Arabic language version and available anywhere in the world. Previously, what went on in Saudi Arabia was unheard of in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim nation. Now, local events can have global significance.

Radical militant groups have made the most effective use of the ubiquity of the internet, notoriously posting propaganda and even beheadings on the internet as a means of furthering their cause. Chat rooms and email serve to buttress this kind of community formation. Gary Bunt, in his book *Islam in the Digital Age* speaks of *ejihad*, the use of the internet to further the aims of radical, political Islam. Cyberspace allows local issues to become global and global perspectives to become local. The ideology of radical Muslim *jihad*, once limited to the Middle East, now gets imported to Muslim communities in Indonesia. When conflict erupted between Indonesian Muslim and Christian communities in 1998, the language of *jihad* was used to interpret the conflict, which was then announced to the world by means of the internet. In Indonesia, radical Muslim factions publicized their views of the conflict on the internet, as well as pictures of the dead and wounded, allegedly killed or injured by Christian militants. The local conflict became global, feeding further into the internet-based linkage of radical Muslim communities.

The internet facilitates community formation for Muslims, as it does for Christians, but a community formation of a particular kind. Because the internet allows communication and the sense of solidarity across vast distances, the very idea of the *ummah* changes. The *ummah* is understood not only in terms of the local community or even the nation, but as the global community of Muslims made tangible by internet access. Not only is what happens in Indonesia known in Saudi Arabia; it can be experienced by people there directly through email, chat rooms, blogs, and websites.

While this globalization via the internet is most obvious in the case of radical, political Islam, it is also quite visible in terms of traditional Islamic piety. Sites like *islamcity.com, islamonline.net*, and *islamworld.net* provide portals for Muslim communities, with content ranging from updated news reports, sidebars that provide basic information on Islam, Arabic language tutorials, radio and television offerings (usually religious in character), and chat rooms. It is not uncommon for these sites to include matchmaking services, a telling connection between the apparently global character of the web and its very local implementation. Islamonline’s matchmaking web page leads with a quotation from the Qur’an. Presumably, by using its service you may find a devout Muslim like you, meaning the kind of Muslim who goes to websites such as Islamonline and shares the same core set of commitments.

There is, however, a price to be paid. Because the internet is a global technology with its roots in
western culture, there is arguably a westernizing effect that the internet imposes at the same time that it fosters particular forms of community. While Arabic language websites thrive, the primary language of the web is English. Because many Muslims do not speak Arabic, English is a convenient second language, keeping in mind the substantial Muslim minorities in English-speaking countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and even India. But along with the English language come elements of Western values, ranging from the emphasis on material goods and entertainment to ideals of sex and romance. On many Islamic websites, commerce is not very far away. Islamicity provides a bazaar where items ranging from books to perfume may be purchased. A visit to www.jannah.org finds a prominent link to MuslimGear.com, promoting Muslim-related clothing items.

Western influence can be seen in other ways. In recent years, individual Muslim groups have jumped on the anti-evolution bandwagon created by Christian fundamentalists. Islamonline includes articles on the relationship of Islam and science, one of them by Harun Yahya, who claims to refute evolution. Yahya’s own website, www.hyahya.org, contains many of the kind of arguments typical of Christian anti-evolutionists, arguments that were largely foreign to Muslim communities a mere ten years ago. Now, however, they are fairly widespread across the internet. Once again, we encounter the central irony of the internet: at the same time that the internet promotes community, it changes community.

FOR GOOD OR ILL?

Those who have emphasized the positive impact of the internet point to its democratizing effect and lack of central control. Advocates of the internet have argued that its very size and decentralization spell the end of totalitarianism everywhere, echoing the prediction of the first Apple ad about its computer’s effect on modern society. However, current efforts by the U.S. government to monitor email traffic for terrorist threats have raised in some people’s minds the totalitarian specter of the internet. In response, internet advocates point to the difficulties that the Iranian and Chinese governments have had in controlling internet access and communication, implying that the very decentralization of the internet makes controlling it impossible. In contrast to positive claims about the internet, its critics often point to its potentially dehumanizing aspects, as we become disembodied surfers on the web, alienated from the very communities we live in, as we seek out the illusion of love and companionship in cyberspace.

When religion is included in this analysis, we find the situation even more complex. On the one hand, many of the features of the internet seem perfectly designed for promoting individuality and questing behavior. New information and diverse points of view are now available in your living room only a mouse-click away, and, if you do not like those views, you can announce your own. But the internet seems to promote new kinds of community more than individualism. Whereas previous forms of mass media, especially radio and television, impose a passivity on the part of the viewer or listener, the internet encourages interaction, encouraging the formation of community. Rather than being disembodied, as many claim, these new communities are connected to physically existing communities in complex ways. But which communities are they connected to?

Despite the web’s intrinsically quest character, it is not quest religion that dominates the web, but, rather, traditional and conservative forms of religion. Christian blogging is more characterized by its uniformity than its diversity. It is the conservative and radical forms of Islam that most prominently use the web, not liberal or progressive forms. Part of this may be simply demographics, but much of it arguably has to do with the nature of the web itself and the communities to which it lends itself.
Democratizing technology not only flattens existing social hierarchies; it also inverts them. This effect is especially true on the internet. The communities most driven to use new technology are those who need it most—communities that feel themselves to be in the minority or oppressed, who desire change from the status quo. The internet not only democratizes information, but also obscures the power relations that exist in society at large. On the internet, there is no automatic gauge that informs you of the significance of a website, the influence of its author or organization, or the authenticity of the material being presented. The weak may appear powerful, and the powerful may appear weak. Because the weak are often more motivated, they are the ones to use the new technologies first and most effectively.

Thus, the weak become powerful, but at a price, for the very technology they use transforms the community of which they are a part. A visit to beliefnet.com, christianitytoday.com, and islamicity.com will reveal the sites’ uniformity as much as their diversity. Articles on all three relate to matters of creed and personal life. Links provide access to chat rooms and ecards to send to loved ones. Besides the banner ads, all three websites have links for shopping for religion-related items. All three websites advertise religion-oriented dating services. The content of beliefnet.com, christianitytoday.com, and islamicity.com is quite different, but the look is much the same. Even dissenters and questers are gathered into the web’s homogenizing realm of influence.

NOTES


8. Birgit Bräuchler, “Cyberidentities at War: Religion, Identity, and the Internet in the Moluccan Conflict,” Indonesia 75 (2003): 123–151. It is important to note that the Christian community in the conflict used the internet in a similar way to the Muslims, and for similar purposes.

9. Similar dating services can be found online for Christians and Jews.
Stewart M. Hoover
My only visit to a true megachurch took place a few years ago when I sat in with a delegation of mainline church communication officers at Willow Creek Community Church near Chicago. Willow Creek is in many ways the prototype of the megachurch, also known as the seeker’s church or “next” church. One incident during my time there stands out. As this group sat in the church’s huge auditorium, the tour guide asked them to name anything they thought was missing from the space. “There’s no cross,” said several, almost in unison. “That’s right,” replied the guide, who went on to say:

In fact, you will see no Christian symbolism here at all. The metaphor or image we are trying to project here is corporate or business, not traditional church. Now, we do have a cross. We bring it out for special occasions, like baptism. When I was baptized here, all of us were asked to write our sins on pieces of paper and stick them on the cross as we came forward. I’ll never forget looking up from the baptistery at that cross, covered in paper. I had not really understood atonement until that moment. So we think of the cross as a prop.

The reaction of these visitors from more conventional churches and denominations was predictable. Most felt that it was disingenuous, if not downright irreligious, for Willow Creek to so consciously eliminate the long-standing trappings of the faith from its walls. But most of the discussion centered around the notion of the cross as a “prop.” This was obviously meant as the theatrical term for stage paraphernalia, not the idea of the cross as a spiritual crutch of some sort to “prop” one up. But the idea struck most of my fellow attendees as a trivialization of the central symbol of the Christian faith. That the cross would only have the status of “prop” substantially devalued it in their eyes.

I will return to this story because I think it enables us to understand some things not only about the megachurch as a phenomenon, but also about the state of contemporary religious practice and the role that the commodities of the media and popular culture have played and will continue to play in it. We are well beyond the time when we can see the intersection between religion and culture purely in cause and effect terms. That is, it is both unsatisfying and misleading to ask either how religion affects the media or how the media affect religion. The deeper, more profound, and more helpful question is how media and religion as social and cultural spaces and practices are interacting in contemporary life, and how we can better understand the prospects of religion in a media age.
It is obvious that I see the phenomenon of the megachurch as a source of helpful insight. The implications of the anecdote above, and of the whole phenomenon of “seeker” religiosity which megachurches benefit from, are best understood when they are historically and theoretically grounded. Megachurches such as Willow Creek are much more than the sum of their various parts.

The characteristics of megachurches are well known. They are large, typically with several thousand members. They are Protestant, and generally associated with the evangelical side of the Protestant ledger. They emphasize service of members’ needs and interests, and see religion as a consumer “demand” rather than as a “supply” issue. Willow Creek, for instance, is well known for regularly conducting market surveys of its geographic area, and adjusting and shaping its ministries to fit the results.

These elements of Willow Creek—its conscious “market” orientation and the programs that have resulted—make it emblematic of a new kind of religious practice that Wade Clark Roof, a sociologist of religion, has described in *A Generation of Seekers*. According to Roof, baby-boom religiosity is coming to be dominated by an emphasis on seeking more than on belief or belonging. The focus is on developing a religious faith that is unique to the individual person and oriented toward their own needs and interests. The market research of Willow Creek has placed it in a unique position to be able to respond to this “seeker religiosity.”

The most common criticism of megachurches relates to their religious authenticity. The market-driven approach so typical of the media and popular culture seems to some observers necessarily to devalue the core activities of these institutions. Using market logic to create programs, services, and even products to respond to religious “seeking” turns religion into a commodity. Worse still, religion becomes just one commodity in a culture of commodities, and therefore necessarily less “authentic,” “meaningful,” and “truly religious.” Seen in this light, the cross being used and manipulated in the way described above suggests that the overall effect of the megachurch is to undermine important and authentic symbols and practices of the faith.

While Willow Creek itself is not a media church of any kind, I wish to argue that its religious practice places it very much in the commodity culture of the media sphere. Such a view can provide important insights into the evolving religion of the media age, and raise the possibility that this religion is, contrary to critics, authentic in important ways. The status of the cross at Willow Creek tells us something about how religious seekers, as children of the television era, understand symbols and their meanings, and suggests that Willow Creek actually understands contemporary religious seeking more deeply than critics realize.

**MEDIA AND RELIGION**

Accounting for religion and media is a large and complex task. As has been argued, the whole literature of media and religion has been typified by a sort of dualist instrumentalism which sees the question solely in terms of cause and effect, as though “media” (or commodity culture, or popular culture) and “religion” are more or less equivalent and autonomous historical categories and it is possible to understand them only as competing with and contesting one another. This view, however, is too limited. First, it has not gotten us very far in understanding the contemporary scene. The impressionistic and anecdotal evidence suggests that the media and religion occupy some of the same turf in modern life. People seem to be seeking religious meaning in mediated cultural commodities, at the same time that media and popular culture regularly address and use religious...
themes. Second, the traditional view turns out to lead to a blind alley whether one begins with the proposition that the media affect religion, or the other way around. We simply find, in both cases, that the same ground is being trod by these two areas of cultural practice (religion and commodity culture), but there is no conceptual scope to finally account for their relationship to one another. Third, the traditional view tends to ignore powerful theoretical and conceptual tools which have become available in recent years in anthropology, cultural studies, religious studies, ritual studies, linguistics, and so on. These disciplines have started concentrating on questions of meaning in contemporary consciousness, and are gradually coming to provide insights into how we might look at the intersection between religion and contemporary culture. Finally, and most importantly, the traditional view has systematically overlooked phenomena in both religion and culture which point toward the emergence of entirely new ways of doing and understanding religion. Before I return to the megachurch and to my experience at Willow Creek, I would like to describe in a bit more detail what I mean by this.

I have argued elsewhere that the contemporary religious scene can be best understood when we step outside received categories of analysis (dictated to us largely by nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century social theory: secularization, functionalism, social movements, positivism, institutional studies, social structure, and the like) and instead follow the lead suggested by anthropological scholarship. We should see cultural practice as the central category, and understand the practices of contemporary lived lives as efforts to embody an evolving religious understanding. From this perspective, it is possible to look at important social categories such as structure, class, institutions, social movements, and so on, but in a way that grounds them in lived lives and lived experience, and which takes account of their cultural, symbolic, and discursive dimensions.

Such an approach immediately illuminates some tantalizing trends in both media culture and religious practice. Today’s media scene is one of tremendous diversification (I am speaking here of diversification of channels and outlets, not necessarily of ownership—another critical matter). Whole new channels and services have emerged in the last ten years, and new cross-media marketing and programming alliances mean that the current atomization, combination, and recombination will continue for the foreseeable future.

There are good reasons to expect an eventual limit to this diversification (audiences, for example, cannot be broken into smaller, more specialized segments ad infinitum), but in any case the diversification to date has important implications for my considerations here. Media marketers are coming to recognize that in today’s marketplace, traditional “push” marketing must give way to a new “pull” marketing. That is, the way to interact with audiences and consumers is not to think that you can push goods or ideas or services on them; they now have a greater capacity to choose, not only what they buy but even what they have access to, and marketers need to encourage them to “pull” goods or ideas or services towards themselves. The days are long gone when one program or one advertiser could be assured of a majority of the audience just by virtue of location or position on the television dial. The situation is now far more fractured and competitive.

At the same time, the media have also learned in recent years that the traditional bifurcation of audience members’ interests into public and private or “rational” and “emotional” categories no longer makes much sense. In the golden age of broadcasting, marketers tended to operate with an easy confidence that social theories of secularization (at their most simplistic) were right: with industrialization and increased education, audiences were becoming more rational and less spiritual, more systematic and less symbolic, more secularized and less interested in religion. With the new diversity of channels has come a whole panoply of material that transcends these oppositions. This material includes much more than mere
“televangelism”: from films and television programs to whole “emotional” channels (such as the “Recovery Network” and “Pax Network”), self-help books, magazines, websites, and pop music songs and videos, the list could go on almost indefinitely.

A good deal of this material admittedly fits into what Roof has called the “therapeutic” turn in establishment American religion, and this is significant in itself. Roof’s more recent work, as well as that of Robert Bellah and his associates (among others), has demonstrated the power and volubility of a new faith and spiritual practice oriented toward perfection of the self. In popular parlance, this has been called “new age spirituality,” but it in fact extends far beyond the boundaries of the “new age” movement.

In a way which connects with (but is not necessarily caused by) these trends in the media, religion is becoming more diverse, fractured, and personal. This has been called the rise of personal autonomy by some and “Sheilah-ism” by others, a term named after Sheilah Larson, one of the respondents in Bellah’s study. Larson has come to embody a kind of religious practice oriented toward the self and conceiving of religion as a conscious search for a variety of inputs, which can then be coalesced into an identity for which the individual considers him- or herself responsible. This practice, of course, has little room for institutions or for classic religious dimensions such as structure, authority, or legitimacy. Instead, it is self-legitimating and self-orienting.

It can be said, of course, that this “seeker” religiosity is, at its root, narcissistic, limited, and superficial. Against such a view, as argued by Bellah himself, R. Stephen Warner has suggested that it is a mistake to think of seekers as anything other than “morally serious” in what they are doing. That is, while this practice may not fit traditional religious behavior, it should not be dismissed out of hand. At the same time, the seeker model has allowed whole new categories of consciousness and spirituality—women’s, indigenous, experiential, invented, and others—to emerge in theory and scholarship.

THE EMERGING MARKETPLACE

The essential question is thus how to understand the common ground forming under these parallel trends. As the authority and legitimacy of traditional religious and institutional practice declines, and as the individual becomes more and more responsible for his or her own faith, a sort of horizontal “symbolic marketplace” is emerging, where an inventory of symbols, networks, movements, groups, sources, relationships, and practices is made available to religious seekers. This marketplace is, increasingly, a commodified, media-based marketplace.

To a great extent, this marketplace’s “commodities” are the symbolic and practical resources which have long been repressed in the American (particularly the Protestant) context: the visual, the body, objects, experience, and rituals. As the “pull” marketing described above comes to the center of this “seeker” religiosity, the most valuable commodities of exchange have become those which address hungers and needs not met by conventional religious practice. Modern media culture is profoundly tactile, visual, embodied, and “effervescent” (to use a term from Durkheim), which lets its programs, services, and symbols contest, by their very nature, the tried-and-true communicational paradigms of traditional religion.

What, specifically, are the underlying needs which contemporary commodity culture aims to fulfill? While it is misleading to limit our sights to one generation or one cultural milieu, there are nevertheless
sound reasons for locating the core of these trends in the “baby boom” generation, the group Roof has called the “Generation of Seekers.” The central spiritual motivation of this group is lodged in a host of historical, social, and cultural factors, but as Roof succinctly summarizes:

The concern is to experience life directly, to have an encounter with God or the divine, or simply with nature and other people, without the intervention of inherited beliefs, ideas, and concepts. Such striving is understandable, not simply because secondhand religion can be empty of meaning, but because only personal experience is in some sense authentic and empowering. Individuals are inclined to regard their own experiences as superior to the accounts of others, and the truths found through self-discovery as having greater relevance to them than those handed down by way of creed or custom. Direct experience is always more trustworthy.¹²

This need for direct, even tactile experience in religion is powerfully expressed by Barbara Wheeler, discussing ethnographic research she conducted in an evangelical seminary:

Evangelicals turn out stuff: thousands of Christian recordings; even more books—a new Christian gothic novel, I was told by an avid reader of them, is published every week—along with almost every other kind of fiction, poetry, Bible translations and paraphrases, advice, celebrity biography, and countless devotional volumes; magazines, pamphlets, newspapers, broadsides, leaflets; plaques, posters, greeting and note cards, bumper stickers, ceramics, jewelry. As various as they are, and as much as they have in common with the rest of American mass material culture, most evangelical artifacts are self-evidently evangelical. . . .

[In contrast,] mainline Protestantism does not have enough of a culture. By comparison with the prolix popular culture of the evangelicals, the mainline Protestant inventory of symbols, manners, iconic leaders, images of leadership, distinctive language, decorations, and sounds is very low indeed.

In fact, mainline Protestants do not handle much of anything. I never would have realized this if I had not done research in such a different milieu. What I further gained from the evangelicals and now have to offer my own religious community is the realization that our lack of paraphernalia is a dangerous situation. We do not need the evangelicals’ particular dry goods or pious practices, but we, like the evangelicals, are bodied beings, and a religious tradition that has little or nothing to look at, listen to, and touch cannot sustain us very long.¹³

So it is at this very direct and concrete level of practice, of actually touching and feeling objects, that a kind of piety can increasingly be invoked by, and satisfied by, commodity culture.

While evangelicalism may have the most obvious and, in a way, superficial range of objects, the religious marketplace, and a marketplace approach to religion, is far from a recent phenomenon. R. Laurence Moore, for example, finds evidence of its emergence around the time of American independence:

I am persuaded that the transformations of market societies in the nineteenth century as they affected the United States did transform the issues, changing the whole texture and meaning of activities labeled “spiritual.” Clearly the First Amendment was a major factor in accelerating the process of religious commodification. Even before it was enacted, as Harry Stout has demonstrated in his work on the eighteenth century, religious leaders, “in order to make religion popular,” understood that they had “to compete in a morally neutral and voluntaristic marketplace environment alongside all the goods and services of this world.”¹⁴

Still, there has clearly been an acceleration and deepening of these marketplace approaches recently: they have become institutional, systematic, and even industrial in ways that transcend our traditional categories of analysis. Furthermore, this development has received a great part of its momentum from the parallel evolution of the media sphere and its interrelated practices of cultural commodification. Finally, the resulting inventory of symbols has also deepened and broadened over time, moving beyond evangelical and orthodox categories to include such offerings as Deepak Chopra, Robert Bly, and various forms of “the Goddess.” These illustrate the extent to which the sort of totemic objects Wheeler discusses are only
one element of the story. As ritual theorists have argued, and as is obvious in the quotation above from Roof, there is also an *experiential* dimension to religious seeking, and experience can also be a marketplace commodity.

**THE MEGACHURCH AND THE MARKETPLACE**

It is a fairly short step from the argument I have been developing here to the phenomenon of the megachurch, which caters to “seeker” religion in its most refined and focused form. Megachurches make certain that their parking lots are large and convenient. They provide childcare and other things which make attendance more accessible. Many have shops and coffee bars. Some provide recreational facilities, aerobics, and the like. Willow Creek is known for self-consciously organizing its weekly program around the process of seeking: in fact, its Sunday services, designed so as to not conjure up conventional church to an audience of Roof’s generation of seekers, are called “seeker services,” while the “real services” take place at another time, on a weeknight.

Two elements of the typical megachurch match the emerging picture of religion in the marketplace particularly well. First, most of the megachurches place great store in conventional market research as a way of understanding their members and potential members. Writing in *Atlantic Monthly*, Charles Truehart recalls meeting the pastor of one of these churches and seeing “a handsome framed woodcut on the wall of his study . . . [which] read, ‘What is our business? Who is our customer? What does the customer consider value?’” Second, the core of the megachurch’s “service” of these customer needs is a panoply of “ministries”—typically support groups, fellowship opportunities, or combinations of these—pegged to the particular stresses and strains of contemporary life. Truehart provides a typical list for a typical church: parenting workshops; twelve-step recovery groups “by category” (i.e., alcohol, drugs, gambling, etc.); premarital couples classes; classes for “homebuilders”; a “women in the workplace” brunch; and so on. The megachurches typically make the effort to schedule these groups in times and locations that are as accessible as possible.

Of course, megachurches have their share of critics.

Most of the credit for the success of the megachurch is given to its facility in making itself intellectually as well as physically accessible, and this intellectual accessibility is criticized as well. The gospel is watered down in the megachurch, the argument goes. It is brought nearer to the grasp of the seeker or believer. It is made easy—too easy—and thus is “cheap grace.”

These criticisms go to the heart of the transitional moment we have been considering here. As the seeker mode of religiosity comes to the fore, making the faith and its symbols accessible is absolutely central. The megachurch phenomenon is simply taking advantage of this transition in religious practice; in it, we can see the modes of practice typical of our times and of the largely commodified and media-saturated context in which we live. To say this, however, is not to say that the media have “made” religion what it is today. They have, however, participated in the creation of—and are now themselves typical of—the conditions and contexts which make the emergence of the megachurch a logical outcome.
Most of what I have said about the megachurch and about the seeker religiosity it relates to has been grounded in the rational and practical spheres. Megachurches use modern research and marketing. They find that people want and need certain kinds of services, and make those services as available as possible. But religion is more than rational and practical: it is, of course, also about symbolically binding the adherent to larger narratives of the ordering of reality. Thus I want to turn now to how the megachurch also represents a transition in contemporary religion on the symbolic level. The argument I have made about the current period of “transitional religion”\(^\text{19}\) lets us see that the essential question in this realm as well concerns the authenticity of these practices.

I argued above that seeker religiosity is, in fact, “morally serious,” which implies that it is “authentic” to a certain degree. But what we must meet head on is the question of whether commodified symbolic practice can be authentic in terms of its relationship to religious consciousness. That is, are commodified symbols in some way less powerful because of their place in the logic of the contemporary cultural marketplace?

There is a theological dimension of this discussion, which I will leave to the theologians to resolve. I wish to provide some additional insight into the discussion, however, by probing the issue of symbolism in a bit more detail. As with everything I have been considering here, the topic is deeper, more nuanced, and more complex than is often appreciated.

Let me begin by pointing out that the science of signs is a well developed and rich discipline, and one with strong and vibrant debates about the nature of symbolic (or metalinguistic) communication. In the simplest of terms, semiotics and semiology (the two subdisciplines in symbolic scholarship) concern themselves with relationship between signs and referents. All signs refer to something, although in actual practice there is a good deal of flexibility and negotiation in these relations. Many signs are relatively fixed referentially, but others vary widely, and it is the capacity to manipulate such signs that in part defines us as human beings. Certain of these readings become conventionalized over time, and under certain institutional regimes, and the ability to establish and maintain such definitions is an important source of the cultural currency of social institutions. The ability of a government, a corporation, or a church to control and define its own symbols is an important source of power, perhaps more so in today’s sign-suffused cultural environment than at any point in history.\(^\text{20}\)

I would further add that the whole question of the status of signs within religious practice is one of the least understood and least theorized fields of contemporary scholarship. Semiotics and semiology have tended to be infected by the same disease that has been epidemic in all of academe during the middle of this century—a wholesale rejection of the serious study of religious phenomena. At the same time, theologians and religious thinkers have tended to under theorize and under problematize the structure and practice of public communication in general, and visual symbolism in particular.\(^\text{21}\)

There are a number of reasons for this. At the most superficial level, it appears as though Western Christianity, and American Protestantism in particular, have a very particular understanding of symbols, an approach that Douglas Kellner has called (in an entirely different context) “representational realism.”\(^\text{22}\) This means that Protestantism has looked at signs only in terms of their capacity to directly represent unequivocal referents in creedal doctrine. The place of the cross, for example, has been described with rich metaphor over the centuries, but within a relatively narrow range of possible referents. Its status is defined by its place within those historic categories. Other images, particularly popular or vernacular ones such as Warner Sallman’s Head of Christ,\(^\text{23}\) are derogated because of their
relationship to popular piety and their potential for undermining the historic claims of Protestantism to be a faith of “the head as well as the heart.”

This is a complex argument, too complex to fully develop here. But I want to argue that one of the things that defines the religion of this transitional moment is a particular relationship to signs. If, as I have said, the religious practice of today is rooted in the cultural practice of the marketplace, then the symbolic practices of the marketplace should be apparent in the world of lived religion.

THE CROSS AT WILLOW CREEK

And, in fact, the particular approach to symbolism at Willow Creek (their description of the cross as a “prop” and their particular understanding of its status) is directly and powerfully rooted in an approach to symbolism that is more consonant with broader cultural practice than the conventional, representational approach taken by mainstream Protestantism, and places the sign in a more central position.

Tillich’s classic formulation of the symbol as something that points beyond itself to a transcendent reality, and the assumption made by many that the symbol is thereby negated (i.e., the sign is no longer present, only the necessarily implied transcendent reality is), is an example of the more mainstream approach, but contemporary practice is better described by a poststructuralist semiotics. The school of Charles Sanders Peirce, in particular, holds that the sign and the referent continue to exist in a material sense, and that the relationship between a continuing sign and a continuing referent constitutes the actual object of the whole enterprise of symbolization: meaning. Thinking again about the cross at Willow Creek, we can see that the experience of the cross in the mind of that speaker was a profound, referential, and spiritual one. But the physical object, the cross, continued to participate in an act which constructed meaning. The cross did not disappear by referring to some external idea of atonement; the cross materially represented atonement as a physical object in space and time.

By saying that the cross is a “prop,” the speaker was therefore saying that the physical manipulation of the cross, its availability for use in a very concrete sense and moment, makes manifest a transcendent meaning. This is one of the particular and unique symbolic practices of transitional religion. Consonant with broader trends in commodity culture, religious practice here takes objects (in this case the cross) and appropriates them in new ways, in a postmodern (or late-modern) practice of meaning construction. I take the cross at Willow Creek, then, to represent the broader trends I spoke of earlier—a new, voluble, embodied, and effervescent kind of religiosity articulated to cultural-symbolic practices which it can never fully escape.

The suppression of this kind of effervescence—of the body, the totem, the experience, ritual, and in particular the image—has generally been considered one of the legacies of John Calvin. Indeed, the term “Calvinism” has come to mean precisely the denial of the physical and expressive in American cultural discourse. However, in an important work on early American Puritanism, Ann Kibbey has demonstrated that this is entirely too narrow a view of Calvin’s ideas. In fact, he did not oppose visual imagery in general, only in the case of religious imagery that might veer toward the idolatrous.

It is, of course, the area of religious symbolism that Calvin was most concerned with, but Kibbey argues that his approach to symbols and images was more complex than he is often given credit for. First, he held that the problem with the idols he condemned in Catholicism was that they were merely representational.
Calvin’s theory of visual art is that of a materialist who fears that he can think no further than he physically sees. . . . Quoting Augustine, he explains the vulnerability of the onlooker: “For the shape of the idol’s bodily members makes and in a sense compels the mind dwelling in a body to suppose that the idol’s body too has feeling.”

Thus Calvin condemned a certain kind of approach to symbols—that is, direct representation—which encompassed the traditional ways symbols such as the cross have been used.

The second significant thing about Calvin’s theory of symbolism is that he calls for a use and manipulation of material symbols very much like that in my example from Willow Creek. The problem with representation, he felt, was fetishization:

[Calvin] candidly summarizes, “Men’s folly cannot restrain itself from falling headlong into superstitious rites.” Images have such power over people that the mere presence of the image compels fetishistic adoration. Calvin assumes that this response to an image is a universal quality, and thus, whatever Catholics may say about the value of representational art, he insists that they believe in their images as a fetishist believes in icons.

Calvin then tries to transcend the fetishistic, representational notion of symbols by contending that symbolic properties are only valid when they are embodied and used. To simplify Kibbey’s argument: she sees Calvin deriving a theory of symbolization from his understanding of the sacrament of communion, and of the bread in particular. He rejects the notion of transubstantiation, holding instead that the power of the bread is not in its transcendent qualities as consecrated bread, but instead in its commonness as ordinary bread. Its connection with the “spiritual essence” only works, in his view, if it is seen to be common bread that is thus engaged in the transaction.

Kibbey then goes on to a stunning claim. Calvin’s view of symbols is remarkably similar to Karl Marx’s theory of commodities in the capitalist market: Both of them hold that the real power, the real transcendence in objects, and hence their real symbolic role, is neither in the things themselves, nor in their merely pointing unequivocally to something else, but in their use and their exchange. Both of them, Kibbey points out, warn against the dangers of fetishizing the object itself. This would imply that using the cross as a “prop,” far from being a trivialization, is a more profound and more meaningful use than simply hanging it on a wall, week after week, so that it is never manipulated, appropriated, or used. As currency in a cultural exchange, the cross at Willow Creek becomes an object in an ongoing discourse of contemporary, transitional religion. Its use in this way is both embedded in, and emblematic of, the broader prospects of religion in an age of commodity culture.

NOTES


11. For more complete discussions, see Albanese, “Fisher Kings and Public Spaces,” and Hoover, “Media and the Religious Public Sphere.”


17. Ibid., 39

18. Ibid., 38.

19. This term is taken from Roof, A Generation of Seekers.


27. Ibid., 46–7.

28. Ibid., 47.

29. Ibid., 52.
PART THREE
POPULAR CULTURE AS RELIGION
Some commentators suggest that it is possible to think of particular forms of Popular Culture as Religion. This approach constitutes our third relationship between religion and popular culture. For these cultural critics, the emphasis is not on traditional forms of religion, but on the way that significant cultural activity takes on the social form and purpose of religion. They ask us to consider whether this cultural activity should be regarded as religious, or at least as analogous to religion.

Most often, these scholars draw on understandings of ritual, myth, and symbol derived from anthropology and religious studies, to suggest that when secular activities take on the forms of religion they also take on the function of religion and become bearers and shapers of cultural values and beliefs. Earlier in this volume, Gregor Goethals made use of the concept of ritual in her discussion of how television ritual transforms evangelical Christian worship. In this section, four writers consider the way that specific popular cultural activities seem to take on religious function when they take on the forms of religion.

Michael Jindra’s work on Star Trek fandom emphasizes the rituals and beliefs of the participants and the way these expressions of popular culture provide interpretive frameworks analogous to religion for thinking about life and values. In doing so, he helps us understand the role of belief and ritual in bonding a distinctive subculture.

Michelle M. Lelwica examines the world of dieting and eating disorders among young women, attending to religious language as well as ritual practices. She finds in the literature and practices designed to reshape the female body a striving for an “ideal” which is expressed in religious terms and pursued with religious zeal.

Joseph L. Price takes a similar approach to a different cultural activity. His consideration of sports and sports fans suggests that the rituals, symbols, and their transformative experiences constitute at least “a form of religion.”

David Chidester focuses more generally on the question of what constitutes a religion. He illustrates how different definitions of the religious lead us to reflect on different features of popular culture, examining in detail the “church” of baseball, the “fetish” of Coca-Cola, and the “pot-latch” of rock ‘n’ roll.
From *The Wizard of Oz* to the *Davy Crockett* series of the 1950s, to movies such as *E. T.* and *Star Wars*, Americans in the twentieth century have been entertained and inspired by vivid and captivating narratives utilizing the new visual media. Through television and film, popular culture has become an influential, even dominating, force in many areas of our society. As the essays in this volume make clear, popular culture often draws upon religious themes, but in this essay I will argue that the entertainment industry also creates meanings that begin to function in religious ways for consumers of popular culture.

This should not be too surprising, for there has always been a relationship between religion and popular culture. Popular culture originally split from “learned,” formal religious culture after the Protestant and Catholic Reformations,¹ but it continued to complement religious culture. The pre-Lenten Carnival was a direct product of church culture, as were the patron saint festivals and the cults of images of early modern Europe. Because of this close connection, popular culture was not a completely distinct alternative to religious culture.

Today, however, popular culture has lost its direct connection with the religious heart of society and has taken on a life of its own, creating its own stories and myths through which people find meaning and identity. Popular culture has become an independent producer of mythical narratives, a reflection of cultural themes and a producer of new ones. Though often using traditional religious themes and imagery (as in *E.T.* or *Star Wars*), the narratives and messages have been formally cut off from the religious traditions that have dominated Western culture over the centuries. In other words, parts of popular culture have taken their place alongside the mainstream religious traditions and political ideologies which have guided people’s lives down through the centuries.

There is no better example of this than the *Star Trek* fan phenomenon. As a television and movie production, *Star Trek* has gone through several installments, but the fan phenomenon it sparked has been going strong since the original *Star Trek* was first broadcast in 1966. The fan phenomenon first became apparent when the original *Star Trek* television series was threatened with cancellation after its second year. Fans immediately organized a letter-writing campaign to keep *Star Trek* on the air.² When it was canceled after its third year, the show went into syndication, which is when the “fandom”³ phenomenon really started to take off. The first *Star Trek* convention was in New York in 1972, and by then...
noncommercial Star Trek fan magazines ("fanzines") and commercial Star Trek books, manuals, and novels were being published for fans hungry for more knowledge about the Star Trek universe.

Efforts to revive Star Trek broadcasts, in some form, continued for years. An animated series was produced from 1973 to 1974, and in 1979 the first of ten (to date) Star Trek movies was released. In 1987, Star Trek: The Next Generation was first aired, and during its seven-year run this series was often the highest rated hour-long show among males 19 to 49 years of age, and a top-rated show among other viewer categories, including females. This success has led to still more spinoffs, including Deep Space Nine, Voyager, and Enterprise.

No other popular culture phenomenon has shown the depth and breadth of fan activity that Star Trek has. Other popular culture productions, such as Star Wars, have also sold billions of dollars in merchandise, but no other fan following has been so active in creatively filling out its alternate universe and attempting to relate it to the real world. Besides the over five hundred "official" Star Trek novels, fans have self-published countless "fanzines," written several dictionaries of Star Trek alien languages, and created institutes to study them. (In 2004, the German international broadcaster Deutsche Welle added web content in Klingon, initially as a joke. It was taken aback at the enthusiastic response from Star Trek fans.) Fans have created hundreds of fan clubs, attended thousands of conventions, participated in endless online discussions, played Star Trek role-playing and computer games, and bought tickets to entertainment centers and tourist sites. Meanwhile, reruns of old series have been broadcast in over one hundred countries. Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, and the spaceship Enterprise have become household names around the world.

**STAR TREK AS A RELIGIOUS PHENOMENON?**

When I undertook research on the fan phenomenon, my earliest intention was to focus on how Star Trek draws a picture of the future that is attractive to many Americans. Early on, however, I realized I was dealing with something much bigger and more complex than I had anticipated. As I will show in this essay, Star Trek is not limited to science fiction fans, nor is it just a pop culture phenomenon created for corporate profit.

Instead, Star Trek fandom seemed akin to a religious movement. It has features that parallel a religious movement: an origin myth, a set of beliefs, organizations, and some of the most active and creative members found anywhere. Fans fill out a mythological universe and keep it consistent through the formation of a "canon" of acceptable and unacceptable Star Trek events. Within fandom, there are also the schisms and oppositions that such movements typically engender. Finally, there is a stigma associated with Star Trek fans that is similar to that directed against serious devotees of other religions. To address Star Trek as a religious phenomenon, however, we first need to understand the place of religion in our society, how it is changing, and what it is changing into.

**RELIGION IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN SOCIETY**

Most Americans think of "religion" as a system of private, conscious, and articulated beliefs, usually expressed in churches and formal creeds, and set off from the other "spheres" of life such as work, politics, or leisure. This view of religion, however, stems from the specifically Western process of societal "differentiation," in which institutional religion was given a specific function. After the...
medieval era, when religious practice was intimately connected to everyday life, the practice of Christianity became “abstracted,” or disconnected from everyday life. As a result, we now tend to regard “religion” as something connected to institutions such as churches and denominations. Alternatively, we view it as something personal and private, a psychological aid that is only peripherally connected to a person’s public life.

This view of religion severely limits our understanding of it. A less ethnocentric definition regards religion as the daily, lived expression of an individual’s or a society’s most important values. In many cultures, religion is not articulated as “belief,” but is more often an ongoing experience, lived out and taken for granted. But we often fail to recognize religion in our own society when it lacks an institutional and creedal form, and is instead “disguised” under various political or cultural forms. The fact that nearly every group has a religious dimension is regarded as obvious in many parts of the world, but is foreign to us, and makes us blind to religious aspects in many areas of our lives.

Since at least the nineteenth century, scholars such as August Comte have been predicting the imminent downfall of religion in society. Religion may now be more “segregated” into its own private sphere, but Christianity has remained a potent force. New forms of religion have also developed, many of which are individualistic and express belief in the power of humanity and our mastery over the environment, whether through science or quasi-scientific or mystical philosophies. These modern-day religions are expressed in many areas of our culture, including popular culture, as Bruce David Forbes makes clear in the introduction to this volume. “New age” groups, for example, favor smaller networks and reject large-scale organization, but have a commonality fostered by commercialization and expressed in popular culture. In this essay, I argue that Star Trek is also a primary location for the expression of contemporary religious impulses.

SOMETHING TO “BELIEVE” IN: THE WORLDVIEW OF STAR TREK

Star Trek is one of the most visible locations to witness religion in popular culture. Not only does it have an identifiable belief system and vision of the future, but the activities of its adherents are oriented toward participating in that vision and bringing it to fruition. Star Trek is a subset of the larger category of science fiction, which itself has been called a religion with a “central myth” of progress that “helps people live in or into the future.” Science and technology are the vehicles by which this future will be brought into existence, “and should be understood in religious terms” as that which “breathes new life into humankind.”

The “positive view of the future” portrayed in Star Trek is one of the most common reasons fans give for their attraction to the show. On Star Trek, problems such as poverty, war, and disease have been eliminated on earth, and threats are normally from alien forces. Faith is placed in the ability of humanity to solve its social and technical problems through application of reason, science, and technology.

Star Trek mixes the scientific and technical ideals of America with its egalitarian ideology, to produce a progressive world where people from all races work together in a vast endeavor to expand knowledge. One fan, recounting his first impressions of Star Trek, said: “We noticed people of various races, genders and planetary origins working together. Here was a future it did not hurt to imagine. Here was a constructive tomorrow for mankind, emphasizing exploration and expansion.”
As a result, Star Trek has taken its place in American mythology alongside the “frontier” myth of westward expansion exemplified by television westerns. Essentially, Star Trek is a projection of America’s expansionist past into the future, a continual quest for more knowledge, space, and resources. Anthropologist Conrad Kottak argues that Star Trek is “a summation of dominant American cultural themes . . . a transformation of a fundamental American origin myth,” akin to a “secular myth” that emphasizes humanity’s power to change the planet through science and technology.12

This utopianism can be traced back to notions of Christian eschatology that foresee, in the context of a linear history, a future perfection. Also tied in with utopian impulses is the Western notion of “order” out of which came the “project” of the West, that of universal assimilation.13 On the heels of these beliefs have come many utopian religious movements, and such political religions as orthodox Marxism. It is this culturewide ideological inclination towards future utopias that Star Trek fandom draws upon.14

The belief in progress and a “positive view of the future” was explicitly articulated by the late creator of Star Trek, Gene Roddenberry. In 1991, just months before he died, a 30-page interview with Roddenberry was published in The Humanist, the official magazine of the American Humanist Association, to which Roddenberry had belonged since 1986. There he reveals that he had a very conscious humanist philosophy that saw humans taking control of their own destiny, and thus able to control the future. Roddenberry’s intention was to express his philosophy in Star Trek, but he had to keep this intention secret lest the network cancel his show.15

Others besides Roddenberry have used Star Trek to express their philosophy publicly. Jeffrey Mills has taught courses at various colleges on “The Cultural Relevance of Star Trek.” He points to the Prime Directive (forbidding interference in another culture), the pluralistic Vulcan philosophy of IDIC (Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combination), and the cooperative governing structure of the United Federation of Planets as the kinds of ideas that we need to act on if we are to survive into the twenty-fourth century. By watching Star Trek, studying it, and applying its lessons, we can make the world a better place, Mills has written. “[I]n this light Star Trek almost becomes a sort of scripture, doesn’t it? What the Bible does in 66 books, Star Trek does in 79 episodes. . . . I can’t think of a series that really spoke to the future of humankind with as much clarity and vision as Star Trek.”16

In sum, Star Trek has strong affinities with a religious outlook, namely an underlying ideology and mythology that ties together messages about human nature and normative statements about social life with a construction and presentation of future society. Fans see Star Trek as a sign of hope for the future: not for personal salvation, but for the future of the collective “we,” our society, our species. It is a myth about where we have come and where we are going. “I” will not live until the twenty-fourth century, but “we” certainly will, according to the Star Trek future. Fans, through their participation in fan activities, have shown they want to be a part of forming that destiny.

THE FANDOM COMMUNITY

Star Trek as a religious phenomenon can be understood as a set of beliefs, but the activities of its fans give us a much fuller picture of its religious potential. Star Trek fandom is in part the culmination of a phenomenon that began in the post-World War I era, when science fiction pulp magazines had a small but loyal readership. From the beginning, science fiction fans formed a group set apart from the rest of society. These fans formed a community, at first exclusively male, but with females entering later: “fans married fans and raised their children to be fans; there are third- and even fourth-generation fans
It was out of science fiction fandom that the first Star Trek fans came. The story of the origin and growth of Star Trek fandom has itself taken on mythological proportions. A preview of the pilot episode of Star Trek, shown at a science fiction convention in 1966, is recounted almost in terms of a conversion experience:

“After the film was over we were unable to leave our seats. We just nodded at each other and smiled, and began to whisper.”
“We came close to lifting the man [Roddenberry] upon our shoulders and carrying him out of the room. . . . [H]e smiled, and we returned the smile before we converged on him.”

From then on, according to the author, the convention was divided into two factions: the “enlightened” who had seen the preview, and the “unenlightened” who had not.

Soon after Star Trek was first broadcast, fans formed organizations. Star Trek fan clubs grew into a diverse worldwide circuit of clubs, with, at the show’s peak, over 500 clubs and chapters in nearly 20 countries. Many of these clubs are modeled after Star Trek ships, in a fan attempt at participation in the Star Trek universe. Hierarchy is established within each club by the titles given to leaders (Admiral, Captain, etc.). Members move up the hierarchy by being active in group events, much like in the Boy Scouts. Many fan clubs stress community service projects, which distinguishes them from a mere fan group and underlies the seriousness with which they take their beliefs about building a better world.

Star Trek fans often describe their fellow fans and clubs as a “family.” They celebrate personal milestones such as birthdays and anniversaries, and console each other over misfortunes. Many remark that they are closer to fellow fans than they are to their own family members. Fans often meet at Star Trek conventions. One fan described a convention in the following way:

If you’ve never been to a convention, it’s an experience that is difficult to explain. It’s like being ushered into another world, where every facet of the day has something to do with STAR TREK. It might be seeing the incredible variety of merchandise in the dealers’ room or seeing a star of the series in person and having the opportunity to ask questions. To describe it as a time warp would not be far from wrong. You’re very much cut off from the real world in a convention. You can easily forget your own troubles as well as those of the world until the con ends and you have to come down to earth again.

In other words, conventions are an opportunity to immerse oneself further in the Star Trek “experience,” much as one is immersed in ritual. Using the religious language of “immersion” is not just a rhetorical move on my part. Witness the following quote, a response to a questionnaire I sent out over the internet:

At a convention I went to a while back they had this thing about the “Temple of Trek.” I stayed and watched—even participated in the chanting. They had some woman who was there with her baby—fairly newborn. And they “baptized” the kid into this pseudo-church. Pretty bizarre—even though it was all just a joke. But I must admit—I was kind of wondering at the time if everyone there was really taking it all as a joke.

This ambiguity over the seriousness of Trek practice reveals, I believe, its underlying religious potential.

Fan activities that seek to promote a family atmosphere are in a sense “symbolic communities” that resist the secularization and rationalization of modern life. Yet there is a paradox here if we seek to apply this to Star Trek fandom, because the ideology expressed in Star Trek and adhered to by many of the fans is an expression of rationalistic modernism itself, the progressive belief that we can construct a better tomorrow. In other words, the modernism that is exemplified by Star Trek is, in the final analysis, itself a faith that is practiced in the various types of communities that make up Star Trek fandom.
For fans, Star Trek exhibitions and tourist sites have become popular places where fans can see and experience the Star Trek universe up close. The Universal Studios theme park in California has a Star Trek set in which selected tourists are filmed, in full uniform, taking on characters’ roles and acting out a Star Trek plot. I visited one fan who proudly showed me the video of her visit there. The scenes of role-playing tourists were spliced with actual footage from one of the movies, giving the appearance that they were actually part of a Star Trek film. This fan described the experience “as a dream come true,” which made the 2,000-mile trip “worthwhile.” “We pilgrimage out there; it’s our Mecca,” she told me. Another fan showed me numerous pictures of herself posing in uniform on a mock-up of the Enterprise bridge that was built for a convention. It is the fan’s dream to actually be on the show, and the closest thing to it are bridge mock-ups and studio tours. The ritual act of sitting on the bridge in uniform and being photographed or filmed brings one into direct participation in the Star Trek universe.

Participation in the Star Trek universe is even more direct through “simming” (playing Star Trek simulations over the internet with other fans). These games allow fans to take a position as a crew member on a “ship” and role-play adventures with other fans. Fans move up through the ranks as they gain experience. As one player described it, simming “allows anyone who embraces the precept of Star Trek and its premises of a bright future to be a part of that future,” by providing “their own unique interpretations of how the future might look or how far ‘we’ might evolve in our quest for knowledge and our thirst for exploration.”

Finally, fans participate in the Star Trek universe by buying vast amounts of Star Trek merchandise and amassing videotaped collections of episodes and movies, a “capturing” of the Star Trek universe that enables fans to enter it at any time. Religion often points us to another world; Star Trek does the same.

LINKING THE STAR TREK UNIVERSE WITH THE PRESENT

The Star Trek universe is not a totally separate, fantastical universe unconnected to the present. In various ways, the Star Trek universe is “linked” with the contemporary world. The lead-in to every Next Generation episode (“Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the Starship Enterprise . . . .”) begins with a close-up of the earth, and then a gradual “tour” through the other planets of the solar system, until the camera finally focuses on the Enterprise. This sequence orients the viewer to envision the events as taking place in his own universe.

Other “linkage” is accomplished by the Star Trek manuals and novels. Star Trek Chronology: A History of the Future compiles a history of the universe, incorporating both actual historical events and Star Trek history through the twenty-fourth century. This world is a direct projection from the present into the future. Furthermore, through time travel, many of the show’s plots actually take place in twentieth-century time. One fan I talked to focused on how space and time is manipulated in time travel plots, which allows one “a second chance . . . to set things right again.” Time travel allows us this ritualistic recourse, in much the same way healing rituals or rituals based on origin myths do. Origin myths often take place “in the beginning,” but are really a message for all time, a model to be attained, enacted through ritual.
Star Trek, like a religion, has profound effects on fans’ lives. Actors often relate how fans have been inspired by the show to do well in school and eventually become engineers, doctors, or scientists. Star Trek has given people hope for the future, inspiring them to take control of their lives in the same way many self-help movements and quasi religions do. Fans also want to make “real” life more like Star Trek. Star Trek fans have been enthusiastic supporters of increased funding for the space program, and science fiction becomes science fact when “fans actively engineer events to make it true,” such as by naming the first space shuttle prototype the USS Enterprise. Fans also point to devices such as the communicator, which foreshadowed today’s portable phones.

FILLING OUT STAR TREK AND MAKING IT “REAL”

Star Trek, like many other shows, actively encourages a “suspension of disbelief” and sets itself up as a “reality” in which fans can exist. The reality of this universe is important to many people. As Richard Weiss, technical advisor to the Air Force, former head of a jet propulsion lab, and an “avowed trekkie,” says, “I believe in Star Trek. It’s all within the realm of possibility.” Dale Adams, who quit his job as an aerospace engineer to sell Star Trek merchandise, proclaims that “Star Trek isn’t about a television series, it’s about faith in our future.”

There has been an entire industry built up around “filling out” the Star Trek universe. Reference books such as the Star Trek Encyclopedia and Star Trek: The Next Generation Technical Manual (which details the specifications of Starfleet ships) have been among the most popular. Dictionaries have been compiled for the languages of three Star Trek alien species: Klingon, Vulcan, and Romulan. The entire history, geography, philosophy, and even the purported location of the planet Vulcan has been described, sometimes with the full cooperation of people at academic institutions and even NASA. There is a journal for the study of the Klingon language (HolQed), and a Klingon language camp one can attend. The Star Trek universe has been filled out with just about everything to make it a full, consistent reality, to enable one to live within this universe. This universe is much larger and more complex than any other fictional universe, such as that of J. R. R. Tolkien’s novels and the game somewhat based on it, Dungeons and Dragons. Star Wars has also become an extremely popular universe, but without the realism and science found in Star Trek.

The coherence of this alternate universe must be maintained in order for fans to continue their “suspension of disbelief.” As a result, there is a Star Trek “canon”: as a regularly posted guide to one internet Usenet newsgroup defines it,

“Canon” means that Gene Roddenberry (or his duly appointed representative) has declared something to be officially part of the “Star Trek” universe. This includes the television episodes and the movies. “Non-canon” is everything else (the books, the animated series, comic books, the story you made up when you were playing “Star Trek” with your friends during recess . . .). The fans of Star Trek have taken this given universe of Star Trek—the canon—and filled it out in order to make a consistent, utopian world in which science has given us control over the problems of life we experience and read about in the papers. Ironically, in order to complete the Star Trek universe, both the creators of the show and the fans have to rely on both science and magic. The technology used is given a veneer of scientific reality, but most fans recognize that most of the technology is made up, and is thus
Science thus turns into magic, a state of affairs anticipated in new religions where magic/science is relied upon to provide control in areas outside our ability to master.\textsuperscript{32} I would argue that all of this fan creativity—the invention and filling out of an entire universe—is a creation of mythology similar to processes of mythological creation in other cultures through the ages. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss uses the term \textit{bricoleur} (French for “handyman”) to illustrate the process of creating mythology: \textit{bricoleurs} use the available “tools” and “materials” of the culture to create a mythological structure over a period of time.\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Star Trek} fan \textit{bricoleurs} act not on their own culture, but on the alternative (but related) one they have constructed. Creating new plots and stories and ironing out existing ones—discussing the canon and writing new fan literature to fill in gaps in character biographies, planet details, or technology—is essentially a way to resolve the contradictions which are an affront to the consistent universe that fans so desperately want to create.

In calling the activities of \textit{Star Trek} fandom “mythological,” I do not intend to eliminate the “playful” or entertainment aspect of \textit{Star Trek} and claim that it is only serious. There is certainly a mix of entertainment and seriousness about \textit{Star Trek} among fans, but this coexistence is also present in the creation of “primitive” mythology. Do the traditional consumers of mythology take it to be only literally true? Here too, there is an ambiguous mixture of reality and unreality, of entertainment and mythology. One can see this in rituals that involve masking, where the masked figure personifies the ambiguity between the person underneath the mask and the spirit which is the mask. Participation in a masked performance, as in the \textit{Star Trek} universe, often involves pretending, but utterly serious pretending.\textsuperscript{34}

Play is serious business, as Victor Turner makes clear in his discussion of the ludic aspects of ritual.\textsuperscript{35} In industrial societies, however, play and seriousness have become separated. \textit{Star Trek} fandom, I believe, is an example of play and ritual coming back together, back to their “natural” condition of coexistence and ambiguity. \textit{Star Trek} fandom does not have the thoroughgoing seriousness of more established religions, but it is not mere entertainment. This interplay of seriousness and entertainment, I argue, is a sign of its vitality.

Religious movements are often persecuted or looked down upon because of their zealousness. And indeed, there is a stigma associated with \textit{Star Trek} fandom. Non-fans react against the “seriousness” of \textit{Star Trek} because they believe it should remain totally in the realm of entertainment, and the fact that people take it seriously offends them. \textit{Star Trek} fans, in turn, want to be respected and understood, and want their devotion to be recognized as legitimate, even as many of them try to distance themselves from a segment of fans whom they believe to have gone “too far” in their fan activities. \textit{Star Trek} elicits this type of controversy because it exists in the liminal area between entertainment and seriousness. It is in this interplay between “seriousness and diversion,” a common feature of religion,\textsuperscript{36} that we see the roots of the tension over \textit{Star Trek} between its fandom and the general public.

\textbf{CONCLUSION}

In a society that has become more diverse (or, as some say, “disunited”), mass popular culture has become the new unifying element. By providing a certain commonality and unity of purpose for a wide variety of people, \textit{Star Trek} takes on many elements of “civil religion”: a generalizing of religious belief necessary for an integrated society, as a counter to pluralizing trends that divide society. In the U.S., it is expressed in a sense of national purpose and destiny, and includes notions of both moral and material
These humanistic ideals become a model for others. This is exactly what seems to have happened by the time of Star Trek's United Federation of Planets, the guardian of universal peace, prosperity, and self-determination, and a direct outgrowth of twentieth-century American faith in science, humanity, and a positive future. Fans latch on to the Star Trek vision that these ideals will eventually triumph, and they enthusiastically continue to fill out and participate in the Star Trek universe.

Americans are traditionally forward looking, and it is events like the space race that animate them. For many fans of popular culture, organized religion seems less relevant, partly because they perceive it as backward looking rather than forward looking. Exceptions are to be found among some conservative religious denominations that speak in specific terms about the future, but enthusiasm for mainline denominations is lacking among baby boomers, who regard them primarily as community organizations which can teach their children good values.  

Meanwhile, popular culture, especially television and film, attempts to fill the religious void. In the ways described above, Star Trek has become a “cultural religion” (as discussed in the introduction to this volume) that reflects many Americans’ most widely held beliefs. Star Trek fandom expresses Americans’ idealism, and offers fans reasons for hope in the future. In this sense, it is a phenomenon born in popular culture that has taken on serious, religious functions.

NOTES

3. “Fandom” is a term that is commonly used to describe people who actively follow specific TV, film, or other popular culture productions.
6. This corresponds with the “functional” definition of religion described by Bruce David Forbes in the introduction to this volume.
10. Numerous fans have stated this in personal interviews with me. See also Jacqueline Lichtenberg et al., Star Trek Lives! (New York: Bantam, 1975), and David Gerroid, The World of Star Trek (New York:


14. The popularity of the optimistic, progressive view of the world has normally been much stronger than the apocalyptic, pessimistic view (which also goes back to biblical apocalyptic themes). There have been popular science fiction movies in the apocalyptic vein (e.g., *Blade Runner*), but the initial draw of these movies did not coalesce into the popular universe created by the vast cultural acceptance of *Star Trek*, which demonstrates the resonance of a future universewide utopia.


24. See, for example, James Doohan (with Peter David), *Beam Me Up, Scotty* (New York: Pocket, 1996), 209.


30. See, for example, the letters page of *Sky & Telescope* 82, no. 1 (July 1991): 5.


32. Swatos, “Enchantment and Disenchantment,” 330. The 1997 Heaven’s Gate suicide cult members
are an example of those who mix science with pseudoscience, and they were also avid watchers of *Star Trek*.


Michelle M. Lelwica
LOSING THEIR WAY TO SALVATION

Women, Weight Loss, and the Salvation Myth of Culture Lite

On any given day, the majority of girls and women in the U.S. worry about their weight and its appearance on their bodies. Nearly two-thirds of adult women surveyed report that one of their greatest fears is becoming fat. Roughly the same percentage of high school girls monitor what and how much they eat, and in some urban areas up to 80 percent of fourth-grade girls have dieted. While the average woman in the U.S. is 5′4″ and weighs 144 pounds, the average female model is 5′10″ and weighs 111 pounds. Not surprisingly, diet books outsell any other books on the market, except the Bible. Meanwhile, nearly 5 percent of adolescent girls and young women suffer from anorexia, and up to 20 percent of college women suffer from bulimia. Still, it is not unusual to see television ads like the one for “Nutri Systems,” in which a slender, young, white woman announces that “Changing your body is as easy as changing your mind.”

What are so many girls and women trying to change through their pursuit of a thinner body? What social conditions and popular-cultural images and rituals make this transformation seem not only possible, but necessary? The current craze of eating disorders has been the subject of numerous studies in the fields of psychology, sociology, and medicine, and a growing number of these studies underline the continuities between eating patterns that are deemed “pathological” (i.e., the self-starving and/or binge-and-purge tactics of anorexics and bulimics) and those that are widely recommended to girls and women as “healthy.” However, few of these studies consider the religious resonances of these problems. In this essay, I explore the popular pursuit of female slenderness from a cultural and religious studies perspective. More precisely, I analyze and assess the language and ethos of a quasi-religious system that invites women to “save” their souls by shrinking their bodies.

SACRED AND SECULAR RITUALS: COMPLICATING THE DISTINCTION

This analysis presumes that the distinction between “secular” and “religious” meanings is less obvious than has traditionally been assumed. In his classic essay, “Religion As a Cultural System,” Clifford Geertz cites the difference between ascetic fasting and dieting to illustrate the distinction between “religious” and “secular” behavior. This distinction, Geertz argues, is based in these practices’ diverging ends, and thus the varying frames of meaning and dispositions they foster. Whereas weight reduction aims to achieve a “conditioned” goal, religious fasting is “directed toward an unconditioned end”; whereas dieting is tied to worldly values (presumably health and beauty), religious fasting takes its meaning and
motivation in reference to “a conception of all-pervading vitality,” a picture of “a general order of existence.”

At first glance, Geertz’s distinction makes a lot of sense. One need only watch TV for an evening, page through a popular women’s magazine, listen to a schoolgirl insist she is “too fat,” or hear a doctor telling you to “watch what you eat” to witness the this-worldly quality of America’s pursuit of thinness. And yet, a closer reading of these weight-reduction discourses suggests that something more, something of vast importance, is being summoned, weighed, and reckoned in this pursuit, especially among its female participants. The more one probes this “something,” the more the distinction between “secular” and “religious” behavior fades, and the more one begins to see that for many girls and women, creating a slender body has become a matter of all-pervading significance, an end whose achievement feels tantamount to ultimate salvation.

Over thirty years ago, anthropologist Mary Douglas, in her book Purity and Danger, recognized the fluidity of the distinction between sacred and secular practices. More recently, Catherine Bell’s work highlights how power operates in the creation of this distinction. In Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice, Bell uses the concept of “ritualization” to draw attention to the culturally embedded and power-laden character of meaning production in ritual activity. For Bell, the significance of ritual practices rests not in their inherent distinction from other ways of acting, but in their capacity to constitute themselves as different from, and holier than, more mundane ways of acting. Rooted in the “ritualized body,” ritual meaning is strategically generated both in relation to prevailing social values and norms, and in reference to “realities thought to transcend the powers of human actors.”

FEMALE DIETING AS A POPULAR-CULTURAL RITUAL AND A “NEW RELIGION”

In short, Bell’s work offers a way of thinking about female dieting as a popular-cultural rite of womanhood: a ritualizing practice through which a woman’s body is distinguished and sacralized, her anxieties and dreams generated and regulated, and the prevailing social order negotiated and reproduced. As part of a broader system of cultural beliefs and practices, weight-loss rituals do not simply create an ideal female body; they generate a worldview, an embodied sense of self-definition, and a precarious method for coping with the conflicting possibilities of life in the late twentieth century. “After a time,” a woman who dieted compulsively writes,

the number on the scale became my totem, more important than my experience—it was layered, metaphorical, metaphysical, and it had bewitching power. I thought if I could change that number I could change my life. . . . I would weigh myself with foreboding, and my weight would determine how went the rest of my day, my week, my life.

In the U.S., land of maldistributed abundance, most girls know the language of dieting, often from firsthand experience, by the time they are ten years old. Rituals of avoiding some foods while measuring others are not only common among females in this culture: they are habitual. So too are the ritual encounters with the number on the scale, and so are the losses of control that often follow restricted eating. To be sure, the range of dieting varies considerably. Some diets involve specific food plans; others focus on technique. Some are formally prescribed by doctors; others are commercially bought and sold. Still others are informally devised and implemented, broken and resumed. Despite these variations,
However, dieting involves the routinization, calculation, and regulation of eating. For many women, this disciplined mode of nourishment is not only habitual: it is, true to its name, “a way of life.”

The desire to minimize the female body’s appetites and size is, of course, neither natural nor universal. In most cultures, especially those where food supplies are unstable, large female bodies are not only tolerated, but desired. Even in this culture, prior to the twentieth century, female plumpness was generally seen as a sign of health, beauty, and prosperity, and calculating one’s food intake entailed an interruption of ordinary ways of eating.

A network of historical shifts and cultural conditions have made slenderness the prevailing ideal, and weight loss a seemingly viable strategy for making meaning among women today. In particular, the axiomatic belief that women can and should monitor what they eat stems from a confluence of modern developments, including the belief that “the self” is an autonomous individual, the reconception of the body as a machine, and the rise of new scientific, technological, and economic systems of power, in conjunction with a long-standing and still-powerful symbolic association between women and bodily concerns.

The various threads of this confluence are evident in the history of dieting in the West, a story that begins not with the notorious fasting practices of medieval holy women but with the new mode of restricted eating that emerged with the rise of modern scientific authority. Beginning in the sixteenth century, this new way of eating combined the quest for spiritual truth with the pursuit of improved health; it focused on measuring and regulating one’s food intake; and its rules and guidelines were encoded in the texts of religiously motivated men. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the practice of restricting one’s eating to augment one’s health was bolstered by a mechanistic worldview, which reconceptualized the body (seen as an extension of the natural world and similarly gendered feminine) as passive, manipulable, subject to and in need of rational mastery and control.

According to Bryan S. Turner, the rise of a mechanistic worldview in the modern period involved a “secularization of the body,” whereby the body as the site of sin and salvation became the object of scientific scrutiny. But this transfer of meaning was neither stable nor complete. For even as the growing authority of science was eroding religious reasons for appetite surveillance by the turn of this century, a new set of moral meanings (“bad” and “good”) were attached to bodies (“fat” and “thin”), thus suggesting a lingering relevance of religious models and meanings. In the rational codes of modern science, variation came to mean deviation, for which there was scant excuse given the presumed autonomy of the self and mechanics of the body: if 3,500 calories equals one pound, then losing weight is a matter of simple arithmetic.

For all its scientific underpinnings, the expanding pursuit of the narrow body hinged on a symbolic system whose patterns resembled some of the moral codes and ritualizing techniques of traditional Christianity. In her historical account of this society’s obsession with weight control, Roberta Seid suggests that the fervor with which contemporary Americans pursue thinness borders on the religious:

If sloth and gluttony have always been condemned as sins, we have taken those sins as the cornerstone of a new faith. We believe in physical perfectibility and see its pursuit as a moral obligation. The wayward are punished with ugliness, illness, and early death. The good get their just rewards: beauty and a blissfully long, happy, and fulfilling life. The virtue that presumably will put us on this road is our ability to control one of our most fundamental instincts—eating.

In Seid’s view, this “new religion” has become so pervasive, and so persuasive, in the latter half of this century because it meshes so well with some of America’s most cherished beliefs, including a faith in the
objectivity of science and a belief in the ideal of individual self-control.\textsuperscript{16}

**“CULTURE LITE” AND THE FITNESS ETHIC**

During the past few decades, these beliefs have been incorporated into and promulgated by the systems of consumer capitalism. In particular, they support a network of industries, products, and programs designed to reduce our appetites and bodies. Organized around the pursuit of thinness, especially the flab-free female form, this soteriology (salvation myth) draws on and sustains a language and ethos through which female dieting makes sense. Its objectifying vision and reductive measures underwrite this culture’s prevailing iconography of womanhood (exemplified, e.g., in magazine images of “model” women). It is the other side of the prevailing cultural war on fat. I refer to it as “Culture Lite.”

Mainstream manifestations of Culture Lite are evident in the explosion of various slenderizing industries and products during the second half of this century. In the 1950s, sales of weight-loss aids (from bathroom scales to diet books, low calorie foods to amphetamines) began to soar.\textsuperscript{17} By 1984, nearly a fifth of the $290 billion spent on retail foods in the U.S. went for “lite” and “lo-calorie” foods. At this time, diet food and soft drink sales were increasing three times as fast as those of regular foods and beverages. Meanwhile, revenues of commercial diet centers grew exponentially, despite statistics indicating that over 90 percent of those enrolled in these programs regain their weight within two to seven years. Over-the-counter drugs for weight control have also become increasingly popular, not to mention profitable, with sales climbing at a rate of 20 percent each year. In 1995, the book about the diet that made Oprah Winfrey thin was hailed as “the fastest-selling book in history.” Dieting today is estimated to be a $50 billion business, and by this century’s turn, Americans are predicted to spend $77 billion trying to shed their “excess” flesh.\textsuperscript{18}

The mechanisms of Culture Lite have not simply accelerated during the past few decades; they have also changed, making the pursuit of the fat-free body more dispersed, more mandatory, and more deeply entrenched in profit-seeking ventures. This trend is illustrated in the rise of the “fitness ethic,” a prominent but distinct current within Culture Lite that emerged in the late 1960s.\textsuperscript{19} What distinguishes this ethic’s practices from its mainstream counterparts is that both its marketers and consumers claim that its primary goal is not slenderness per se, but overall “health,” signified by a body that is light and lean.

Like the ascetic Christian disciplines that it implicitly takes as its models, the fitness ethic began as a countercultural critique. In particular, it challenged mainstream eating and dieting practices, promoting nutritious food and moderate exercise as means for mental and spiritual renewal. Before long, however, this alternative was absorbed by the very powers it meant to criticize: the giant food and weight-loss industries. While this co-optation produced the current markets for “natural” foods, it also reinterpreted the fitness ethic beyond recognition. Concerns about healthy eating and “living lightly,” by which the counter-culture meant watching the earth’s resources, came to mean counting calories and fat grams, whereby mostly middle-class white women were encouraged to watch their waistlines.\textsuperscript{20}

As it turns out, the difference between “mainstream” weight-loss practices and those comprising the “fitness ethic” is far from clear. In the wider context of Culture Lite, the call to “overall health and fitness” is not easily distinguishable from the imperative to lose weight. Given this culture’s axiomatic preference for female slenderness, fitness-oriented rhetoric usually implies the need for women to reduce. Surveys indicate that most women who exercise do so primarily in order to lose weight.\textsuperscript{21} Commercial
enticements and exhortations to “Get Healthy! Feel Fit! Lose Weight!” (to quote an ad for Joan Lunden’s Workout America home video) end up conflating health, aesthetic, and moral concerns. This conflation contributes to the apparent “naturalness” of the thin ideal, an aura that makes the call to slenderness all the more difficult to contest.

THE QUASI-RELIGIOUS POWERS OF CONSUMER CAPITALISM AND THE CULT OF THINNESS

The adoption of the “fitness ethic” by commercial weight-loss industries illustrates the mechanics of modern domination: prevailing cultural hegemonies (systems of power) operate by accommodating and profiting from new developments within the social order, even when these developments are critical of its systems. In many ways, the profit-seeking ethos of consumer capitalism seems both omnipresent and omniscient, supplanting an omnipotent creator as the invisible ground of transcendent power. Given its quasi-religious function, it is not surprising that some of this system’s rhetorical maneuvers employ the terms of traditional religion, particularly the language of this country’s dominant tradition: Christianity.

The degree to which this rhetoric alludes to or conjures up recognizably religious motifs varies considerably among advertising texts and their viewers. Still, such techniques are relatively common amid the symbolic galaxy of consumer/media culture. Choir music and personal confession are regular features of television commercials; words like “ultimate,” “pure,” “total,” and “perfection” are used to sell a wide assortment of consumer items, from breakfast cereals to new cars. Given that the average American is exposed to 1,500 ads each day and is likely to spend one-and-a-half years of her or his life watching television commercials, it is reasonable to suggest that advertisements are a crucial conduit for communicating traditional religious values, both in spite of and because of their “secular” content.

The commercial use of traditional religious idioms and terms has come to play a particularly prominent role in the soteriology of Culture Lite. Within this system, producing a body that is fit and trim has become a middle-class mode of spiritual “enlitenment.” That such enlitenment depends on consumption is not a problem within the logic of late capitalism. A magazine ad for a fat-burning candy bar, featuring a lean, athletic-looking woman, tells us that by eating this product we can “Burn it off.” The ethic of control that underwrites this trope of forgiveness is seen in another ad for a fat-burning product, which summons its readers to “Show those pesky fat cells no mercy.” More subtle tactics of domination/enlitenment are sold in products like “The Cellulite Solution,” the “Chews to Lose” weight-loss gum, the “Totally Fit” workout video (available in Spanish), or the “Think Like A Thin Person” tape series (at Sharper Image for just $69.95).

TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE IN THE CONTEMPORARY CULT OF THINNESS

Precisely because weight-reducing rituals engage their users’ hungers for a sense of meaning, many of their terms and promises resemble those of traditional religion. The penitential aspects of losing weight are implicit in the New Year’s cover stories of People magazine: “Diet Wars: Who’s Winning, Who’s Sinning” (1992) and “Diet Winners and Sinners of the Year” (1994). Indeed, the continuities between
the salvation myth of Culture Lite and the discourses of biblical religion are sometimes quite explicit. A weight-loss program called “Happy Losers” motivates its members with the saying:

The diet is within me I shall not cheat  
It leadeth me to choose the legal food  
whenever I have the urge to eat  
Yea though I may wish to eat sweets or cake  
I shall eat them never  
For the diet is with me  
And I shall reach my goal  
And remain slim forever. Amen.  

In other cases, the weight-loss “gospel” is constructed and preached through conversion idioms of before-and-after. Several diet franchises were founded by women who confessed and capitalized on their “personal” weight-loss sagas. The evangelical tone of these enterprises echoes in the words of “fitness diva” Susan Powter: “Four years ago . . . I was an unfit person—a very, very, very unfit person,” referring to the days when she allegedly weighed 260 pounds. Now weighing 115 pounds, with shaved and bleached white hair, she quips: “I’m just a housewife who figured it out.”

Confessed and converted, Powter presents a female rendition of the “American Dream.” Unlike the famous fitness gurus of previous decades (e.g., Jack Lalane and Richard Simmons), Powter displays a female body that many women can envision themselves becoming. Moreover, in contrast to her female counterpart, Jane Fonda, Powter appeals to women without unusual social privilege: women like herself, she claims, reminding disciples of her unhappy fat days in the Dallas suburbs, where her husband abandoned her and her two children for a woman who was thin. In the spirit of the fitness ethic, Powter criticizes “mainstream” weight-loss programs such as Jenny Craig. Her “alternative” includes a “wellness kit” (which has five motivational audio cassettes, an exercise video, a booklet with recipes and fat guides, and a caliper to measure body fat), in addition to her best-selling book *Stop the Insanity*, a quarterly audio newsletter, and a paid infomercial which reached nearly 50 million viewers every three days when it first aired. Needless to say, Powter is a millionaire. But that, she says, is not the point. Her goal, she insists, is to empower women like herself, which can only happen when they slim down and shape up so the world will take them seriously.

Powter’s mixture of evangelical tone and democratic rhetoric is a recurrent theme in Culture Lite, where distinctions of worth are made by transforming the ordinary practices of daily life into opportunities for self-improvement:

Park a few blocks away from work and walk; or better yet, ride your bike. And take the stairs instead of the elevator. Stand rather than sit. Walk rather than stand. Walk briskly rather than slowly. This way you can nudge up the caloric expenditure.

On an obvious level, such advice suggests that burning calories is the underlying goal of fitness-oriented activities. More subtly, however, the mundane focus of this rhetoric masks the ritualizing function that weight-loss strategies implicitly serve. Walking briskly rather than slowly, taking the stairs rather than the elevator . . . such practices create more than a taut and trim physique. They also produce a sense of purpose, an embodied sense that links an individual’s experience to a wider social order, and ultimately (if implicitly) to a cosmic scheme, a conception of “the general order of existence” (Geertz) within which life is meaningful.
The ritualizing function of Culture Lite, its capacity to transform life’s banal materials into ultimate meaning, is further illustrated in popular food products whose labels bear the saving words: “lo-cal” or “fat-free.” An ad for Diet Coke, featuring the standard figure of a slender young white woman, entices consumers by reference to ecstatic religious experience. “To the Novice,” the copy reads:

> Many of our loyal drinkers equate the indescribable taste of a Diet Coke with that of something in the spiritual realm. However, if this is your first time, we do advise that after drinking one, you resist the urge to run out into the street, toss your beret in the air and exclaim to a slightly bewildered crowd “I’m gonna make it after all!” While we are not disputing these emotions of exuberance, a display of this kind could be confusing to the non-Diet Coke drinker, thus resulting in ostracism from the community, perhaps to a strange land that does not serve Diet Coke.

Such is the longed-for rapture that the monotonous fare of Culture Lite can engender. Though the details of its products, rhetoric, and programs vary, the “truths” around which the pursuit of thinness spins its often vicious circles seem as indisputable as the numerical values (both scientific and monetary) through which they are measured. In the words of a smiling woman, who in an ad for Weight Watchers testifies that she lost over 8 pounds in 14 days: “The scales don’t lie.”

## THE SOCIAL POLITICS OF DIVERSION: FUELING AND EN-GENDERING THE MYTH

The salvation myth of Culture Lite is fueled by a broader culture of self-deception, however. More specifically, the search for a sense of meaning that America’s battle with the bulge both masks and reveals represents a large-scale attempt not merely to manage this society’s apparent abundance, but more importantly to divert attention away from the damaging effects of its grossly uneven distribution. According to the ethos and logic of Culture Lite, it is good to have excess in your billfold but not on your body, and it is right to want to change your thighs but dangerous, indeed crazy, to want to change the world.

Organized around the pursuit of female slenderness, Culture Lite is a central nerve in this society’s politics of distraction: the wide-scale diversion of attention away from the prevailing values and actual conditions that undermine individual and social well-being. On one level, the prominence of diet culture stems from its ability to synthesize a number of authoritative discourses and beliefs, thus offering diverse Americans what traditional religion no longer does: a common, public frame of meaning which appeals and applies across competing party lines. On another level, this prominence stems from its resonance with certain paradigms and values of traditional Christianity, especially those which sanctify oppressive relations of power by defining salvation as a state of perfection one achieves (or receives) in another space and time.

The salvation myth of Culture Lite is not simply otherworldly: it is also both patriarchal and feminized. For the modern beliefs that fuel the quest for the lean and well-managed body, particularly the notion that individuals can and should control their own destiny, have special meaning for those whose destinies have historically been tied to their anatomies. More specifically, the long-standing view of women as spiritually uncomplicated servants of men and as objects of devotion or temptation, together with women’s historical exclusion from formal realms of power, and their modern duties as household servants, ornaments of beauty, domestic scientists, and consumers, has cast them in a leading role in the quest for the fat-free body. In this drama, modern beliefs in the autonomy of the self, the manipulability of
the flesh, the authority of science, and the promises of consumer capitalism merge with traditional visions of womanhood, revising without upsetting women's age-old identification with and through their bodies by demanding their increasingly strict mastery over them. In a society whose prevailing symbols, rituals, and social arrangements continue to conflate female anatomy and destiny, it is not altogether surprising that women learn to seek salvation both from and with their bodies. In a culture where female anatomy is evaluated largely according to its size and contours, it makes sense that rituals aimed to regulate the body's weight and appetites figure prominently in this soteriological quest.

THE REWARDS OF PUNISHMENT: HUNGRY BODIES, SOCIAL APPROVAL, AND SELF-DEFINITION

Despite this grim description, my analysis of the operations and conventions of Culture Lite suggest that this quasi-religious system of meaning is best seen as a context, rather than as a conspiracy. No one forces girls and women to diet. At the same time, losing weight has become an extremely compelling, if often debilitating, practice for so many of them. To understand this conundrum is to recognize that what makes this plan of salvation so compelling among so many different girls and women are the rewards it promises and, at least partially, delivers.

Practices aiming to slenderize the female body create their own rewards, including a sense of social approval and a feeling of self-determination. Women's own accounts of their weight-loss quests illustrate the extent to which the applause of others is an enticing factor in their struggles to be thin: "The more the clothes hung, the more the compliments grew. 'What kind of diet are you on; you haven't looked this good in ages; why, you look like you've lost ten years. . . .'")31 For girls and women of color, losing weight may represent not so much an acceptance of prevailing (i.e., Euro-American) ideals of feminine health and beauty, but rather a rejection of widespread cultural stereotypes. A young Black woman who temporarily lost forty pounds following "The Model's Ten Day Diet" recalls: "Afterwards, no one dared to call me Fat Alberta, and my relatives extolled me for my weight loss and referred to me as a 'real teenager,' as though prior to the weight loss I was insignificant."32 Undeniably, the social applause that accompanies weight loss may temporarily ease the pain of long-standing cultural stereotypes and prejudices. It does so, however, by reinstating the narrowly defined standards and values that keep an unjust social order intact.33

In addition to the social approval it generates, losing weight is a compelling practice because of the autonomy it requires and fosters. By deciding what, how much, or whether to eat, a woman exercises a kind of self-determination that has historically been the prerogative of men. In her daily rituals of self-surveillance (counting calories, doing leg-lifts, checking in mirrors, refusing dessert, etc.), a woman gains the feeling of control that she does not experience in other areas of her life. In one woman's words: "Food was power and control. Food was making my own decisions about what I would eat, when I would eat, how much I would eat. Food was taking control over what I looked like."34

The fact that some of the primary rituals this culture proffers girls and women for cultivating a sense of agency and worth require obedience to prevailing ideals of womanhood suggests the limits of the power that dieting produces. Frigga Haug's work on female socialization suggests that these everyday rites are precisely the means whereby "society as a whole re-creates itself."35 As Susan Bordo points out, weight-loss practices reward women with a sense of autonomy by rendering them more subservient, more
pliable and more “useful” to an oppressive social order. Although such rituals can foster a sense of agency and purpose, they do so by reproducing the classic scenario of patriarchal religion, in which a woman’s salvation depends on her sacrifice, self-denial, and submission.

EMBODYING PURPOSE, PRIVILEGE, AND SELF-CONTROL

By ritualizing some of the most banal of all human activities—eating and moving—women’s weight-loss practices harness the power of those two elements that history seems to have granted them: food and body. Through the privileged contrasts they create, these rites generate opportunities for experiencing something more, something better, something beyond the vicissitudes of life on earth, something sacred in a disenchanted world. In these rites, necessities become possibilities. And possibilities become profits. In the U.S. today, reducing the female form is highly profitable business, not simply because of its almost perfectly predictable lack of permanent success, but also because of the sense of purpose it fosters among those who are overwhelmed by the inequities and pluralities of life today.

On some level, weight-loss rituals “work” by creating simple and accessible solutions to the questions “What do I want?” and “What should I do?”—questions that have grown ever more complicated amid this culture’s movements and backlashes. The industries of Culture Lite capitalize on the eclipse of Truth and the dispersion of meanings that these shifts entail by providing an array of “Answers,” even before any questions are raised. The attraction of these “Answers” rests in the agency they presume, and in the tangible and immediate results they imply. Promotions for diet programs often begin with the promise “In Just One Week.” A television ad for Bally’s fitness centers assures potential converts/consumers that “Twenty-four dollars is all it takes to turn your life around.”

In particular, diet industries cash in on the changing expectations of womanhood that have emerged during the past three decades, by appropriating and reinterpreting the feminist assertion that “biology is not destiny.” An article in *Vogue* entitled “Redefining the Body” encourages women to use “body sculpting” to produce a “look” that is “both strong and feminine.” This technique involves “chiseling one’s body fat to expose the muscle.” Such a standard applies to every woman, the author warns, “no matter what shape you’re born with.” A similar article on body sculpting features a close-up of a woman’s firmly shaped butt, grabbed by her hand which bears an expensive-looking ring. The copy at the corner of the page explains: “A firm fundament announces to the world that the owner controls her own destiny—and can wear an ass-grabbing thong with aplomb.”

The growing popularity of body sculpting among economically elite women suggests the multiple ironies through which popular codes of womanhood are ritually defined and consumed. Women, who are generally born with a higher ratio of fat on their bodies, are seen to perfect themselves in proportion to the amount of fat they eradicate from their bodies, especially those parts of their bodies seen to mark them as “female” (hips, buttocks, stomach, thighs). That breasts are supposed to stay inflated and plump while the rest of the body is flattened and trimmed underlines the unattainability, aside from surgical alteration, of this bodily ideal. Moreover, muscles, which have traditionally been associated with masculinity and working-class life, are transcribed onto female bodies to signify social privilege: these are bodies whose “owners” have time and money to spend at the health club. Finally, women of color, who have been virtually excluded from the public sphere except when their labor was needed for jobs that nobody else cared to do, now have role models like Black fitness guru Victoria Johnson instructing them to “shape up for summer without ever leaving home.”
Despite its egalitarian coating, the salvation myth of Culture Lite reproduces an association between the fat-free body, material privilege, and individual self-control. A magazine ad for Nestle’s dark chocolate fudge diet product called “Sweet Success” illustrates this nexus. The ad features a slender female torso wearing an elegant black dress. The figure is outlined in a way that conveys an image of a paper doll: depthless, playful, and ultimately headless. Given prevailing definitions of female “success” in the U.S. today, losing weight is not only a gendered practice, it is also racially, generationally, heterosexually, and economically inflected. Market research profiles of the typical dieter—a woman who is white, urban, married, employed, well-educated, financially sound, and between the ages of 25 and 44—underline this point.41

The belief that undergirds the call to slenderness, that every body can and should get fit “no matter what shape you’re born with,” ignores women’s uneven access to the cultural “goods” that the fat-free body requires. Neither the time nor the accoutrements through which middle- and upper-class female bodies are trimmed and distinguished (health clubs, home exercise equipment and videos, and so on) are affordable to women from lower income brackets. Even exercise that seems to be free, such as walking or jogging, is a limited option for those who live in neighborhoods where simply being outside is unsafe.42 Commercial diet foods are expensive, and so-called “healthy” or “lo-fat” foods usually cost more (even though they are often cheaper to produce).43 As it turns out, creating a flab-free female body is far from free, and despite occasional moments of color, Culture Lite is very white.

By highlighting the social hierarchies that underwrite the soteriology of Culture Lite, I mean to underline the varying meanings and effects of this pursuit among girls and women in different social locations. By showing how this plan of salvation is constructed through various forms of gender, racial, economic, sexual, and generational privilege, I want to question the quality of the “freedom” and “purpose” that slenderizing rituals produce. As more and more girls and women turn to weight loss as a strategy for making meaning out of the inequities and contradictions that fill their lives, as consumer markets encourage them to shape up and burn fat “without ever leaving home,” as elite women worship and imitate an ideal defined through economic and racial exploitation, as minority girls and women join the majority in hating their bodies, as industries’ profits get fatter by making female bodies and imaginations smaller, those with critical consciousness and religious faith must take a serious look at what is really being gained and lost in the saving promises of Culture Lite.

REINVENTING WOMANHOOD: “IS THIS A NEW RELIGION?”

A few years ago, I came across a magazine ad for Avia running shoes, whose text inspired my present inquiry. “Is This a New Religion?” the boldfaced copy asked its readers. The central image of the two-page ad features a young, taut, and sweating female body, dressed in a leotard, arms extended in a gesture that recalls a crucifix. This image is flanked by two others: on one side, the same sweating woman bent over and lifting weights, muscles and bosom accentuated by a bluish haze; on the other, a close-up of the shoes cast in the same mystifying light. Together these images form a triptych, but the religious motifs do not stop there. In the upper corners of each page, the ad addresses its own query:

This is not about guilt. It’s about joy. Strength. The revival of the spirit. I come here seeking redemption in sweat. And it is here I am forgiven my sinful calories. Others may never understand my dedication. But for me, fitness training is something much
On an obvious level, this text illustrates the affinities between, on the one hand, contemporary diet and fitness rituals, and, on the other hand, the terms and beliefs of traditional Christianity. More subtly, however, it suggests that women’s subordination within traditional religion makes them prime candidates for this “secular” substitute. Defined through an ostensibly progressive rejection of biblical religion’s most notoriously harmful features, its degradation of women and the body, this commercial alternative proffers a new ultimate point of reference, Womanhood Herself: revived and redeemed, made powerful and clear through a diligently trained and slender body. Juxtaposing a stereotypical view of Christianity (characterized by guilt, damnation, and belief in female weakness) with a liberal vision of “a New Religion” (defined by joy, redemption, and affirmation of female strength), this ad speaks to those whose need for meaning remains unfulfilled by the promises of traditional religion, and whose dreams have been further delayed or lost in the shuffle of a rapidly changing and unevenly conflicted world.

In the end, perhaps, the question that the Avia ad raises is not simply whether women’s pursuit of physical perfection constitutes a new religion, but also what kind of religion this pursuit turns out to be.

NOTES


In this work, Douglas argues that “rituals of purity and impurity” such as dietary restrictions and avoidances are central to religious behavior. At the same time, she notes, “very little of our ritual behaviour is enacted in the context of religion” (2–3, 68–9, 72).

4. Catherine Bell, _Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice_ (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 8, 67, 74. In sum, Bell’s theory highlights how rituals make meanings, rather than have or reflect meanings. Ritual practices do not dramatize the symbols they reference; instead, they generate their meanings for practical (rather than logical or universal) purposes. In this understanding, “ritual” has more the quality of a verb than a noun, and its power is productive.

5. Bell, _Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice_, 48–9, 83–5, 90. Bell is drawing on the insights of Antonio Gramsci, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel Foucault. From Gramsci, she uses the concept of “hegemony” to highlight “the dominance and subordination that exist within people’s practical and un-self-conscious awareness of the world. . . . This awareness is a lived system of meanings, a more or less unified moral order, which is confirmed and nuanced in experience to construct a person’s sense of reality and identity” (82–3). Bell’s notion of the “ritualized body” is close to Bourdieu’s concept of the “socially informed body,” the body that has been taught to think, feel, act and appear a certain way in a given social milieu (80). From Foucault, Bell picks up the idea that the body is basic to all sociopolitical relations of power (202).


7. Seid, _Never Too Thin_, 5, 102. Seid lists a number of popular diets in the first chapter of her book.

8. The word “diet” stems from the Greek word _diaita_, meaning “way of life.” See Bryan S. Turner, _The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory_ (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1984), for a discussion of the different meanings of the term, particularly as “a regulation of the individual or a regulation of the body politic” (165).


10. A number of historians concur that fatness had primarily positive connotations throughout the nineteenth century. Seid writes: “Fat in the blood, fat on the body, and a new physicality had become the hallmarks of the American female ideal. . . . Throughout this period [1830–1900] body fat had profoundly positive associations . . . abundant flesh symbolized all that was best in middle-class life, especially its comfortable prosperity” ( _Never Too Thin_, 76). According to Harvey Levenstein, “Plumpness was widely regarded, by health experts and connoisseurs of female aesthetics alike, as a sign of good health” ( _Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet_ [New York: Oxford University Press, 1988], 13).

11. By situating the beginnings of contemporary dieting in the writings and practices of early modern men rather than the practices of medieval holy women, I am following the work of cultural historians such as Seid and Levenstein, and especially that of Hillel Schwartz ( _Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies and Fat_ [New York: Free Press, 1986])—all of whose studies suggest greater threads of continuity between the practices of early modern dieters and those of present-day girls and women.


15. Alongside new medical theories about the detriments of obesity, psychoanalytic models not only blamed obesity on overeating, but also assumed that people who overate did so because of unsatisfied emotional needs. In psychoanalytic theories, “[t]he overfed body was, strangely, an empty body” (Seid, Never Too Thin, 126). According to Schwartz, during the forty-year period following World War I, psychoanalysis shifted the cause of obesity from biological to psychological disturbances (Never Satisfied, 192–4, 153–5).


21. For example, in a survey conducted by Essence on issues related to troubled eating and body-hatred, 74.5 percent of respondents said that they exercise to burn calories (Villarosa, “Dangerous Eating,” 19).


24. Quoted by Lois Fine, “Happy Loser,” in Eating Our Hearts Out: Personal Accounts of Women’s Relationship to Food, ed. Lesléa Newman (Freedom, Calif.: Crossing Press, 1993), 134–6, quotation from 136. In addition, Seid cites several diet books and programs whose titles make explicit reference to the rhetoric of traditional religion, including Rev. C. W. Shedd’s Pray Your Weight Away, which equates fat with sin, arguing that “God really made us all thin, except for the glandular cases, and if our bodies really are to be temples of the Holy Spirit, we had best get them down to the size God intended.” According to Seid, the 1970s saw a number of evangelically inspired weight-loss groups: “The Prayer-Diet Clubs of the fifties gave way to Overeaters Victorious, the Workshop in Lenten Living, 3D (for Diet, Discipline, and Discipleship), and the Jesus System for Weight Control.” Other examples of Christian diet books include Frances Hunter’s God’s Answer to Fat—Lose It! (1976) and Joan Cavanaugh’s More of Jesus, Less of Me (1976). See Seid, Never Too Thin, 107.

25. Alison Thresher charts this trend in “Girth of a Nation,” 50–1.


29. For more examples of the use of religious discourse in advertisements for weight-loss products, see Kilbourne, “Still Killing Us Softly,” especially 409–11.

30. The ad appears in Self, April 1995, 117.


36. Susan Bordo, Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body (Berkeley: University of...
39. Bordo makes this point about the transvaluation of muscles in *Unbearable Weight*, 193–5.
41. Schwartz, *Never Satisfied*, 254. According to Schwartz, profiles of male dieters are similar in all respects except for age (which is assumed to be between 35 and 54). In a chapter entitled “Work(ing) Out,” Susan Willis suggests that a similar demographic makeup (i.e., white and middle- or upper-class) characterizes the women who “work out” on a regular basis (*A Primer for Daily Life* [New York: Routledge, 1991], 65).
42. Rosemary Bray makes these points in “Heavy Burden,” *Essence*, October 1989, 53–4, 90, quotation from 54.
AN AMERICAN APOTHEOSIS

Sports as Popular Religion

THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF SPORTS

Each year, on a Sunday toward the end of January, more than half the American population, and perhaps as much as one-tenth of the entire world’s, rivets its attention on a single, remote event. By then, the Super Bowl has dominated public attention for weeks, and viewers tune in to face their televisions like an electronic qiblah. In 1985, the Super Bowl commanded such power that the public celebration of Ronald Reagan’s inauguration was shifted from the constitutionally required day of January 20, a Sunday, to the following day, a frigid Monday in Washington, D.C. Meanwhile, on Sunday the 20th in Palo Alto, California, Joe Montana and his crew of San Francisco 49ers commanded full national attention as they beat the Miami Dolphins, winning their first Super Bowl trophy. The football championship has not only come to take precedence over national political rituals: economic exchanges and entertainment performances have also become dominated by the event. Fans, in fact, spend more money on the Super Bowl—making a pilgrimage to the game; attending parties bedecked with official Super Bowl paraphernalia; placing bets in office pools and elsewhere—than Americans spend on traditional religious practices and institutions throughout the entire month.¹

The religious impact of sports, however, extends beyond the popular fascination with this most prominent national sporting event. Every week during intercollegiate sports seasons, fans orient their schedules toward their team’s game, devote their attention to plays and players, and put on masks (painting their faces and bodies, dyeing their hair, and wearing color-coordinated jerseys, jackets, and sweatshirts) to increase their identification with their team. The religious significance of their activity is described succinctly by American philosopher George Santayana, who thought of religion as “another world to live in.” Yet Santayana “could not have anticipated how, for many millions of [Americans] . . . , what he meant by ‘religion’ would one day be displaced in the most immediate, existential and emotional sense by organized spectator sports.”² For tens of millions of devoted fans throughout the country, sports constitute a popular form of religion by shaping their world and sustaining their ways of engaging it. Indeed, for many, sports are elevated to a kind of divine status, in what I would call an American apotheosis.

Sports Illustrated journalist Frank Deford was among the first to identify the kind of religious power that sports exert over modern Americans. Deford suggests that if Marx had lived at the end of the twentieth century in the United States rather than in Victorian England, he would have declared that sports is the opiate of the people, anesthetizing them to the class struggle and focusing their hopes on events that project fulfillment through a vicarious form of participation and through an often delayed form of
This poignant critique of sports and culture also indicts the decline of traditional religion’s influence at the end of the twentieth century. Other critics have drawn this conclusion more explicitly: “The decline of religion as a source of significant meaning in modern industrialized societies,” Joyce Carol Oates avers, “has been extravagantly compensated by the rise of popular culture in general, of which the billion-dollar sports mania is the most visible manifestation.”

The fusion of sports and religion is neither eccentric nor particular to modern America. Throughout history, and across multiple cultures in today’s world, mythic and ritual significance has often been recognized in a number of sports events and play activities. In ancient Greece, the Olympic games were only one set of games performed in honor of the gods—for their entertainment, since the gods were thought to be too serious to engage in the recreational play and physical exercise which they nonetheless enjoyed. In Central America, Mayans played ball games officiated by priests, on courts attached to temples, and with victory perhaps demanding the sacrifice of the team captain. Among other tribes and nations of pre-Columbian Native Americans in North America, the game of lacrosse bore religious weight in its ritual enactment of conflict and combat between contestant tribes, and perhaps in the use of its rackets to forecast or foresee future events. For the Oglala Sioux, the seventh sacred rite of Tapa Wanka Yap, or “the throwing of the ball,” combined spiritual and sporting dimensions. In Japan, sumo wrestling tournaments utilize Shinto purification rituals of throwing salt, and the space for the matches and the hierarchy of wrestlers reflect certain Shinto values. The physical and mental control demanded by karate and other Asian martial arts can be understood as a spiritual discipline. Eugen Herrigel also discusses Asian traditions and discipline in his well-received *Zen in the Art of Archery,* in which archery is called a sport but is also recognized as a disciplined form of spiritual exercise: the archer seeks to become unified with the bow and the target, precisely by not focusing on the athletic aspects of shooting an arrow. Finally, especially in South America and Europe, soccer promotes a sense of national identity that is rightly considered religious.

In America, sports have been identified as a form of civil religion by Michael Novak, as a form of folk religion by sociologist James Mathisen, and as a form of cultural religion by Catherine Albanese. However, other scholars—trained in literary critical procedures or historical (methods, rather than in religious studies or theology—have challenged whether sports could constitute a religion, which, they insist, is characterized by transcendental, sacramental, and uplifting social elements. Sociologist Harry Edwards calls sports “essentially a secular, quasireligious institution. It does not, however, constitute an alternative to or substitute for formal sacred religious involvement.” Other scholars who have focused on the similarities between particular sports and religious life concur with Edwards. In his analysis of collegiate football, Edwin Cady examines the ways in which college games provide a cultural spectacle for intensifying and celebrating rivalries. Yet Cady contends that “The Big Game” is not in itself fundamentally religious, since it is not, as he perceives it, essentially sacramental. Nevertheless, he allows that “The Big Game” might feel sacramental in approximately the same way that good art does, and he identifies “The Big Game” as being “the most vitally folklorist event in our culture.” On different grounds, Joan Chandler refuses to classify sport as religion since both priests and believers, on the one hand, and fans and players, on the other hand, would probably not identify the objects of their devotion as addressing or meeting the same needs. Robert J. Higgs and Michael Braswell deny that sports constitute a religion, but acknowledge that sports, like art, share deep elements with religion. They conclude that rather than alloying itself with either war or sports, religion should check them.

Despite these reservations and protests against classifying sports as a religion, it seems reasonable to do so. Even though sports does not have all characteristics of a religion, neither does any particular
religious tradition, because such comprehensive definitions of “religion” are simply ideal norms against which actual religions are measured. And although Charles H. Lippy, in his recent study of popular religiosity in America, hesitates to call sports a religion, he does identify a crucial factor for considering sports as a form of popular religion: the media. The incredible growth of spectator sports, he observes, has corresponded to, if not emerged out of, the expansion of media coverage of sports events. Less than three decades ago, the only sports events that would be televised during weekdays or prime time were the World Series and the Olympics. Triple-header coverage of football games was restricted to the college bowl game day on New Year’s. Nowadays, most fall Sundays let couch coaches and sofa quarterbacks view three full NFL games, while channel flipping to at least two others. With cable systems providing increased coverage of college sports, it is possible to view five football games on most Saturdays in season, and to see scores of basketball games throughout the weeks of winter and spring.

As sports coverage of Sunday events began to increase in the mid-1970s, Frank Deford observed that “the churches have ceded Sunday to sports. . . . Sport owns Sunday now, and religion is content to leave a few minutes before the big games.” Not only do the overwhelming majority of Americans identify themselves as sports fans, as mentioned above, but “sport, in its spectatorial and participatory forms, permeates our technological society to the extent that few are left untouched by it.” And the public’s attraction to broadcast sports events represents more than merely the pursuit of entertainment, for “sports affect people, and their lives, far more deeply and for a longer time than mere diversion would.”

Among the first scholars to consider the popular religious dimensions of sports in America are sociologist Harry Edwards and theologian Michael Novak, both of whom identify several characteristics common to sports and religion. According to Edwards, these characteristics concern deity, authority, tradition, beliefs, faithful followers, ritual sites, and material elements: superstar athletes correspond to religions’ gods and deceased players serve as saints; the coaches and executives who sit on boards and commissions and make and interpret the rules are like religious patriarchs and high councils; the reporters and broadcasters who chronicle sports events and tabulate their statistics are like the scribes of religious traditions; sports trophies and memorabilia are like religious icons; the formally stated beliefs that are commonly accepted about a sport are like religious dogmas; sports stadiums and arenas are like houses of worship; and halls of fame, both the different facilities for different sports (e.g., the Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown, New York, and Pro Football’s Hall of Fame at Canton, Ohio) as well as the most local of sports “shrines”—trophy cases—are like religious shrines. Finally, he identifies the faithful or devoted fans of sports with the true believers of a religious tradition. With these perceptive points, Edwards prompts further reflections on how aspects of sports indeed correspond to elements of religions.

Most of Edwards’s connections are drawn from a comparison of sports with theistic, scriptural religious traditions. In particular, his association of superstar athletes with gods calls the accuracy of his comparison into question, because sports heroes are living, physical, visible actors, while the gods, for all their presence and potency, remain invisible and nonmaterial. Yet historian of religion Charles S. Prebish supports Edwards in his assessment that sports heroes function as gods: “The child’s worship of [baseball great] Ted Williams,” Prebish offers, “is no less real than his or her reverential adoration of Christ, and to some, Williams’s accomplishments and capabilities in baseball were unquestionably godly.”

The reverence and respect accorded to sports heroes and events is not restricted to children or to fans unfamiliar with characteristics of religion. One Saturday afternoon in late November, 1993, more than 7,000 professors of religious studies convened at a hotel in Washington, D.C., for the annual meetings of the two largest professional societies in religious studies. Midway through the afternoon’s sessions, a
televised event claimed the attention—yea, devotion—of many of the professors. Initially, observers might have thought that the Notre Dame–Boston College football game was quite unlike the religious rituals that the professors studied. But as time wound down in the game, more than a hundred scholars spontaneously gathered around a lobby television set to watch the final kick, and, during the timeout called before the snap and placement, several of them fell to their knees in front of the television set or at the edges of their sofas, while others sat with hands clasped as though in prayer. When the winning kick went through the goal posts, the players on the field and fans in stands leapt into each other’s open embraces and cried with tears of ecstasy, and the scholarly supporters of Boston College turned their faces upward, thrust their arms upright, and shouted and whooped with joy in front of the hotel television. Their posture, volume, and spirit resembled a display of spirit-filled believers shouting “Hallelujah!” As theologian Michael Novak notes, the joy of victory in an athletic contest often prompts such a religious response, for winning games generates a feeling that “the gods are on one’s side, as though one is Fate’s darling, as if the powers of being course through one’s veins and radiate from one’s action—powers stronger than nonbeing, powers over ill fortune, powers over death.” Victory, Novak asserts, “is abundant life.”

In contrast to the jubilation of the Boston College followers, dejected fans of the Fighting Irish reacted with rituals of mourning, first expressing shock that such a “tragedy” (as some of them put it) could occur, then denying that the upset could be real, by proposing scenarios and plays that could have altered the outcome, and finally acknowledging the loss and its pain. “To lose,” Novak also notes, “symbolizes death, and it certainly feels like dying; but it is not death.” Such a symbolic rehearsal of death, Novak relates, is characteristic of the Christian sacraments of baptism and eucharist, wherein the communicants symbolically experience death and rebirth.

The religious sensibility of sports involves more than the supplanting of divine roles by sports superheroes, or the substitution of religious rites and doctrines with corresponding sports rituals and rules. For the religious sensibility of sports derives from their basic spiritual dimensions and from the public’s potential engagement with them. Addressing fundamental questions about the nature of religion and its exemplification in sports, Novak, like Edwards, draws up a list of correspondences between sports and religion. But unlike Edwards, Novak does not restrict the foundation for his comparison to a theistic perspective. In contrast to the somewhat tentative identification of sport with religion that Edwards finally affirms, Novak is forthright, even if ambiguous: “Sports is, somehow, a religion.” Throughout *The Joy of Sports*, Novak celebrates the spiritual dimensions and impact of sports, revels in various acts of sporting competition and in the admiration of sports heroes, and, particularly in his chapter “The Natural Religion,” specifies the fundamental correspondence between sports and religion—that they are “organized and structured.” Like religions, which “place us in the presence of powers greater than ourselves, and seek to reconcile us to them,” sports help participants confront the uncertainties of “Fate” by playing out contingencies in games, and by recognizing the role that chance plays in the outcome of contests. Religions regularly help persons confront their anxieties and dreads about failure, aging, betrayal, and guilt, while competitive sports consistently engage participants in situations that “embody these in every combat.” Furthermore, because both athletes and believers espouse a self-imposed subordination of their physical bodies to their wills, they develop “character through patterns of self-denial, repetition, and experiment.”

Novak also identifies sports with religion by remarking that both establish high standards of expectation, demand discipline, and strive toward perfection. Such pursuit of excellence creates and cultivates a climate of reverence—in religious traditions, manifest in the devotion to saints; in sports
activities, evident in the celebration of heroes. In addition, Novak notes, religions normally create a sense of belonging by focusing initially on the bonding of local communities. This sense of affiliation then becomes a paradigm for the germination and nurture of larger commitments—from local to national, from earthly to universal. Sports similarly generate a sense of identity with “the home team” and the loyalty that such a self-understanding entails. One of the means for generating this group identity is through rituals that are common to both religions and sports: even as religions use chants, songs, and certain gestures, so too do sports bond teammates and fans together by using cheers (“Two bits, four bits, six bits, a dollar: All for our team, stand up and holler”), songs (“Take Me Out to the Ballgame,” which features the call to “root, root, root for the home team” during the seventh inning stretch, or the singing of the school “fight song” at football games), and bodily movement (clapping, giving “high fives,” slapping each other on the back, and so on). With each of these forms of acting and inter-acting, fans and players unite as a single body.

THE SPIRITUALITY OF SPORTS

Underlying these common facets of religion and sports is the experience of “flow,” which Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defines as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.” Applying his insights on the psychology of optimal experience to persons’ participation and performance in sports and games, Csikszentmihalyi recognizes that such opportunities go beyond the boundaries and expectations of ordinary experience. Temporarily set apart from ordinary folks during sports contests and performances,

players and spectators cease to act in terms of common sense, and concentrate instead on the peculiar reality of the game.

Such flow activities have as their primary function the provision of enjoyable experiences. . . . Because of the way [that sports] are constructed, they help participants and spectators achieve an ordered state of mind that is highly enjoyable.21

“The peculiar reality of the game,” as Csikszentmihalyi refers to it, constitutes the core of the spiritual power and religious significance of sports, and develops out of their ritual aspects—the game’s time, space, rules, and purposes. In ritual and in play, Johan Huizinga notes, performance space is set aside, demarcated as the “field of play” wherein a certain set of rules apply. During play or ritual, performance takes shape in a time of its own, certainly surrounded or engulfed by the chronometric measure of ordinary time but set off in such a way that the duration of the game conforms to a different standard of temporal computation, as in the play of baseball with its “innings” or in tennis with its sets and matches. Even the games that utilize a clock, such as football and basketball, run the clock and stop it at appointed times, measuring game time according to a different set of rules than those that govern the calculation of ordinary time. Finally, special rules within the designated space and time for play, such as rules regulating tackling (allowed in football but impermissible in ordinary relations) and taunting (forbidden in basketball, but not in ordinary affairs), create a microcosm, an area and time within whose confines an order is established.22

Like Huizinga, historian of religions Mircea Eliade recognizes the worldmaking functions of ritual, although he takes a somewhat different perspective regarding their purpose. Eliade applies the concepts of ritual space and time to his analysis of humans as homo religiosus: for him, the categories of time and
space provide the orientation for cosmicization, or the development of a worldview, construing and maintaining one’s way of being in the world. All such acts of cosmicization are fundamentally religious because the establishment of order in a new world—even one such as that of a game—replicates the cosmogonic act of the gods in the creation of the world. And sacred time, like play time, is discontinuous with ordinary time. It is reversible and replicable, a different realm of time in which one might forget ordinary time. Like priests performing and laypersons attending religious rites, athletes and spectators lose track of ordinary time when the game is good—when the intensity of play fully engages the participants. It is a realm of time which is satisfying in itself, because the actions that take place are meaningful within the time frame, although they may, in addition, express meaning beyond the block of sacred time or provide release from the strictures of ordinary time.

Obviously, sports are not religions in the same way that Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Taoism are religions. But sports are “a form of religion,” as Novak puts it, because they provide “organized institutions, disciplines, and liturgies” and because they “teach religious qualities of heart and soul. In particular, they recreate symbols of cosmic struggle, in which human survival and moral courage are not assured.” Through their symbols and rituals, sports provide occasions for experiencing a sense of ultimacy and for prompting personal transformation.

The kinds of personal and social transformations that sports proffer do not depend upon winning a game or achieving a personal best performance in a contest, although both may certainly generate spiritual experiences. Instead, the transformative potential of sports themselves extends to all participants, whether or not competition is undertaken. The transformative potential of sports involves, as Prebish puts it, “redemption as well as rebirth into a new type of reality, separated from ordinary reality by its sense of being permeated with ultimacy and holiness, with beauty and freedom.” The ultimacy or holiness of the religious experience derives from its location, not in a remote realm of transcendence, but in a sense of alterity generated by the freedom and beauty of the sports activity itself.

When considering the significance of sports as religion, one can distinguish between the sport’s spiritual presence and power for athletes, and fans’ allegiance to teams and heroes. In established religious traditions, it is not uncommon for priests and laypersons to enjoy various levels of engagement and enrichment in their religious exercise; so too with sports, wherein athletes experience dimensions of selfhood and the quest for perfect performance in ways strikingly different from the experiences of fans.

In her examination of the spiritual experiences of athletes in competition, even where that competition is simply a struggle with oneself to achieve a “personal best” performance, Carolyn Thomas draws inspiration from Jean-Paul Sartre’s assertion in *Being and Nothingness* that a person’s goal is “to attain himself [or herself] as a certain being, precisely the being, which is in question to his [or her] being.” For athletes, Thomas claims, “sport is a lived experience that, despite teammates or fans, is ultimately a solitary quest that reflects highly individual, personal, and subjective intents.” Serious athletes, she asserts, “often unknowingly . . . enter the world of sports in search of self, in search of the reality of a given moment, in search of truth.” To engage the most profound level of truth requires that one become introspective and meditative, opening oneself to the Other that resides at the innermost dimension of self. In this sense, then, sports constitute an essential, spiritual pursuit—seeking truth and self-awareness.
An athlete might articulate this self-understanding following a performance, but not be conscious of this “knowing” dimension during the performance itself. In fact, the opposite is probably the case, according to Phil Jackson, former coach of the Chicago Bulls and Los Angeles Lakers, son of Pentecostal ministers, and student of Zen Buddhism. The secret for playing basketball well, he says, is a Buddhist sense of being aware of what everyone on the court is doing and responding to, interacting with, and directing the flow of the game, precisely by not thinking. The self-awareness that, upon reflection, leads to an articulation of self-understanding and disclosure of truth is the experience of flow.

A casual observer, of course, would be unlikely to perceive the pursuit of self-awareness and truth in a Division I intercollegiate contest, because of corruption, attempts by some players and coaches to win at all costs, booster clubs that provide illegitimate support for certain players and teams, and the like. “Often portrayed in terms of greed, egocentricity, and immorality, these [Division I] forms of sport . . . that focus on competitive ends . . . seem a far cry from a historic dependence on religion.” But even in such contexts, Thomas concludes, sport “provides a place where people can dominate fear and passion; a place where adventure and purpose and commitment can remove a sense of dread that may otherwise prevail.”

The spiritual experience of athletes in their performance of sport is not only the introspective pursuit of personal, foundational truths, but also includes their appreciation of simplicity and harmony in team play, and their quest for a perfectly synchronized performance. This quest for perfection arises out of the fundamental dissatisfaction and uneasiness that constitute the human condition, but “sports nourish this drive [toward perfection] as well as any other institution in our society.” Even when the pursuit of a perfect performance in sports becomes corrupted or distorted—when it moves toward selfish goals rather than the joy and disclosive possibilities of play itself—it still manifests a fundamental human desire for fulfillment. The willingness to subject personal preferences to the good of the team constitutes a basic religious aspect of team sports. “Even for those who don’t consider themselves ‘spiritual’ in a conventional sense, [the process of] creating a successful team—whether it’s an NBA champion or a record-setting sales force—is essentially a spiritual act,” asserts Phil Jackson. “It requires the individuals involved to surrender their self-interest for the greater good so that the whole adds up to more than the sum of its parts.”

**DEVOTION TO SPORTS**

In contrast to an athlete’s experience of spiritual harmony in team play, fans manifest the religious power of sports in their expressions of allegiance and respect. The most explicit recent example of this was the “religious overtone,” as Phil Jackson put it, of the press coverage when Michael Jordan contemplated returning to the Bulls following his eighteen-month retirement. “Perhaps it was just a reflection of the spiritual malaise in the culture and the deep yearning for a mythic hero who would set us free,” Jackson mused. “Whatever the reason, during his hiatus from the team, Michael had somehow been transformed in the public mind from a great athlete to a sports deity.” And yearning for the possibility of his return—expecting almost an eschatological second coming of sorts—some of the most fervent fans made their way to the United Center, where the Bulls play their home games, and knelt and prayed at the foot of Jordan’s statue—a shrine to his transcending the court, his being “Air Jordan.”

Certainly, sports fans exhibit a kind of devotion that often is described in terms of religious dedication or intensity. They express their fervor not only in the religious rituals of supplication for
success, but also in the negative expressions of prayer for others’ destruction or failure. In the Puerto Rican town of San Germán, Jackson recalls, “the fans hated the Gallitos [Jackson’s team] so much that they lit candles the night before we arrived and prayed for our death.” The most extreme form of this attitude is surely that of the Colombian soccer fans who assassinated Andres Escobar for having accidentally scored a goal against his own team in the 1994 World Cup competition. Most fans, of course, do not resort to death threats and murder, but they express their dedication and devotion by the size of their wagers on favorite teams, the extent to which they will go—the sacrifices that they will make—in order to make a pilgrimage to an important game, and the ludic masking that they often assume in order to establish full identity with their favorite team or its mascot.

One of the most vivid displays of a fan’s devotion to a sport occurs in *Bull Durham*, the popular, romantic baseball movie. The opening sequence behind the credits features sepia tones of photographs from the collection of Annie Savoy, whose wall gallery serves as a sort of shrine to bygone baseball superheroes and their seemingly cosmic feats. The soundtrack features a blues singer wailing “Yes, yes, yes” (a secular rendition of “Amen”) to a mournful gospel melody. Then we hear Annie deliver her confession:

> I believe in the Church of Baseball. I’ve tried all of the major religions and most of the minor ones. I’ve worshipped Buddha, Allah, Brahma, Vishnu, Síva, trees, mushrooms, and Isadora Duncan.

> I know things. For instance, there are 108 beads in a Catholic rosary and there are 108 stitches in a baseball. When I learned that I gave Jesus a chance. But it just didn’t work between us. The Lord laid too much guilt on me.

> I prefer metaphysics to theology. You see, there’s no guilt in baseball, and it’s never boring. . . .

> I’ve tried ’em all, I really have. And the only church that truly feeds the soul day in and day out is the Church of Baseball.

Annie’s experience of awe and sustenance in baseball is not merely aligned with her annual romantic liaison with one of the Durham Bulls. Her enduring love is for baseball, the game itself, and the way it makes sense out of life.

What Annie senses in her devotion to baseball is that somehow the game of baseball dramatizes a myth, a set of contingent relations or a display of possible outcomes that make life meaningful. Scholars have also proposed that baseball enacts elements of a myth whose meaning often corresponds to its athletes’ and fans’ hopes. For example, A. Bartlett Giamatti, former Commissioner of Major League Baseball, suggests that baseball’s space and rules correspond in many respects to the ancient omphalos myth, which reflects upon the creation and ordering of the world from the center of the earth, often a cosmic mountain.

In addition to personal acts of fan devotion such as Annie Savoy’s, the group behavior of fans also has religious import. According to a *Sports Illustrated* survey in the 1970s, three-fourths of Americans identified themselves as sports fans. In 1990, the Indiana State High School championship game hosted 41,046 fans, a national record, in the Hoosier Dome at Indianapolis. “Hoosier Hysteria”—Indiana’s obsessive love of basketball, especially at the high school level—has been called the state’s religion; “indeed it is the church and the team,” Barry Temkin observes, “that stand as the two most important institutions in many a town—and not necessarily in that order.”

The expressions of devotion by fans are not restricted to fervent individuals; they also extend to communities that often establish their identity by supporting their local team and celebrating its heroes. One of the memorable scenes in the popular basketball film “Hoosiers” reflects such devotion by an entire community, as the headlights on a caravan of cars light the town’s pilgrimage to an “away game” on a Friday night. In Kentucky, too, the reverence, hope, and community bonding associated with high school
basketball can be seen in the fact that the Metcalf County High School gymnasium seats more fans than the population of Edmonton, the town where it is located. A similar phenomenon has been chronicled by H. G. Bissinger in *Friday Night Lights*, an Analysis of a season in the life of the Permian Panthers (Odessa, Texas), and of the community’s dreams for justification and validation through the success of this high school football team. In Kentucky, part of a community’s dream is that the local high school stars might become immortal by playing for the vaunted University of Kentucky Wildcats. When, at the start of his junior year of high school, Metcalf County point guard J. P. Blevins signed a letter of intent to attend Kentucky, the gymnasium was filled as the entire community celebrated his accomplishment, not merely as a rite of passage for a budding star’s achievement but as an enduring validation of their own way of life and their love of Kentucky Wildcats basketball.  

**CHALLENGES FOR SPORTS AND FAITH**

There are at least three points of continuing concern for those who wrestle with comparing the religious creed with the code of the sports cult. The first issue is a theological one. Although religions do not necessarily involve the worship of “God” or “gods,” they do orient their followers toward an ultimate force or pantheon of powers, whether personalized as “gods” or identified in abstract ways, for example Buddhism’s path of enlightenment or Shinto’s abiding sense of family and tradition. One of the primary challenges for religious studies scholars who undertake theological analysis of sports is to identify within sports a source of ultimate powers for evoking and inspiring radical transformation among participants and faithful spectators.

The second issue emerges out of ethical concerns about the inculcation and transmission of values. Not all of the values are negative, as some might be tempted to claim in light of ongoing exposés about the athletes’ corruption, the appreciation and practice of violence, the cultivation of bodily deformation as a way to achieve success (as with the use of anabolic steroids), and the use of cheating in order to win at any cost. James Mathisen, among others, challenges the naive notion that sports, in and of themselves, promote the building of admirable character. It should be noted, however, that not all religions adopt and encourage humanistic, pacifist, and compassionate values, so the critique of sports on the grounds that they promote violence, bodily abuse, and an aggressive competitive spirit does not, of itself, separate sports from established religious traditions.

In any case, many celebrate the beneficent aspects of sports, in contrast to these more negative portrayals of the potential evils in store for sports devotees. Michael Novak, for instance, writes: “Sports are our chief civilizing agent. Sports are our most universal art form. Sports tutor us in the basic lived experiences of the humanist tradition.” Thus, a challenge for scholars who pursue a religious studies critique of sports is to identify and classify the values in sports that motivate action of players and interaction with and among faithful fans.

Finally, some theological critics have been reluctant to consider sports as religion since they recognize that many traditionally pious persons are also avid sports participants and fans. “Is it possible to maintain multi-lateral religious affiliations? Can the proponent of sport religion also retain standing within his or her traditional religious affiliation?” Prebish asks. “Ostensibly no!” he responds, reasoning that anyone who identifies sports as his or her religion would be “referring to a consistent pursuit that is also the most important pursuit and a religious pursuit. If this individual were to then state that he or she is also a Jew or a Protestant or a Catholic or whatever,” Prebish concludes, “he or she would be referring to
cultural heritage only, to the complex series of factors that are essentially ethnic and locational rather than religious.”

This conflict arises most frequently out of monotheistic concerns, since in monotheistic traditions true believers can adhere to only one form of faith. However, if we recognize, with historians of religion like Mircea Eliade, that it is possible for persons to be simultaneously religious in multiple and apparently competing ways, then a new respect for pluralism might arise, and we could consider ways to appreciate the rhythmic or antagonistic forces for allegiance among devoted fans who are also faithful followers of an established religious tradition.

In short, although difficulties exist in trying to specify the exact nature and extent of sports as religion, sports do exhibit many of the characteristics of established religious traditions. Most importantly, they exercise a power for shaping and engaging the world for millions of devoted fans throughout America; they enable participants to explore levels of selfhood that otherwise remain inaccessible; they establish means for bonding in communal relations with other devotees; they model ways to deal with contingencies and fate while playing by the rules; and they provide the prospect for experiencing victory and thus sampling, at least in an anticipatory way, “abundant life.” In America, quite simply, sports constitute a form of popular religion.

NOTES


15. Edwards, *Sociology of Sport*, 261–262. See also Mathisen, quoting M. C. Kearl: “Like religion, professional sports use past generations as referents for the present and confer conditional immortality for their elect through statistics and halls of fame.” Then Mathisen comments: “In our desire to fix in time the achievements of those we look back upon as our representatives for time immemorial, we attribute a sense of sanctity to them and their accomplishments. . . . When a record is broken in sport, we are both happy and sad. Not only has immortality been achieved, but previous immortality proves to have been conditional and so has been stolen from our midst. Maybe we should place an asterisk next to the new record, just to ensure that we do not lose sight of the former one and of the hero who established it” (“Civil Religion to Folk Religion,” 24). For a specific connection of superstar Michael Jordan with a kind of deific projection, see Jim Naughton, *Taking to the Air: The Rise of Michael Jordan* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), 134. Naughton reminds us of former sportswriter Red Smith’s warning against the “godding up of ballplayers,” and suggests that, with Jordan’s air quality, he embodies the nearest thing to transcendence that we are likely to see.

16. Cf. Oates: “For the ‘sports fan’ the team or idolized athlete provides a kind of externalized soul: there to be celebrated or reviled but, as the God of the ages apparently was not, there in full public view” (“Lives of the latter-day saints,” 9).


19. Ibid., 21.


27. Ibid., 509–10.
32. Ibid., 16–7.
33. Ibid., 70–1.


39. Novak, Joy of Sports, 27. Elsewhere in his collection, Novak promotes the potential good in sports even more hopefully: “What I have learned from sports is respect for authenticity and individuality (each player learning his own true instincts, capacities, style); for courage and perseverance and stamina; for the ability to enter into defeat in order to suck dry its power to destroy; for harmony of body and spirit. . . . In sports, law was born and also liberty, and the nexus of their interrelation. In sports, honesty and excellence are caught, captured, nourished, held in trust for the generations” (43).

40. Prebish, Religion and Sport, 72.
David Chidester

Not exactly, of course, because we have no idea what Buck O’Neil, the great first baseman of the Kansas City Monarchs in the 1930s, who served baseball for over six decades as player, coach, manager, and scout, means by the term “religion.” What does he mean? As Ken Burns would have it, baseball is a religion because it operates in American culture like a church, “The Church of Baseball.” Is that how we should understand “religion” in American popular culture, as an organized human activity that functions like the more familiar religious institution of the Christian church?

To complicate the matter, however, consider this: A religion is not a specific institution, but rather “a system of symbols.” So says anthropologist Clifford Geertz; so too says Mark Pendergrast in his account of a new religion that was founded in America but eventually achieved truly global scope, the religion of Coca-Cola.

In his popular history For God, Country, and Coca-Cola, Pendergrast concludes that the fizzy, caramel-colored sugar water stands as a “sacred symbol” that induces “worshipful” moods which animate an “all-inclusive world view espousing perennial values such as love, peace, and universal brotherhood.” According to this reading, therefore, religion is about sacred symbols and systems of sacred symbols that endow the world with meaning and value. As Pendergrast argues, Coca-Cola—the sacred name, the sacred formula, the sacred image, the sacred object—has been the fetish at the center of a popular American system of religious symbolism.

But we can complicate things even further by considering this: “Let’s Give It to ’Em, Right Now!” singer Joe Ely screams before the instrumental break in the Kingsmen’s 1963 rock ‘n’ roll classic, “Louie, Louie.” In the midst of the clashing, crashing cacophony, with lyrics that are unintelligible at any speed, we are struck by the strained screech of Ely’s exhortation, “Let’s Give It to ’Em, Right Now!” What kind of a “gift” is this?

In his book-length history of the song, which explores “the secret” of “Louie, Louie,” rock critic Dave Marsh proposes that one useful model for understanding this kind of gift-giving appears in the ritualized display, presentation, and destruction of property associated with the potlatch ritual performed by indigenous American societies in the Pacific Northwest. This analogy with a Native American ritual,
Marsh argues, can illuminate what he calls the “socioreligious” character of “Louie, Louie” in American culture. In this sense, however, religion is not an institution; it is not a system of symbols; it is the gift.

Church, fetish, potlatch—these three terms represent different theoretical models for analyzing religion in American popular culture. By examining their recent deployment in popular accounts of baseball, Coca-Cola, and rock ‘n’ roll, I hope to explore some of the consequences of these theoretical models for the study of religion. Among those consequences, I will highlight the force of metaphoric transference in theory building; the implications of these three metaphors—representing the institutional formation of the church, the powerful but artificial making of the fetish, and the nonproductive expenditure of the potlatch, respectively—for our understanding of the character of religion; and the ways in which the very term “religion,” including its definition, application, and extension, does not, in fact, belong solely to the academy but is constantly at stake in the interchanges of cultural discourses and practices.

THE CHURCH OF BASEBALL

To return to the testimony of Buck O’Neil, baseball is a religion because it is an enduring institution governed by established rules. “If you go by the rules,” he explains, “it is right.” Baseball is a religion according to Buck O’Neil, then, because “it taught me and it teaches everyone else to live by the rules, to abide by the rules.”

This definition of religion as rule-governed behavior, however, is not sufficiently comprehensive or detailed to capture what Ken Burns presents as the religious character of baseball. The “church of baseball” is much more than merely the rule book. It is a religious institution that maintains the continuity, uniformity, sacred space, and sacred time of American life. As the “faith of fifty million people,” baseball does everything that we conventionally understand the institution of the church to do.

First, baseball ensures a sense of continuity in the midst of a constantly changing America, through the forces of tradition, heritage, and collective memory. As Donald Hall suggests, “Baseball, because of its continuity over the space of America and the time of America, is a place where memory gathers.” Certainly, this emphasis on collective memory dominates Burns’s documentary on baseball. But it also characterizes the religious character of the sport in American culture as a whole. Like a church, Major League Baseball institutionalizes a sacred memory of the past that informs the present.

Second, baseball supports a sense of uniformity, a sense of belonging to a vast, extended American family that attends the same church. As journalist Thomas Boswell reports in his detailed discussion in “The Church of Baseball,” his mother was devoted to baseball because “it made her feel like she was in church.” Like her church, Boswell explains, baseball provided his mother with “a place where she could—by sharing a fabric of beliefs, symbols, and mutual agreements with those around her—feel calm and whole.” Boswell draws out a series of analogies between baseball and his mother’s church: both feature organs; both encourage hand-clapping to their hymns; both have distinctive robes and vestments; and in both everyone is equal before God. Although his analogy between the basepaths of a diamond and the Christian Cross seems a bit strained, Boswell provides sufficient justification for asserting that his mother regarded her attendance of baseball games as roughly equivalent to belonging to a church.

Third, the religion of baseball represents the sacred space of home. In this respect, baseball is a religion of the domestic, of the familiar, and even of the obvious. As Boswell explains:

Baseball is a religion that worships the obvious and gives thanks that things are exactly as they seem. Instead of celebrating
mysteries, baseball rejoices in the absence of mysteries and trusts that, if we watch what is laid before our eyes, down to the last detail, we will cultivate the gift of seeing things as they really are.

The vision of reality that baseball affords, therefore, is a kind of normality, the ordinary viewed through a prism that only enhances its familiarity. While many religions point to a perfect world beyond this world, Boswell observes, baseball creates a “perfect universe in microcosm within the real world.” By producing such a ritualized space within the world, baseball domesticates the sacred and gives it a home.

Fourth, the religion of baseball represents the sacred time of ritual. “Everything is high-polish ritual and full-dress procession,” Boswell notes. The entire action of the game is coordinated through a ritualization of time. But baseball also affords those extraordinary moments of ecstasy and enthusiasm, revelation and inspiration, that seem to stand outside of the ordinary temporal flow. His mother experienced those moments of “ritual epiphany” in church, according to Boswell, and “[b]asically, that’s how she felt about baseball, too.” Through ritual and revelation, baseball provides an experience of sacred time that liberates its devotees from time’s constraints.

In these terms, therefore, baseball is a church, a “community of believers.” Certainly, the church of baseball is confronted by the presence of unbelievers within the larger society. As Thomas Boswell reports, his father failed to find his rightful place among the faithful in the church of baseball: “The appeal of baseball mystified him, just as all religions confound the innocent bewildered atheist.” Like any church, however, baseball has its committed faithful, its true believers. The opening speech of Annie Savoy in the film Bull Durham can be invoked as a passionate statement of religious devotion to baseball. “I believe in the church of baseball,” she declares. The religion of baseball, however, promises a freedom beyond guilt. Although she observes the analogy between baseball and the Christian church, which is supported by the curious equivalence between 108 beads on the rosary and 108 stitches on a baseball, Annie Savoy proclaims baseball as a church in its own right. “I’ve tried them all, I really have,” she concludes, “and the only church that truly feeds the soul, day in, day out, is the church of baseball.”

“What nonsense!” an unbeliever might understandably conclude in response to all this testimony about the church of baseball. Baseball is not a religion. It is recreation; it is entertainment; supported by the monopoly granted to Major League Baseball, it is very big business. All this religious language merely mystifies the genuine character of the sport in American society.

For all the apparent mystification, strained analogies, and improbable statements of faith, however, the depiction of baseball as a church represents a highly significant development in attempts to locate religion in American popular culture. In earlier anthropological accounts, especially those produced by the anthropologist-from-Mars school of cultural anthropology that gave us the “Nacirema” tribe (“American” spelled backwards), baseball registers as “magic” rather than “religion.” For example, a frequently anthologized article titled “Baseball Magic” records the magical techniques employed by baseball players to manipulate unseen forces and control events. Using various kinds of amulets for good luck, players engage in specific practices—never stepping on the foul line, always spitting before entering the batter’s box—that appear, in Freudian terms, just like “what are called obsessive acts in neurotics.” In their magical practices, baseball players display an obsession with “little preoccupations, performances, restrictions and arrangements in certain activities of everyday life which have to be carried out always in the same or in a methodically varied way.” Although Freud held that such “obsessive acts” characterized the practice of both ritual and magic, the author of “Baseball Magic” implicitly upholds the familiar analytical distinction between the two. Instead of interpreting baseball as religion, however, he highlights its superstitious practices of magic.
This account of baseball magic raises two theoretical problems. First, by characterizing baseball as magic, the author pushes us back to the basic opposition between “religion” and “superstition” that has been crucial to the very definition of religion in Western culture. The ancient Latin term religio, indicating an authentic, careful, and faithful way of acting, was defined by its opposite, superstition, a kind of conduct that was allegedly based on ignorance, fear, or fraud. In these terms, “we” have religion; “they” have superstition. But only rarely has the inherently oppositional character of the notion of “religion” been recognized: Thomas Hobbes, for example, observed that the “fear of things invisible is the natural seed of that, which everyone in himself calleth religion; and in them that worship or fear that power otherwise than they do, superstition,” and the linguist Emile Benveniste observed that “the notion of ‘religion’ requires, so to speak, by opposition, that of ‘superstition.’” Baseball magic, therefore, is not religion. It is a repertoire of superstitious beliefs and practices that stands as the defining opposite of authentic religion. From the perspective of the anthropologist who stands outside and observes, baseball magic is clearly something very strange that “they” do; it is not “our” religion.

The second problem raised by the argument of “Baseball Magic” is that its author recalls the tension between the individual and society that has long characterized academic reflections on the difference between magic and religion. Following Emile Durkheim’s classic formulation, magic is essentially individualistic and potentially antisocial. Unlike religious ritual, which affirms and reinforces the social solidarity of a community, magic manipulates unseen forces in the service of self-interest. As Durkheim insisted, there can be no “church of magic.” Accordingly, if baseball is magic, there can be no “church of baseball.”

Ken Burns intervenes in these theoretical debates by reversing their terms. Simply by presenting baseball as religion rather than magic, he represents the game as an authentic religious affirmation of the traditional continuity, uniformity, and solidarity of American society. Adopting a functional definition of religion, Burns documents the ways in which baseball operates like a church by meeting personal needs and reinforcing social integration. In fact, his implicit theoretical model of religion seems to be informed by the kind of functional assumptions found in J. Milton Yinger’s definition of a universal church as “a religious structure that is relatively successful in supporting the integration of society, while at the same time satisfying, by its pattern of beliefs and observances, many of the personality needs of individuals on all levels of society.” Like a church, with its orthodoxy and heresies, its canonical myths and professions of faith, its rites of communion and excommunication, baseball appears in these terms as the functional religion of America.

Of course, this account of the church of baseball is positioned in a historical moment of great public disillusionment with the professional game. Feeling betrayed by both greedy players and arrogant owners, many devotees have become apostates of the religion of baseball. In this context, the phrase “church of baseball” shifts from metaphor to irony; it becomes a figure of ironic displacement as collective memory is transformed from commemoration of an enduring tradition into nostalgia for a lost world. From this vantage point, the continuity and uniformity of baseball tradition, the sacred time and sacred space of the baseball religion, can only be re-created in memory.

THE FETISH OF COCA-COLA

A very different theoretical model of religion is developed in Mark Pendergrast’s For God, Country, and Coca-Cola. Drawing upon the familiar definition of religion provided by Clifford Geertz, Pendergrast proposes
that Coca-Cola is a religion because it is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions in such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.  

To his credit, Pendergrast does not force his history of Coca-Cola into the mold of Geertz’s definition. Rather, he allows the major actors in the drama to evoke their religious moods and motivations in their own voices. Here, I will mention only some of the more striking examples.

From the beginning, the beverage was enveloped in a sacred aura: its inventor, John Pemberton, referred to one of Coca-Cola’s original ingredients, cocaine (which remained in the mix from 1886 until 1902), as “the greatest blessing to the human family, Nature’s (God’s) best gift in medicine” (27). During the 1890s, Coca-Cola emerged as a popular tonic in the soda fountains that a contemporary commentator described as “temples resplendent in crystal marble and silver” (16). Eventually, however, the blessings of Coca-Cola moved out of the temple and into the world.

Company executives, advertisers, bottlers, and distributors displayed distinctively religious moods and motivations in relation to the sacred beverage. Asa Candler, the Atlanta entrepreneur who started the Coca-Cola empire, was described by his son as regarding the drink with “an almost mystical faith” (68). Candler eventually “initiated” his son “into the mysteries of the secret flavoring formula” as if he were inducting him into the “Holy of Holies” (61). Robert Woodruff, who became president of the company in 1923, “demonstrated a devotion to Coca-Cola which approached idolatry” (160). Harrison Jones, the leading bottler of the 1920s, often referred to the beverage as “holy water” (146). Even the bottle itself was a sacred object that could not be changed. At a 1936 bottlers convention, Harrison Jones declared, “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse may charge over the earth and back again—and Coca-Cola will remain!” (178). Archie Lee, who assumed direction of Coca-Cola advertising in the 1920s, complained that the “doctrines of our churches are meaningless words,” but he speculated that “some great thinker may arise with a new religion” (147). Apparently, Archie Lee, along with many other “Coca-Cola men,” found that new religion in Coca-Cola.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the Coca-Cola religion inspired a missionary fervor. At the first international convention, at Atlantic City in 1948, an executive prayed “May Providence give us the faith . . . to serve those two billion customers who are only waiting for us to bring our product to them” (238). Delony Sledge, an advertising director in the early 1950s, proclaimed, “Our work is a religion rather than a business” (261). Obviously, the Coca-Cola Company has imagined its enterprise as a religious mission.

Coca-Cola has also assumed religious significance for the consumer, having “entered the lives of more people,” as one executive put it, “than any other product or ideology, including the Christian religion” (406). In the jive vocabulary of the 1930s, Coca-Cola was known as “heavenly dew.” But the religious significance of Coca-Cola extends far beyond such playful invocations. Coca-Cola gave America its orthodox image of Santa Claus in 1931, by presenting a fat, bearded, jolly old character dressed up in Coca-Cola red; it became the most important icon of the American way of life for U.S. soldiers during World War II; it represented an extraordinary sacred time—the “pause that refreshes” —redeemed from ordinary postwar routines of work and consumption; and from the 1960s on, it promised to build a better world “in perfect harmony.” One indication of the popular religious devotion to the drink was the public outcry at the changed formula of “New Coke” in 1985, which caused one executive to exclaim, “They talk as if Coca-Cola had just killed God” (364). In these profoundly religious terms, as
Editor William Allen White observed in 1938, Coca-Cola became a potent symbol of the “sublimated essence of America” (198).

Although the popular religion of Coca-Cola has pervaded American society, it has also been global. Represented in over 185 countries—more countries, Pendergrast notes, than are in the United Nations—the Coca-Cola Company has extended its religion all over the world. As company president Roberto Goizueta put it: “Our success will largely depend on the degree to which we make it impossible for the consumer around the globe to escape Coca-Cola” (397). The 1980s film The Gods Must Be Crazy suggests precisely this impossibility of escaping the religion of Coca-Cola, with its absurd parable of Coca-Cola’s effect among a remote community of Bushmen in southern Africa. As Pendergrast notes, the film opens with “the totemic bottle fall[ing] out of the sky onto the sands of the Kalahari Desert, where it completely transforms the lives of the innocent Bushmen as surely as Eve’s apple in Eden” (406). Here we find Coca-Cola as a sacred sign: a sign subject to local misreading, perhaps, but nevertheless the fetish of a global religion, an icon of the West, a symbol that can mark an initiatory entry into modernity. Through massive global exchanges and specific local effects, the religion of Coca-Cola has placed its sacred fetish “within arm’s reach of desire” (376) all over the world.

“What utter nonsense!” a skeptic might justifiably conclude after reviewing this alleged evidence for the existence of a Coca-Cola religion. Coca-Cola is not a religion. It is a consumer product that has been successfully advertised, marketed, and distributed. In the best tradition of American advertising, the Coca-Cola Company has created the desire for a product that no one needs. Even if it has led to the “Coca-colonization” of the world, this manipulation of desire through effective advertising has nothing to do with religion.

In the study of popular culture, however, the religious character of advertising, consumerism, and commodity fetishism has often been noted. “That advertising may have become ‘the new religion of modern capitalist society,’” Marshall W. Fishwick has recently observed, “has become one of the clichés of our time.” Advertising-as-religion has transformed “commodity fetishism” into a redundant phrase. In the symbolic system of modern capitalist society that is animated by advertising, the commodity is a fetish object.

As a model for defining and locating religion, the fetish raises its own theoretical problems. As William Pietz has shown in a series of articles, the term “fetish” has been a focal point for ongoing controversies in Western culture over what counts as authentic making. From the Latin facere, “to make or to do,” the term has carried the semantic burden of indicating artificial, illicit, or evil making, especially in the production of objects of uncertain meaning or unstable value. In this respect, the fetish is not an object; it is a subject for arguments about meaning and value in human relations.

As a modern dilemma, the problem of the fetish arises in complex relations of encounter and exchange between “us” and “them.” On the one hand, the fetish is something “they” make. Recalling the evil making—the maleficium—of black magic, Portuguese traders on the west coast of Africa in the seventeenth century found that Africans made fetisos, objects beyond rational comprehension or economic evaluation. Likewise, for generations of anthropologists, the fetish was an object that “they” make, a sign of their “primitive” uncertainty over meaning and inability to evaluate objects. On the other hand, Marx, Freud, and their intellectual descendants have found that the fetish is something “we” make—the desired object, the objectification of desire—something integral to modern subjectivities and social relations.

Drawing upon this ambivalent genealogy of the fetish in Western culture, Michael Taussig has recently emphasized the importance of “state fetishism” in both making and masking the rationality and terror of the modern political order. This recognition of the role of fetishized making in the production
and reinforcement of the state resonates with recent research on the making of those collective subjectivities—the imagined communities, the invented traditions, the political mythologies—that animate the modern world. All of these things are made, not found, but they are made in the ways in which only the sacred or society can be produced.

Unlike the historical continuity and social solidarity represented by the church, therefore, the fetish provides a model for religion in which religion is inherently unstable. As an object of indeterminate meaning and variable value, the fetish represents an unstable center for a shifting constellation of religious symbols. Although the fetishized object might inspire religious moods and motivations, it is constantly at risk of being unmasked as something made and therefore as an artificial focus for religious desire. The study of religion in popular culture is faced with the challenge of exploring and explicating the ways in which such “artificial” religious constructions can generate genuine enthusiasms and produce real effects in the world.

THE POTLATCH OF ROCK ‘N’ ROLL

As if it were not enough to bestow religious status on baseball and Coca-Cola, we now have to confront the possibility that rock ‘n’ roll should also count as religion. Certainly the ambivalent relations between rock and religion have often been noticed. As Jay R. Howard has observed, “Religion and rock music have long had a love/hate relationship.” On the one hand, rock ‘n’ roll has occasionally converged with religion. Rock music has sometimes embraced explicitly religious themes, serving as a vehicle for a range of religious interests, from heavy metal Satanism to contemporary Christian evangelism. On the other hand, rock ‘n’ roll has often been the target of Christian crusades against the evils that allegedly threaten religion in American society. From this perspective, rock music appears as the antithesis of religion: not merely an offensive art form but a blasphemous, sacrilegious, and antireligious force in society.

Rock’s ambivalent relationship with religion is obvious. Less apparent, perhaps, is the inherently religious character of rock ‘n’ roll, and yet attempts have been made to theorize rock ‘n’ roll as religion. For example, rock ‘n’ roll has given rise to “a religion without beliefs”; it has given scope for the emergence of a new kind of “divinely inspired shaman”; it has revived nineteenth-century Romantic pantheism; rock music, concerts, and videos have provided occasions for what Durkheim called “ecstasy ritual”; and a new academic discipline—“theomusicology”—has included rock ‘n’ roll in its mission “to examine secular music for its religiosity.” From various perspectives, therefore, rock ‘n’ roll has approximated some of the elementary forms of the religious life.

In one of the most sustained and insightful analyses of the religious character of rock ‘n’ roll, Dave Marsh’s book-length cultural analysis of the archetypal rock song, “Louie, Louie,” explores the secret of its meaning, power, and rhythm, the “sacred duh duh duh. duh duh.” He issues a daunting assessment of all previous attempts to address his topic: the “academic study of the magic and majesty of duh duh duh. duh duh,” as Marsh puts it bluntly, “sucks” (77). To avoid this condemnation, we must proceed not with caution, but with the recklessness that the song requires. We must say, with the song’s African-American composer Richard Berry, who first recorded “Louie, Louie” as a calypso tune in 1956, “Me gotta go now,” and see where that going takes us.

As Dave Marsh follows the sacred rhythm of “Louie, Louie,” especially as it was incarnated by the Kingsmen in 1963, he dismisses previous attempts to explain the secret of the song’s appeal as the result
of effective marketing or the intentional mystification produced by its unintelligible lyrics. In rejecting economic and rhetorical explanations, Marsh advances an analysis of the secret of “Louie, Louie” in explicitly religious terms. His analysis uncovers layers of religious significance that are all associated with a “gift.” Although his discussion is inspired by the dramatic prelude to the instrumental break—“Let’s Give It to ’Em, Right Now!”—it is also directly related to the power of giving and receiving in the history of religions.

The song might be regarded as if it were a divine gift. As Marsh’s colleague Greil Marcus puts it, by the 1980s “the tune was all pervasive, like a law of nature or an act of God.” Marsh plays upon this theme: If the song was a gift from God or the gods, “he, she, or they chose a vehicle cut from strange cloth, indeed—deus ex cartoona” (78). However, the sacred gift of “Louie, Louie,” the hierophany of incoherence, three chords, and a cloud of dust, cannot be accounted for in the conventional terms of any orthodox theology. Accordingly, Marsh turns to a passage in the gnostic Gospel of Thomas that seems to capture the “holy heartbeat” of “Louie, Louie.”

Jesus said, “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”

Bringing forth all that is within them, the gnostic celebrants of “Louie, Louie” are saved—if not “eternally,” as Marsh clarifies, then at least temporarily, during the liberating moment when they participate in the rhythm of the “sacred duh duh duh. duh duh” and the “magical incantation” of “Let’s Give It to ’Em, Right Now!” (73–4).

Ultimately, however, the religious significance of the gift must be located in relations of exchange. Here a Native American ritual—the potlatch—provides a model for giving and receiving in which the gift assumes a sacred aura. From a Chinook term meaning simply “to give,” the potlatch practiced by indigenous communities of the Pacific Northwest signifies the ritualized display, distribution, and sometimes destruction of valued objects at ceremonial occasions.24

Although potlatch has variously been interpreted in the ethnographic literature as religious ritual, status competition, a kind of banking system, or even a periodic outburst of “unabashed megalomania,” Marsh focuses on three aspects. First, the gift is total. The potlatch demands giving “everything you had: your food, your clothing, your house, your name, your rank and title.” As a ritual occasion for giving everything away, the potlatch demonstrates an “insane exuberance of generosity.” Second, the gift is competitive. In ritual relations of exchange, tribes compete with each other to move to the “next higher plane of value.” Third, the sacred secret of the gift is ultimately revealed in destruction. As the ritualized exchanges of ceremonial gift giving escalate in value, the supreme value of the gift is realized by destroying valued objects, so that, as Marsh concludes, “eventually a whole village might be burned to the ground in order that the rules of the ceremony could be properly honored” (79–80).

By an odd coincidence, the Pacific Northwest was home to both the Native American societies that performed the potlatch, and the rock ‘n’ roll bands of the early 1960s that played the song “Louie, Louie.” In Marsh’s account, both demonstrate the religious “secret” of the gift, especially as it was revealed in acts of conspicuous destruction, in ritual acts that “violated every moral and legal tenet of non-Native American civilization, encumbered as it was with the even stranger socioreligious assumption that God most honored men by allowing them to accumulate possessions beyond all utility in this life, let alone the next” (80). In these “socioreligious” terms, the “modern day electronic potlatch” of rock ‘n’ roll violates Euro-American religious commitments to capitalist production and accumulation, to property rights and propriety, by reviving the sacred secret of the gift.
In defense of the capitalist order, J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI pursued a four-year investigation of “Louie, Louie” during the 1960s, in search of evidence of subversion and obscenity in the song and its performers. As Marsh recalls, Hoover’s mission “consisted precisely of visiting the plague of federal surveillance upon any revival of the potlatch mentality” (80). But “Louie, Louie” survived this state-sponsored inquisition. Defying all attempts to suppress it, the song remains the archetype of the sacred gift at the religious heart of the potlatch of rock ‘n’ roll.

“What utter, absolute, and perverse nonsense!” anyone might conclude after being subjected to this tortuous exposition of the religion of rock music. Rock ‘n’ roll is not religion. Besides the obvious fact that it is a major part of the entertainment industry, rock ‘n’ roll is a cultural medium in which all the “anarchistic, nihilistic impulses of perverse modernism have been grafted onto popular music.” As a result, it is not a religion; it is a “cult of obscenity, brutality, and sonic abuse.”

The model of the potlatch, however, refocuses the definition of religion. As exemplified most clearly by rituals of giving and receiving, religion is a repertoire of cultural practices and performances, of human relations and exchanges, in which people conduct symbolic negotiations over material objects and material negotiations over sacred symbols. If this theoretical model—religion as symbolic, material practice—seems to blur the boundaries separating religious, social, and economic activity, then that is a function of the gift itself, which, as Marcel Mauss insists in his classic treatment, is a “total” social phenomenon in which “all kinds of institutions find simultaneous expression: religious, legal, moral, and economic.” According to Mauss, the potlatch, as ritual event, social contest, and economic exchange, displays the complex symbolic and material interests that are inevitably interwoven in religion. Similar interests, Dave Marsh and Greil Marcus argue, can be located in rock ‘n’ roll.

In the performance of the potlatch, Mauss observes, the contested nature of symbolic and material negotiations becomes particularly apparent; the “agonistic character of the pretension is pronounced.” If contests over the ownership of sacred symbols characterize the potlatch, what is the contest that is conducted in the potlatch of rock ‘n’ roll? It is not merely the competition among musical groups, a competition waged in the “battle of the bands” that Marsh identifies as an important element of the history of “Louie, Louie.” It is a contest with a distinctively religious character. In broad agreement with rock critics Marsh and Marcus, anthropologist Victor Turner proposes that rock ‘n’ roll is engaged in a contest over something as basic as what it means to be a human being in a human society. “Rock is clearly a cultural expression and instrumentality of that style of communitas,” Turner suggests, “which has arisen as the antithesis of the ‘square,’ ‘organization man’ type of bureaucratic social structure of mid-twentieth-century America.” By this account, rock ‘n’ roll, as antistructure to the dominant American social structure, achieves the human solidarity, mutuality, and spontaneity that Turner captures in the term “communitas.” It happens in religious ritual; it happens in rock ‘n’ roll.

This “agonistic character” of the potlatch of rock ‘n’ roll, however, is not only evident in America. As Greil Marcus has proposed, the potlatch might unlock the “secret history of the twentieth century.” Tracking a disconnected narrative that links Dada, surrealism, litterists, situationists, and performance art, Marcus rewrits the cultural history of the twentieth century from the vantage point of the punk rock that was epitomized in 1976 by the Sex Pistols. Surprisingly, perhaps, that revised history depends heavily upon a sociology of religion that is implicitly rooted in the foundational work of Emile Durkheim and extended by Marcel Mauss’s seminal essay on the gift, but it is a left-hand sociology of religion that takes an unexpected turn through the world of the French social critic, surrealist, and student of religion Georges Bataille.

In his 1933 essay “The Notion of Expenditure,” Bataille takes up the topic of the potlatch to draw a
distinction between two kinds of economic activity: production and expenditure. While production represents “the minimum necessary for the continuation of life,” expenditure is premised on excess and extravagance, on loss and destruction, or, in a word, on the gift. This alternative range of economic activity “is represented by so-called unproductive expenditures: luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (i.e., deflected from genital finality)—all these represent activities which, at least in primitive circumstances, have no end beyond themselves.” While productive economic activity is directed towards goals of subsistence, gain, and accumulation, expenditure is devoted to achieving dramatic, spectacular loss. In expenditure, according to Bataille, “the accent is placed on a loss that must be as great as possible in order for the activity to take on its true meaning.” 

In the performance of the potlatch, especially when gift giving escalates to the destruction of property, Bataille finds a model of expenditure that informs his entire theory of religion.

As exemplified by the potlatch, religion intersects with rock ‘n’ roll because both are cultural practices of expenditure. The gift—as in “Let’s Give It to ‘Em, Right Now!”—reopens the complex ritual negotiations over meaning and power, over place and position, over contested issues of value in modern American society. In that context, religion in American popular culture is neither a church, nor a symbolic system revolving around a fetish. Beyond the constraints of any institution or the play of any desire, religion is defined as religion by the practices, performances, relations, and exchanges that rise and fall and rise again through the ritualized giving and receiving of the gift.

RELIGION IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

So now where are we? After this long journey through the religious contours and contents of baseball, Coca-Cola, and rock ‘n’ roll, we are still left with the question: where is religion in American popular culture? How do we answer that question? Where do we look? If we only relied upon the standard academic definitions of religion, those definitions that have tried to identify the essence of religion, we would certainly be informed by the wisdom of classic scholarship, but we would also still be lost.

In the history of the academic study of religion, religion has been defined, following the minimal definition of religion proposed in the 1870s by E. B. Tylor, as beliefs and practices relating to spiritual, supernatural, or superhuman beings. This approach to defining religion continues to find its advocates, both among scholars and in the discourse of popular culture. The extraordinary athlete, for example, can easily become the focus of religion to the extent that he or she is regarded as a superhuman being. When Michael Jordan returned to basketball in 1995, his “second coming” was portrayed in precisely these superhuman terms. While *Sports Illustrated* recorded Michael Jordan’s embarrassment at being regarded as a superhuman being—“When it is perceived as religion,” Jordan complained, “that’s when I’m embarrassed by it”—it also added that this reservation was expressed by “the holy Bull himself” about “the attention his second coming has attracted.” Adding to the embarrassment, the same article quoted Brad Riggert, head of merchandising at Chicago’s United Center, who celebrated the return of Michael Jordan by declaring that this “god of merchandising broke all our records for sales.” In this case, therefore, Michael Jordan—the “holy Bull,” the “god of merchandising”—registers as a superhuman being that should satisfy Tylor’s minimal definition of religion.

In a second classic attempt to define religion, Emile Durkheim stipulated in 1912 that religion was constituted by beliefs and practices that revolve around a sacred focus, a sacred focus that serves to unify
In this approach to defining religion, which also continues to have its proponents, religion depends upon beliefs and practices that identify and maintain a distinction between the sacred and its opposite, the profane. That distinction between the sacred and the profane has also appeared in the discourse of American popular culture. For example, during the long and difficult development of a crucial new software product, Microsoft hired a project manager who undertook the task with religious conviction. According to the unofficial historian of this project, that manager “divided the world into Us and Them. This opposition echoed the profound distinction between sacred and profane: We are clean; they are dirty. We are the chosen people; they are the scorned. We will succeed; they will fail.” According to this account, therefore, the cutting edge of religion—the radical rift between the sacred and the profane—appears at the cutting edge of American technology.

Like church, fetish, and potlatch, these classic definitions of religion—belief in supernatural beings, the distinction between sacred and profane—are at play in American culture. As a result, religion is revealed, once again, not only as a cluster concept or a fuzzy set but also as a figure of speech that is subject to journalistic license, rhetorical excess, and intellectual sleight of hand. For the study of religion, however, this realization bears an important lesson: the entire history of academic effort in defining religion has been subject to precisely such vagaries of metaphorical play.

As I have argued in detail elsewhere, the study of religion and religious diversity can be seen as originating in the surprising discovery by Europeans of people who have no religion. During the eras of exploration and colonization, Europeans found indigenous populations all over the world who supposedly lacked any trace of religion. Gradually, however, European observers found ways to recognize—by comparison, by analogy, and by metaphoric transference from the familiar to the strange—the religious character of beliefs and practices among people all over the world. This discovery did not depend upon intellectual innovations in defining the essence of religion; it depended upon localized European initiatives that extended the familiar metaphors already associated with religion, such as the belief in God, rites of worship, or the maintenance of moral order, to the strange beliefs and practices of other human populations. In the study of religion in American popular culture, I would suggest, we are confronted with the same theoretical dilemma of mediating between the familiar and the strange.

The theoretical models of religion that we have considered allow some of the strangely religious forms of popular culture—baseball, Coca-Cola, and rock ‘n’ roll—to become refamiliarized as if they were religion. These models allow them to appear as the church, the fetish, and the sacred gift of the ritual potlatch in American popular culture. Why not? Why should these cultural forms not be regarded as religion?

The determination of what counts as religion is not the sole preserve of academics. The very term “religion” is contested and at stake in the discourses and practices of popular culture. Recall, for instance, the disdain expressed by the critic who dismissed rock ‘n’ roll as a “cult of obscenity, brutality, and sonic abuse.” In this formulation, the term “cult” signifies the absence of religion, the opposite of “religion.” The usage of the term “cult,” however it might be intended, inevitably resonates with the discourse of an extensive and pervasive anticult campaign that has endeavored to deny the status of “religion” to a variety of new religious movements by labeling them as entrepreneurial businesses, politically subversive movements, or coercive, mind-controlling, and brainwashing “cults.” In that context, if we should ever speak about the “cult” of baseball, Coca-Cola, or rock ‘n’ roll, we could be certain about one thing: we would not be speaking about religion.

The very definition of religion, therefore, continues to be contested in American popular culture. However, if we look again at the privileged examples considered above—baseball, Coca-Cola, and rock...
‘n’ roll—they seem to encompass a wildly diverse but somehow representative range of possibilities for what might count as religion. They evoke familiar metaphors—the religious institution of the church, the religious desires attached to the fetish, and the religious exchanges surrounding the sacred gift—that resonate with other discourses, practices, experiences, and social formations that we are prepared to include within the orbit of religion. Why do they not count as religion?

In the end, we will need to answer that question. In this case, however, “we” refers to all of us who are in one way or another engaged in the professionalized and institutionalized academic study of religion. Participants in American popular culture have advanced their own answers. As a baseball player, Buck O’Neil certainly had an answer: “It’s a religion.” As a Coca-Cola executive, Delony Sledge definitely had an answer: “Our work is a religion.” As a rock ‘n’ roller, John Lennon had his own distinctive and controversial answer: “Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn’t argue about that. I’m right and I will be proved right. We’re more popular than Jesus now.”37 These claims from outside the discipline raise problems of definition and analysis which need to be addressed within the study of religion. In different ways, as I have tried to suggest, the terms “church,” “fetish,” and “potlatch” signify both the problem of defining religion and the complex presence of religion in American popular culture.

NOTES


5. Ibid., 193.

6. Ibid., 189–90.

7. Ibid., 189.

8. See Joseph L. Price’s essay in this volume for another account of this speech from Bull Durham.


522.


23. Dave Marsh, *Louie, Louie* (New York: Hyperion, 1993), 74; further citations will be made in parentheses in the text.


27. Ibid., 4.


PART FOUR
RELIGION AND
POPULAR CULTURE
IN DIALOGUE
When a Roman Catholic activist, a Muslim imam, or a Lakota holy man criticizes certain features of popular culture, or when Sinead O’Connor tears up a picture of the pope on national television, their activity does not quite fit into the previous relationships between religion and popular culture: Religion in Popular Culture, Popular Culture in Religion, and Popular Culture as Religion. Critiques of popular culture by representatives of religious communities, and challenges to religious understandings by figures from popular culture, open the door to conversation between the two; thus our fourth type of interaction is Religion and Popular Culture in Dialogue. Reference to dialogue between religion and popular culture is not meant to imply that the two are totally discrete, separate realities. They interpenetrate one another, and many of the participants in this dialogue are themselves involved both in a religious community and in popular culture. For many, however, religion provides an interpretive lens through which culture may be read and critiqued, and popular culture raises realities and themes that cast religion in a different light. The three essays in this section all participate in this conversation.

Robert Jewett’s reflection on Clint Eastwood’s Pale Rider represents a Christian biblical scholar’s dialogue with themes that emerge from popular culture. By comparing the appeal to vengeance in the Eastwood film to Paul’s discussion of vengeance in Christian scripture (Romans 12), Jewett finds that cultural realities lead him to new insights about the biblical passage, while he also uses his understanding of Paul to provide a theological critique of American culture.

Anthony Pinn draws on insights derived from blues and rap music to critique African American religious explanations of suffering and evil. In a reversal of the more common pattern, in which critics utilize their religious principles to critique popular culture, Pinn’s critique moves in the other direction. For him, African American popular music raises questions about the adequacy of the theological formulations offered by the black church.

Amy Johnson Frykholm explores the development of a literary genre which she calls “rapture fiction.” Using the Left Behind novels as popular examples, and supplemented by other rapture fiction titles published in the twentieth century, she identifies three distinct gender types, the “raptured woman,” “worldly man,” and “prodigal daughter,” within this literature. Johnson Frykholm suggests that in this fiction we see evangelical Christianity’s negotiation with popular culture over issues of gender and the
evangelical community's revised definitions of Christian manhood and womanhood that result.

These three essays illustrate that dialogue between religion and popular culture can take several forms. Often, religion critiques the values and assumptions of popular culture, offering appreciation, criticism, or both. Yet commentators also can use themes and insights from popular culture to critique religion, raising questions about its relevance or adequacy. In either case, the discussions provoke clarification of implicit values and assumptions in both religion and popular culture.
Robert Jewett
THE DISGUISE OF VENGEANCE
IN PALE RIDER

Beloved, do not avenge yourselves,
but give way to the wrath [of God],
for it is written,
“Vengeance is for me, I will repay,”
says the Lord.
But if “your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him drink;
for by doing this you will pile up
burning coals upon his head.”
Do not be conquered by the evil
but conquer the evil with the good.

(Romans 12:19–21)

Paul’s warning against vengeance runs counter to the widely shared sentiment several years ago regarding the capture of a mass murderer in the city where I live. After a killing spree through the Midwest, Alton Coleman was captured without resistance by police in Evanston, Illinois. I heard one professional woman state the view that many others held: “I wish he had been killed in a shootout with the police!” The yearning for vengeance—quick and final—assumes a most peculiar form in American society, where popular myths frequently picture the police or private detectives acting as avenging judges and executioners.

A popular preference for shootouts resulting in the death of criminals is expressed in classical form in Pale Rider, with Clint Eastwood playing the role of the nameless stranger who rides a small town of murderous predators in the employ of a ruthless mining corporation. Since the stranger had earlier been shot by these same predators, there is an element of personal vengeance disguised in this traditional tale of the selfless redemption of a helpless community. The movie has some fascinating links with Romans 12–13 that may shed light on how to counter the siege of violence that threatens to engulf the country.

VENGEANCE AND VIGILANTISM

“Beloved, never avenge yourselves,” writes Paul to the Roman Christians. It is an admonition that flatly counters the sentiments expressed about an American serial killer. But rather than condemning those who feel the need for direct and effective vengeance in the case of particularly heinous criminals, I would like to explore the cultural origin of this sentiment. It can be traced back to early American traditions of using violent stories from the Bible to justify taking the law into one’s own hands. Derived from Biblical stories such as that of Phinehas the lynch in Numbers 25, there has long been an ideal of holy vengeance in our society. Acting on the premise that God inspires and justifies the righteous to take vengeance in his behalf, we have celebrated a succession of heroes who took the law into their own hands—from the
disguised citizens of the Boston Tea Party through John Brown in his Harper’s Ferry raid, from the Phantom and Dick Tracy through the Avengers of contemporary comics.

The vigilante ethos justifies direct violence so long as the evil is clearcut, the vigilantes disinterested, and their identity kept secret. The appeal of this vigilante tradition has been that quick justice could be achieved for crimes which might otherwise go unpunished, and achieved through private channels, without encouraging feuds or reprisals.

To understand how citizens could prefer that the defenders of the law would sometimes take the law into their own hands and execute vengeance on criminals requires a grasp of the widely popular myth system that developed in the wake of the vigilante tradition. The large number of popular superheroes and heroines in modern entertainment derive from earlier forms of the cowboy western and detective stories that have embodied this vigilante plot.

A crucial example of this kind of story is *The Virginian*, Owen Wister’s 1902 novel that contains the first duel on Main Street in American literature. The story is set in the context of struggles between farmers and ranchers in Wyoming, specifically the 1892 range war in Johnson County, in which lynching and systematic thievery was practiced by both sides. The ranchers imported a trainload of Texas gunmen equipped with dynamite to put down the resistance of the farmers who were homesteading land in the public domain that the ranchers had used without rent for years. Widespread violence came to a climax near Buffalo, Wyoming, where federal troops finally intervened.

Wister romanticized the ranchers’ side of this struggle in the creation of the Virginian, a tall, nameless cowboy who becomes the foreman of Sunk Creek Ranch. He is forced to track down a rustling gang, capturing two of its members, one of whom was formerly his best friend. True to the vigilante code, the Virginian renounces friendship and has the thieves hung. But the chief rustler, Trampas, escapes with a guileless sidekick, and when the trackers approach, Trampas shoots him in the back so he can escape on their only horse.

Several years later, Trampas is seen by the Virginian and his fiancée, Molly the schoolteacher. She comments that it seems “wicked that this murderer” should go free when others were hanged for rustling. “He was never even arrested,” says the girl. “No, he helped elect the sheriff in that county,” replies the Virginian (385–6).

In the dramatic climax of this novel, which became required reading for high school classes all over the U.S., the rustler issues a formal challenge for a Main Street duel. The Virginian seeks the counsel of the clergyman who was to perform the wedding ceremony. The bishop was convinced that the rustlers had to be dealt with by vigilante tactics, that “they elected their men to office, and controlled juries; that they were a staring menace to Wyoming. His heart was with the Virginian. But there was his Gospel that he preached, and believed, and tried to live.” He reminds the Virginian of the Biblical injunction not to kill. The heroic cowboy responds, “Mighty plain to me, seh. Make it plain to Trampas, and there’ll be no killin.” As they parry about the contradictory demands of religion and law, the Virginian poses the key question: “How about instruments of Providence, seh?” In other words, what about the Biblical idea of providence taking the form of heroic vigilantes who rid the world of evil-doers? As the hero reluctantly departs for the duel that threatens to prevent his hoped-for marriage and end even his life, the bishop finds he cannot repress the words, “God bless him! God bless him!” (404–6).

We all know the end of the story, even without having read *The Virginian* or seen the film in which Gary Cooper played the title role. In the archetypal duel with Trampas, the bad guy draws and shoots first, but is killed by the Virginian’s bullets. The hero’s friends marvel, “You were that cool! That quick!” (416), which expresses the cool ethos of the vigilante tradition. The state of Wyoming is redeemed from the reign
of crime, which results in a paradisal condition in which all problems are solved. Even Molly’s New England conscience, which had resisted the vigilante tactic so strongly, finally relents, and she marries the Virginian. The novel ends with the hero and his family ensconced in prosperity and long life. The Virginian becomes a wealthy rancher and mine owner, passing the redemptive task onto the next generation.

This novel produced hundreds of imitations, including Pale Rider. The cinematic triumph of The Virginian in 1929 was soon followed by the emergence of serialized stories featuring the supercowboy (“The Lone Ranger”), the supercop (“Dick Tracy”) and superheroes (“Superman,” “Wonderwoman,” and “Captain America”)—tales that embody the same kind of plot. It is one of the most pervasive tales in American culture, giving shape to the yearning for quick and effective public redemption, but not with the legally sanctioned public means. Here is violent redemption without due process of law, accomplished with dignity and heroic self-restraint. The public does not take the law into its own hands in this kind of story; “instruments of providence” take up the task of the “wrath of God” which Paul believed should never be shouldered by people in their own behalf.

The ingenious result of this widely popular myth is that it allows Americans to imagine gaining retribution without incurring personal risk. They gain in fantasy a perfect form of public justice, but never feel the need to call it vengeance. It is disguised as a story of courageous redemption of helpless communities by selfless heroes. This kind of story has the immense advantage of occurring without the slow and cumbersome machinery of public means in a constitutional society. The United States has police forces without judicial powers, a court system bound by constitutional restraints, and forms of punishment that often seem awkward and ineffective. Compared with this, who would not prefer the “miracle” of a Pale Rider?

CINEMATIC MIRACLES AS DISGUISED VENGEANCE

Megan Wheeler is burying her puppy after the maulers hired by the mining corporation have made yet another raid on the defenseless miners at Carbon Canyon. She breaks off the recitation of the Twenty-third Psalm to look skyward: “But they killed my dog! Why did you let them kill my dog?” When there is no reply from the silent heavens, she returns to the psalm: “For thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff comfort me—but we need more than comfort. We need a miracle . . . Mother says miracles happen, sometimes. The book says they happen” (13–4). On her way back from the hillside grave, young Megan sees a horseman with a broad-brimmed hat riding slowly into town. It is, of course, Clint Eastwood, playing the role of the Preacher who ultimately takes his .44 caliber pistol out of storage to redeem the community from its corporate outlaws.

On one level, the redemption promised by the Pale Rider seems to fit the parameters of the divine “wrath” that Paul hopes will be provided in the place of human vengeance. When the stranger rescues one of the beleaguered miners from three of the hired gunmen, he is invited to Megan’s home for supper. After cleaning up from his redemptive exertions, the stranger appears with a clerical collar. Everyone else is stunned that so skilled a fighter could be a preacher, but not Megan: “She knew a miracle when she met one” (53). Later, she describes the uncanny stranger with a line from the Book of Revelation that provides the title of the movie: “And I looked, and beheld a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was death, and hell followed with him” (Rev. 6:8). The tall stranger demonstrates a miraculous ability to prevail against the bullies hired by the mining corporation, smashing them with effortless ease in encounter after
His presence in Carbon Canyon causes an incredible revival of morale, and the miners set about restoring their homes and mining sluices. He reappears with uncanny timing to rescue Megan from a gang rape at the hands of the corporate thugs, and acts as a divinely appointed judge to dynamite the mining operation that destroys entire hillsides and valleys with its gigantic water cannon. This “god of some sort” prevails against incredible odds in the final duel against a gang of hired gunmen, killing them all with the relentless accuracy of an apocalyptic avenger.

The profile of the gunmen hired to contend with the tall preacher matches the Biblical archetype of agents of the antichrist. In Stephen Chapman’s words, “The enemy is the devil himself. . . . Even the villainous lawman’s name, Stockburn, conjurs up flames.” The six gunmen along with Stockburn are made to appear like the antipode of the seven horsemen of the apocalypse. Alan Dean Foster’s novelization of the film provides this chilling description of the scene in front of Stockburn’s headquarters, when the corporation’s telegram arrives to summon these dark angels of destruction into battle:

There were seven horses tied to the hitching rail that fronted the lawman’s office. Each had a black saddle on its back. A black leather rifle holster slashed at an angle on the right-hand side of each seat. Their oiled walnut stocks gleaming, seven Winchesters filled the holsters. Expensive guns, worth a lot of money in a bustling frontier community like Yuba City. They sat there in plain sight, apparently unguarded. There was nothing to prevent a resourceful thief from making off with the lot of them.

Nothing except knowing better. (129)

When they arrive in the mining community, the gunmen begin by shooting down an unarmed miner with uncanny coordination and accuracy. After making him dance in the streets for a while by firing at his feet, Stockburn gives a slight nod and all seven guns fire simultaneously into his defenseless body. It is the kind of law that the Preacher had explained to the miners after they decided to refuse the offer to be bought out by the corporation. “I don’t know how he ever managed to get himself appointed Marshal, but that doesn’t matter. . . . Stockburn’s got six deputies been with him a long time. Six—and they’ll uphold whatever law pays them the most. Killing’s their way of life” (113).

The model for this kind of figure within the Pauline tradition is the “lawless one” who usurps the place of a properly lawful agent, deluding people “with all power and with pretended signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception” (2 Thess. 2:9). So it is appropriate that these evil gunmen are slain in the end by divine agency, fulfilling the Biblical paradigm (2 Thess. 2:8). In the most incredible duel scene in cowboy western history, the Preacher alone prevails in a Main Street face-off with all seven killers, who come within twenty-three yards before anyone fires. This is the final miracle, doubtless achieved by more than human powers, which is probably the reason why the “Inspirational Films” lobby group touted the “positive Christian values” in Pale Rider.

Yet there is a major discrepancy in this picture of impartial, superheroic redemption. After all of his partners are killed by the tall stranger, Stockburn is cut down by a hail of bullets, fired more quickly than even the most experienced gunman could get off from a single gun: “The shells ripped an eight-inch circle into the Marshal’s chest” (215). This odd detail matches the strange sight caught by the camera earlier in the movie while the Preacher was washing up for dinner in the Wheelers’ home. The scars on his back would have caught the eye of the most indifferent observer. There were five of them. Each was a half inch in diameter and evenly spaced from its neighbor. They formed a neat circle. Though long since healed over, their origin was unmistakable.

They were bullet holes. (45)
This explains why Stockburn suddenly recognizes the tall stranger in the duel scene, having earlier dismissed reports of similarities to someone he used to know. “ Couldn’t be him,” Stockburn had told his corporate employer earlier in the story, because the “man I’m thinking about is dead” (170). Stockburn had evidently fired that circle of bullets in the back of the tall stranger and left him for dead. The duel on main street is therefore an act of personal vengeance: as the tall stranger explains before the battle, “It’s an old score. There’s more to it than the problems of the folks in Carbon Canyon. Time’s come to settle things” (190).

So this particular superhero tale disguises what really amounts to private vengeance, carried out in the precise fashion of tit for tat, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. The symmetry is almost Biblical, a kind of holy battle against a demonic enemy who receives a precisely measured retribution. Yet the greatness of this particular Clint Eastwood film is that the disguise is fleetingly lifted. Behind the facade of a story of superheroic redemption, with all its apocalyptic references to the pale horse of the Book of Revelation, there lies a tale of personal vengeance.

**MOVING PAST VENGEANCE**

The relevance of Paul’s view in Romans to this popular American view of vengeance gains cogency when we realize that Paul was facing similar myths in the first century. In particular, large segments of the Jewish community in the period prior to the Jewish-Roman war of A.D. 66–70 favored a vigilante strategy. Modeling their behavior on the same heroic tales in the Old Testament that inspired early vigilantes in our society, zealous Jews believed that their violence against evildoers would achieve divine ends. In particular, these advocates of Jewish vigilantism felt that the Roman governing authorities should be opposed on principle, and with force. And it was natural in this kind of environment that many persons who had suffered injustices at the hands of the authorities felt themselves called by the heroic myths to take the law into their own hands, to avenge themselves and thus avenge Israel.

It is in this context that Paul’s admonition—“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God”—assumes significance. He was tapping the ancient tradition of never being a judge in one’s own cause, a principle embodied in Jewish as well as Greco-Roman law. It is a crucial principle as well for modern jurisprudence. The trouble with the police or private citizens taking the law in their own hands is that the omniscience and impartiality of myths such as *The Virginian* and *Pale Rider* rarely work out in reality. Zealotism is presumptuous, Paul implies here, for it refuses to “give way” to the prerogatives of divine justice (“give way to the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’”).

It is significant in this connection that Paul does not deny the principle of vengeance. He realizes that in this imperfect and violent world, human beings yearn for some kind of justice. When people have suffered at the hands of thieves and murderers, they usually hope that such evil will someday be overcome. The belief that the universe is as unfair as everyday experience is would be too demoralizing to tolerate. This may be one reason why the Judeo-Christian and Islamic religions have developed such elaborate systems of belief in the final judgment, when all accounts will be paid in full, for both good and ill. What Paul counsels in Romans is patient reliance on the instruments of divine justice.

The most significant question with regard to vengeance is what to do in the meanwhile. If people
simply harbor their hatred and fail to express it, they sicken; if they give way to the desire for vengeance and take the law into their own hands, they usually suffer disastrous consequences. As Thomas Wilson once said, “It costs more to avenge injuries than to bear them.” In place of zealous vigilantism, Paul advises two things—an active concern for the life and well-being of one’s adversary, and submission to lawful governmental authority—but at first glance these appear to be flatly contradictory.

Paul treats the concern for the good of one’s enemies first. “Instead, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give to drink. For in so doing you heap coals of fire on his head” (Rom. 12:20). This verse specifies what was meant earlier in this chapter by the admonition “Repay no one evil for evil” (Rom. 12:17). Whereas the natural tendency is to respond to violence with violence, to meanness with reprisals, the actions of mercy aim to break the deadly cycle. The abiding guideline of the church is the commitment to “overcome evil with good,” as the following verse sets forth (Rom. 12:21).

William Klassen has made a convincing case that the metaphor of burning charcoal on the adversaries’ heads is meant to represent their repentance and remorse rather than painful vengeance inflicted on them. The strategy Paul recommends seeks not only the well-being but also the transformation of persecutors and criminals: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:21). This is not to say that what one aims to achieve will actually be accomplished in every instance. Those commentators who accuse Paul of being an incurable optimist in these verses confuse, in my opinion, intentions with results. As Paul knew from personal experience, there are some adversaries who redouble their hatred when shamed by such unanticipated gestures of love.

But one aims to achieve, in the final analysis, not vengeance but transformation. We are seeing a remarkable embodiment of this idea in the “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” in the Republic of South Africa. Archbishop Desmond Tutu explained the rationale of this commission to reporter Colin Greer:

To pursue the path of healing for our nation, we need to remember what we have endured. But we must not simply pass on the violence of that experience through the pursuit of punishment. We seek to do justice to the suffering without perpetuating the hatred aroused. We think of this as restorative justice . . . focused on restoring the personhood that is damaged or lost. . . . Restorative justice is different from retributive justice. Retributive justice will adjudicate guilt, then the case is closed. But restorative justice is about the profound inability of retributive justice to effect permanent closure on great human atrocities. . . . Vengeance leads only to revenge.

This transformist viewpoint is consistent with the Apostle Paul, whose final goal was to “conquer the evil with the good.”

The other half of the counsel Paul offers, besides concern for one’s enemy’s well-being, is submission to lawful authority. This is laid out in Rom. 13:1–7, one of the most controversial passages in the Pauline epistles. Here Paul flatly states that those who resist governing authorities resist God, for the government serves as “the servant of God to execute God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.” The idea is that a primary component of what the Virginian called “instruments of providence” is governmental law enforcement.

There are mitigating circumstances that help us understand why Paul was so positive in his appraisal of the Roman government. At the time of writing Rom. 13, an exemplary period of Roman justice and law enforcement was nearing its end. The court system was being administered with unusual fairness; the conspiracy laws had been abolished; the emperor himself was obeying the law—a fact worth mentioning, given that he was Nero, who would violate every law in the book within a few years. Paul did not foresee what was to come when he made the sweeping claims in this passage, and thus we are justified in taking
his views with a grain or two of salt. When the law is perverted by a Marshal Stockburn, some form of resistance seems justified. Yet the most serious question this passage raises is the question of whether or not it contradicts the business of heaping coals on the head of one’s enemy, feeding him, and giving him drink.

How could Paul have it both ways? How could he call upon the Christian community to pray for its enemies and bless those who persecute it, and at the same time urge obedience to the government, which “bears the sword” to execute divine wrath on criminals?

Paul’s Holy Inconsistency

The common sense answer is surely that Paul is inconsistent, that one or the other side of his position should be abandoned. This is, in fact, what Christian communities have usually done. Advocates of law and order have taken Rom. 13:1–7 and have dropped the idea of loving the enemy: from the tradition of the divine right of kings to the proponents of submission to Adolf Hitler in Lutheran and Catholic Germany, the word has been to obey the emperor or the Führer as a kind of God, and as for the enemies, let them be rooted out, harassed, and destroyed. Others in the Christian tradition have taken Rom. 12 and abandoned 13, urging the love of enemies no matter what their scale of provocation, no matter how many atrocities they may have committed. The pacifists holding this preference have tended to oppose the use of law enforcement powers to punish criminals, and resist the use of warmaking powers to curb the actions of tyrants.

I would grant that either position has a kind of consistency that Paul seems to lack. But as I mull over this passage, I find myself wondering whether there is not a deeper consistency of human experience that Paul is tapping into in Rom. 12–13. Look at the record of our American cultural tradition: having resisted strong law enforcement ever since our struggle against the British crown, we have tolerated remarkably high levels of violence and disorder. On the American frontier in the decades before The Virginian was written, for example, there was very lax law enforcement, little protection for the rights of the weak, and a series of economic disorders that proved destructive to stable relationships. Hundreds of vigilante actions occurred in response to those evils, some of them inspired by the religious heritage I sketched earlier. But vigilantism also frequently disguised what amounted to personal vengeance. The net result of such actions was the further erosion of security and a popularization of violence. Lacking a widely shared belief in the government as the agency of divine wrath against criminals, we found it necessary to invent “instruments of providence” in the form of frontiersmen, tall cowboys, and, later, superheroic figures.

The problem is that such superhero stories serve to popularize the very antisocial behavior that causes much of the problem in the first place. I believe that the impact of such superheroic “disguises for vengeance” is visible not only in the unusually high crime statistics in the United States, but also in the increasing frequency of mass murderers. The society influenced by these stories is facing a virtual epidemic of cool and relentless killers. Several years ago, a colleague and I presented a paper on this topic, suggesting that recent assassins and mass murderers have tended to model their behavior after the avengers of the superheroic dramas. They differ from “normal” citizens in that they take the mythic paradigm of the Virginian seriously, tracking down persons they imagine are offenders and giving them vigilante justice, swift and direct.

These considerations lead me to wonder whether the seeming contradiction of Paul’s perspective may not be superior to the tradition our culture has favored. If you abandon the idea of the government as the
agent of divine wrath, then you will have to invent such agents—which is precisely what our culture has done. People who are suffering from abuse and injustice simply will not tolerate a world in which there is no hope for tidying up the score. To glorify the heroes of vigilante justice is to sow the seeds of our own destruction. It is to allow us to think that we might become vigilante heroes or heroines ourselves, or at least elect one to the Marshal’s office or the White House. When that happens, respect for the law disintegrates, and the yearning for violent resolution of the quick and easy sort gains highly dangerous, public forms.

Is there not perhaps a more healthy balance in Paul’s view? A kind of holy inconsistency? Paul holds fast to the idea of divine vengeance, both in the world to come and in the form of vigorous law enforcement by a duly constituted government. At the same time, he strongly resists any involvement in vengeance on one’s own behalf—“Beloved, never avenge yourselves”—because no one should ever attempt to become a judge in one’s own cause. And to counter the poison of vengeance that afflicts anyone who is abused and persecuted, as the early Christians were, Paul counsels that “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by doing this you will pile up burning coals upon his head.” As Desmond Tutu has suggested in advocating a policy of divine inconsistency, “restorative justice” rests on the premise that “we live in a moral universe after all. What’s right matters.” So, he explains, “we aim to remember, to forgive and to go on, with full recognition of how fragile the threads of community are.”

Is there perhaps a deeper, more divine logic at work here? Are humans really capable of such actions if they are not entirely certain of the final judgment of God, the final triumph of righteousness? How can persecuted people counter despair without such a hope? How can they gain the power to respond creatively with burning coals except by trusting, finally, in the power of God either to transform or to punish the wicked? Is there not perhaps a deeper understanding of the human psyche in Paul’s apparent inconsistency than in our current cultural simplicities?

TWO CONCLUDING SUGGESTIONS

I leave these questions for you to ponder, because they are larger than I can comprehend on my own. Yet to take Paul’s position seriously is to question certain aspects of our cultural tradition, to challenge our attitudes toward popular entertainment, and to alter our perspective on the proper role of government. It provokes us to think about what Roger Bacon wrote in his Essays: “Revenge is a kind of wild justice; which the more man’s nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out.” Private vengeance disguised as selfless redemption has now reached such proportions in our society that we must begin to develop a new respect for the law, and for equal but firm justice under law. This pondering leads to two practical suggestions.

The first relates to Paul’s concern for an impartial system of law enforcement. Obviously, if we seek the perfection of the myths, we shall find any legal system fatally flawed; there were numerous loopholes in Paul’s time as well. But when our system works fairly well, we should not stifle expressions of support and appreciation. When the five Evanston police arrested mass murderer Alton Coleman quickly, efficiently, and without undue use of force, we had every reason to be proud. We should find ways to express our gratitude when a system patterned on Paul’s ideal of due process of law functions properly. And we should constantly be ready to support and pay for international institutions of this sort, comparable to the kind of international law enforcement that the Roman Empire offered when this letter was written.
Secondly, there is a need to develop contemporary forms of “heaping up burning coals” on the heads of adversaries. While relying on the final vengeance of God, whether in this life or the next, there is the practical task of feeding enemies and seeking the welfare of abusers. Rather than retaliating against neighbors, the challenge is to find ways to help them within the context of truthfulness about crimes committed. Rather than simply seeking the defeat of national adversaries, the challenge is to discover ways to assist them. This is not to condone their crimes or to diminish the injuries they have caused; if Paul is right, the crimes of our enemies and ourselves will be avenged in God’s good time, both in this world and the next. In the meanwhile, it makes sense to set about the business of seeking to overcome evil with good. Only in this way shall it be possible truly to become instruments of God’s peace. For “vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”

NOTES

This essay is adapted from Robert Jewett, Saint Paul at the Movies: The Apostle’s Dialogue with American Culture (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), chapter 10.

1. See the rhetorical analysis of this material in Walter T. Wilson, Love without Pretense: Romans 12.9–21 and Hellenistic-Jewish Wisdom Literature (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1991), 132–6.

2. Pale Rider was directed and produced by Clint Eastwood and released by Warner Brothers in 1985. Citations will be drawn from Alan Dean Foster, Pale Rider: A Novelization (New York: Warner, 1985), and made parenthetically in the text.

3. This material about Wister’s The Virginian is adapted from Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, The American Monomyth (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977), 180–5. Citation from Wister will be taken from The Virginian: Horseman of the Plains (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), and will be made parenthetically in the text.

4. See the description of the American Monomyth in Bruce David Forbes’s introduction to this volume; see also Tom Shales, “Reign of TV Terror Floods Viewers in Vigilantism,” Chicago Tribune, 17 January 1986, section 5, 5.


8. I am not inclined to follow Vincent Canby’s suggestion in “Vengeance Is His” that “resurrection also is the key to ‘Pale Rider.’” I am more inclined to agree that “just who this fellow was in his previous incarnation is left so vague you have a right to suspect that he might have been Him,” i.e., God (C8).


13
Anthony Pinn
RAP MUSIC AND ITS MESSAGE

On Interpreting the Contact between
Religion and Popular Culture

INTRODUCTION

George Clinton and Parliament would be in town doing some of their classic cuts—“Flashlight,” etc. My friends were going and part of me wanted to attend, but, as a good “church boy,” I was torn. Should a Christian attend such a “worldly” event, listening to songs that did not address themes of spiritual uplift? Granted, I did on occasion listen to these songs, but I always believed this was somehow wrong. Could there be a relationship between these two worlds? Initially I thought not. My friends went to the concert and I stayed home. It would be years before I would see George Clinton live, only after I was able to recognize and appreciate the natural conversation or convergence between popular culture and religiosity.

Media sources tend to highlight the negative and reactionary interaction between religious ideologies and popular culture; one need only think about the friction between Rev. Calvin Butts and several “gangsta” rap artists. The former argues that this form of musical production erodes moral values and religious sensibilities; the artists respond that they are speaking of reality and are misunderstood and disrespected. This, however, is only one form of interaction between religion and popular culture. On another level, Paul Tillich is correct; they work in harmony—revising and rethinking each other, interpreting each other for the benefit of larger communities. As Bruce David Forbes writes in the introduction: “Because popular culture surrounds us, it seems reasonable to assume that its messages and subtle themes influence us as well as reflecting us. If popular culture reflects values we already hold, that reflection also serves to reinforce our values and deepen our commitment to them” (p. 5).

This essay is my attempt to discuss this form of interaction between religion and popular culture. The question is, how do those who are interested in understanding and exploring the connections between these two worldviews interpret the dialogue? My goal is not to outline or rehearse the conversation, but rather to provide a methodology for exploring this conversation, a method growing out of the source material. I have labeled this approach “nitty gritty hermeneutics.”

“NITTY GRITTY HERMENEUTICS” DEFINED

The term “nitty gritty” denotes a hard and concrete orientation in which the “raw natural facts” are of tremendous importance, irrespective of their ramifications. While serving to confine vision and orientation to certain parameters of roughness, it also uncompromisingly expands the meaning and
possibility of life to its full limits. Thus nitty gritty hermeneutics seeks a clear and unromanticized understanding of a hostile world, and entails “telling it like it is” and taking risks.

Aspects of this hermeneutic include a sense of heuristic rebelliousness as well as raw and uncompromised insight. This hermeneutical approach takes the material of life that goes unspoken and hidden, and expresses it. In Foucault’s terms, this hermeneutic ruptures American dialogue by both surfacing “subjugated knowledge,” which dismantles false perceptions and harmful practices, and by altering popular perceptions and life values.¹

Defined by its nitty gritty character, nitty gritty hermeneutics exhibits a sense of nonconformity. It ridicules interpretations and interpreters who seek to inhibit or restrict liberative movement and hard inquiries into the problems of life. The nitty gritty “thang,” so to speak, forces a confrontation with the “funky stuff” of life, and, oddly enough, finds strength in the challenge posed. These two principles—rootedness in rebelliousness and raw, uncompromising insight—not only give shape to this hermeneutic, but are also found in cultural expressions such as the blues. That is to say, the blues illustrates the nature and function of nitty gritty hermeneutics.²

I do not mean to suggest an endorsement of oppressive opinions held within the blues or other forms of musical expression such as rap. However, I am not willing to reject these forms of expression simply because they contain some of the misguided tendencies of the larger society. Rather, I am suggesting that the positive expressions of this music (i.e., the examples of this music which have a constructive intention) suggest a hermeneutic which is worthy of investigation and implementation by those interested in the connections between religion and popular culture, because it already entails this very conversation between religious realities and cultural production.

NITTY GRITTY HERMENEUTICS IN ACTION: THE BLUES

The historical origin of the blues as a musical form is virtually impossible to pinpoint. It is, however, safe to say that blues songs took form long before their actual recording, and likely developed alongside spirituals and secular work songs. Consequently, existential and musical contexts informing work songs and spirituals determined the content, shape, and sound of the blues. Yet whereas the spirituals—“religious songs”—tell the story of Black life in terms of a collective reality, blues songs connote a shift to an individualized and personal accounting of existence within a hostile society.³

Within these songs, the promises of the spirituals were weighed and tested in light of life’s controlling hardships, and Utopian ideals were found wanting. Hence the blues as a musical form is concerned with truth as it arises out of experience. That is, for blues artists “truth is experience and experience is the truth.”⁴ The blues’s commitment to the unpolished expression of Black life made some segments of the Black community uncomfortable. For example, the blues met with the disapproval of Black churches because the lyrical content and “seductive” nature of the music fell outside of the norms, values, and morality advocated by Black church tradition. Raw or “gutbucket” experiences were poetically presented, critiqued, and synthesized, yet unapologetically understood as real and unavoidable. No subject was taboo, although most were shrouded in metaphorical language. The rejection of the blues stems from the “hard living” and hard questioning noted in the lyrics. In this manner, blues performers openly discussed aspects of life that church folk would just as soon keep hidden, and challenged espoused yet unpracticed principles of religion.⁵
Blues artists often found traditionally religious interpretations of life fundamentally flawed and unproductive. The blues critiqued the hypocrisy and inactivity of Black churches and used this as fuel for significations and sarcasm. J. T. “Funny Paper” Smith hits upon this point when singing the following lines:

Some of the good Lawd’s children, some of them aint no good,
Some of the good Lawd’s children, some of them aint no good.
Some of them are the devil, ooh, well, well,
and won’t help you if they could.

Some of the good Lawd’s children kneel upon their knees and pray,
Some of the good Lawd’s children kneel upon their knees and pray.
You serve the devil in the night, ooh, well
and serve the Lawd in the day.6

Smith’s questioning of banal theological formulations and sarcasm towards hyper-optimistic religiosity, when he sings about the traditional notion of a good God held by Black Christian religion, is also typical of the blues. He sings:

I used to ask God questions, then answer that question my self,
I used to ask God questions, then answer that question my self,
’Bout when I was born, wonder was there any mercy left?

You know it must be the devil I’m servin’, I know it can’t be Jesus Christ,
You know it must be the devil I’m servin’, I know it can’t be Jesus Christ,
’Cause I ask him to save me and look like he tryin’ to take my life.7

Looking over the course of his life, Smith is unable to accept traditional conceptions of God (as compassionate and historically involved), nor is he willing to explain his continual hardship through divine mystery. Taking a hard look at his condition and Christian faith, Smith raises subtle questions concerning the evidence of God’s involvement in the world and one’s ability to decipher this involvement.

The blues forces a rethinking of what religion is and what it means to be religious. In this way, blues players expanded the narrow perceptions of religiosity beyond the confines of mainstream Black traditional approaches. Hence, with respect to the blues, it is unacceptable to limit religion and religiosity to traditional Black Christian (or theistic) models. Consider the following lines:

Yes I went out on the mountain, looked over in Jerusalem,
Yes I went out on the mountain, looked over in Jerusalem,
Well, I see them hoodoo women, ooh Lord, makin’ up in their
low-down tents.

Well I’m going to Newport to see Aunt Caroline Dye,
Well I’m going to Newport to see Aunt Caroline Dye,
She’s a fortune-teller, oh Lord, she sure don’t tell no lie.8

Productive religiosity comes to mean a religiosity whose principles have felt consequences for daily life.
Doctrinal and theological “purity” pale in comparison to existential need. Usable religion must not place abstraction and neat theological categories above human experience: only that which is proven by experience holds value. Religious expression is here defined by its commitment to human accountability, and responsibility for human occurrences. To a large extent, productive religiosity is fluid, in that its dynamics alter with the existential situation; thus it avoids dilemmas of applicability resulting from the rigid demands and dictates of tradition.

The nitty gritty hermeneutics surfacing in the blues interprets religion based upon complex Black life as a tool, by which humans are encouraged to remove psychologically comforting theological “crutches” and develop themselves as liberators. Ralph Ellison captures this meaning in “Richard Wright’s Blues”:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged edge and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy [or religious constructs] but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-cosmic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically...

[Blues songs’] attraction lies in this, that they at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit. They fall short of tragedy only in that they provide no solution, offer no scapegoat but the self.9

There is a sense in which blues tones, such as those mentioned above, carve out a space of creativity and ingenuity in the middle of oppressive circumstances, and this space belongs to both those who sing and those who listen. I believe there is much for academics to learn from the contours of this made space.

NITTY GRITTY HERMENEUTICS IN ACTION: RAP

Blues songs make use of the same creative and existential materials as the spirituals, thereby creating a continuum of musical expression. But perpetual hardship, and the need to respond creatively to it, continues into the present, resulting in a new musical exploration that is both continuous with the earlier one, and appropriate to current conditions and contexts. This new form is rap music. Consequently, the substance of this nascent method of interpretation—nitty gritty hermeneutics—also appears in rap.10

An accurate history of rap music must understand it in connection to the larger development of hip hop culture. Hip hop first emerges as a cultural and creative response to the matrix of industrial decline, social isolation, and political decay endemic to the Bronx in New York City.11 Faced with declining opportunities for socioeconomic mobility, and the accompanying marginality, young artists made use of their creative resources to establish an alternative “way of being” in the world, complete with a vocabulary, style of dress, visual artistic expression (graffiti art emerges as early as 1971), and dance (break dancing is present as early as 1973) uniquely their own.12

In essence, hip hop culture and its musical voice—rap—signal both cultural resistance and, in keeping with this essay’s theme, a continued dialogue with religious ideals and institutions. The music behind rap lyrics, with its sampling and strong beats, rethinks traditional understandings of proper musical formation, and finds pleasure in the sounds the music industry labeled undesirable. As Tricia Rose insightfully points out,

Although famous rock musicians have used recognizable samples from other prominent musicians as part of their album material, for the most part, samples were used to “flesh out” or accent... Rap producers have inverted this logic, using samples as a point of reference, as a means by which the process of repetition and recontextualization can be highlighted and
On another level, rap lyrics—the verbal expression of hip hop’s more general affirmation of identity and critique of the larger society—present a “postmodern” articulation of themes, lifestyles, and behaviors found in Black oral traditions. Rap music has roots in African musical techniques and African influenced oral practices, and uses folk heroes such as “Bad Niggers,” Brer Rabbit, Signifying Monkey, Stagolee, and Dolemite as models in order to develop ways of outsmarting and temporarily gaining the upper hand over the dominant society while still rehearsing the realities of Black urban life. More recent influences include storytellers such as the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron, as well as mid-century radio personalities such as Douglas “Jocko” Henderson.

Most rap music aficionados mark the emergence of what became contemporary rap with the arrival of DJ Kool Herc in New York City, from Jamaica, in 1972. DJ Kool Herc used the Jamaican tradition of toasting or speaking over extended beats and, like Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash, began holding open-air parties in the Bronx. In 1979, “Rapper’s Delight” was recorded by the Sugar Hill Gang (on Sugar Hill Records), and sold millions of copies. The Sugar Hill Gang, from New Jersey, brought rap to a larger audience by making it available to groups outside select New York circles. Prior to this, MCs and DJs distributed their goods using dubbing devices and cassette players known as “boom boxes,” but with the success of “Rapper’s Delight,” the commercialization of rap music was underway.

In the early 1980s, East Coast hip hop made its way to the West Coast, where Soul Sonic Force and Afrika Bambaataa toured in 1980. Captured by the rap music craze, Los Angeles residents used two skating rinks, “World on Wheels” and “Skateland,” as rapper training camps, where contests sponsored by radio station KDAY were held. This style gave way to the creativity of Eazy E, Dr. Dre (formerly of the World Class Wreckin’ Crew), Ice Cube, and the other members of NWA (Niggaz With Attitude). NWA firmly established a style of rap based upon the hard facts of L.A. gang and hustler life. Granted, Schooly D and KRS-One (with Scott La Rock) on the East Coast and Ice-T (“Six in the Morning” and “Colors”) on the West Coast had already pioneered this hard-life form of rap music, and I do not mean to downplay the national attention they gained. Yet it was not until NWA recorded “Straight Outta Compton” (as a Macola Company/Ruthless record production for sale out of car trunks) and successfully adopted “gangsta” personae that this style gained a large audience. As Brian Cross says: “NWA placed themselves on the hiphop map with authenticity, capturing the aggression and anger of the streets of South Central in their intonation and timbre. This places the listener in an intimate position relative to their rhymes. Ice-T sounds like a narrator by comparison.”

The raw aggression and reckless lifestyle portrayed by this form of rap caught the attention of rap fans and defined the West Coast as the center of “realism” rap or gangsta rap. New York’s rap was “flavored” by the dynamics of hip hop culture, and so West Coast rap highlighted, in response, its culture’s own defining features, most prominently gang culture. Compton was in direct competition with the Bronx. The reputation of West Coast rap has been enhanced, in recent years, by the work of Cypress Hill, Snoop Doggy Dogg, Dr. Dre, Warren G., Ice Cube, and Yo-Yo.

The above history, although brief, presents the social and cultural context, creative dynamics, and scope—East Coast and West Coast—of rap music’s development. What is needed at this point is a typology to clarify the thematic structure of rap’s lyrical content. I argue that there are three major (at times overlapping) categories of rap music: “status” rap, “gangsta” rap, and “progressive” rap.

The “status” strand of rap first appears in the Sugar Hill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight.” This cut consists of braggadocio’s rhythms and mild signification, which denote a strong concern with “status” and social
This style of rap music, emerging early, is concerned with distinguishing artists from their competitors. “Status” rap, combined with break-dance movements, served as the major tool within this struggle for artistic dominance. Both cultural expressions highlighted competitor’s flaws and shortcomings while emphasizing the rapper’s or dancer’s own prowess.

The social critique offered in this brand of rap is usually limited to the assertion of self in opposition to a society that is seeking Black nonexistence. This rupture is often expressed sexually and overtly, such as in the lyrics of New York’s “Heavy D” (born Dwight Myers). The following lines are from “Mr. Big Stuff” (1990):

```
I'm a fly girl lover and a woman pleaser
Girls say, “Heavy, let me squeeze you”
An incredible
Overweight, huggable
Prince of poetry
That's why I'm so lovable. ^20
```

Groups such as Salt-n-Pepa effectively brought Black women into the rap world beyond roles as sexual objects and targets for male aggression and distrust, highlighting the personal value and strength of Black women. Salt-n-Pepa (the trio of “Salt” [Cheryl James], “Pepa” [Sandy Denton], and “Spinderella” [Dee Dee Roper, the DJ]) argue for self-appreciation—the creation of strong and assertive individuals—and, in so doing, promote the value of human personality. “It’s About Expression” (1991):

```
You know life is all about expression
You only live once, you’re not coming back
So express yourself . . .

Express yourself
You gotta be you and only you, baby
Express yourself
Let me be me
Express yourself
Don’t tell me what I cannot do, baby
Express yourself. ^21
```

More recent artists such as Li’l Kim and Foxy Brown also signify and challenge sexual stereotypes.

Although “status” rap contains an implicit political agenda, it explicitly discusses the social “living
of life.” As Michael Dyson recounts, rap of this nature allows rappers, and by extension their listeners, to momentarily move beyond physical demise and enjoy the material benefits of the American Dream. Unfortunately, this struggle for individual, ontological, and material “space” often results in counterproductive and oppressive tendencies, which can be seen in the sexism, patriarchal ideals, and problematic consumerism that much “status” rap expresses. On one level, this brand of rap strikes at the dehumanizing tendencies of American society; on another level, it buys into the structures and attitudes fostering such dehumanizing practices.

“Gangsta” rap presents this dual message in even stronger terms, responding to the same dehumanizing effects of life in the United States with much more overt intracommunal and extracommunal aggression. The first major gangsta group, NWA, consciously plays out America’s nightmare—depicting itself as ruthlessly dominating its environment. However, one notices an implied critique of American racism. Take, for example, NWA’s controversial rap “Fuck Tha Police” (1989):

F*ck the police, comin’ straight from the underground
A young nigger got it bad because I’m brown
And not the other color. Some police think
They have the authority to kill a minority
F*ck that shit ‘cause I ain’t the one
For a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun.²³

The members of this group point out the manner in which “law and order” operates on principles that encourage the victimizing of young people based upon style of dress and skin color. Whereas some acquiesce to this treatment, NWA promotes resistance to such practices, in order to maintain a sense of self-worth and importance.

If NWA is correct in its analysis, the anger and violence expressed in gangsta rap is reflective of American society in general. In other words, violence and crime do not originate with rap music, but are part of the American fabric and merely magnified by musical expression.

Dr. Dre uses the “Americanness” of gangsta rap’s lyrics to justify the violence of his album, The Chronic (1993). In an interview with Rolling Stone, Dr. Dre says:

People are always telling me my records are violent[,] . . . that they say bad things about women, but those are the topics they bring up themselves. . . . They don’t want to talk about the good shit because that doesn’t interest them, and it’s not going to interest their readers. . . . If I’m promoting violence, they’re doing it just as much as I am by focusing on it in the article. That really bugs me out—you know, if it weren’t going on, I couldn’t talk about it.²⁵

In addition to pointing out the oppressive nature of American society, gangsta rap outlines the practices within the “hood” that allow survival. As with “status” rap, gangsta style often entails using counterproductive tools in order to achieve identity and material comfort. A consequence of this is the sexist and misogynistic attitude glorified in the music. Women are often viewed as the enemy, the ones
who destroy Black manhood and thereby bring into question the gangsta’s survival. As a result of this assumed threat, women are dealt with harshly; they are stopped at all cost from ending the G’s quest for success. Rappers, without question, must be held responsible for the oppression supported in their music. At the same time, however, critics and fans must recognize that gangsta rap echoes oppressive precepts acknowledged and encouraged by the larger society.

Even with these flaws, gangsta rap (and to a lesser extent status rap) provides a brief glimpse of the interpretative honesty, roughness, and concern for personal identity inherent in nitty gritty hermeneutics. The appeal to reality at all cost, and despite the possibility of more comfortable agendas, is clear in these two forms of rap. Still, this critical insight is most forcefully presented in the “progressive” strain of rap. Aware of the same existential hardships and contradictions as gangsta rap, progressive rap seeks to address these concerns without intracommunal aggression and in terms of political and cultural education, providing an interpretation of American society and a constructive agenda (e.g., self-respect, knowledge, pride, and unity) for the uplift of Black America. It is also within progressive rap that one encounters a more overt dialogue with and interpretation of Black religiosity.

Nascent progressive rap gained popular attention with “The Message” (1982), by New York rappers Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five. Using a portrait of life amid industrial decline, social alienation, and political corruption, this rap interprets the cycle of poverty and dehumanization producing limited life options and despair. It speaks to the destructiveness of systemically imposed “ghetto” existence.

You’ll grow in the ghetto living second-rate
And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate
The places you play and where you stay
Looks like one great big alleyway.

Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five’s appeal stemmed, in part, from the group’s uncompromising attention to the “underbelly” of U.S. economic and sociopolitical structures. Yet implicit within this depiction of daily hardships in urban centers was an understanding that knowledge might produce the struggle necessary for transformation.

Progressive rap seeks, first, to change the system, using Black history and cultural developments as well as a critique of social structures to point out the intrinsic value of Black life, and increase positive Black self-expression. A classic representative of this agenda is the group Public Enemy. Its lead rapper, Chuck D, understands rap music as an arena for the exchange of vital information. Rap deciphers the muddled ideologies of political, economic, and social institutions and makes listeners aware of necessary steps leading to self-determination.

As the self-proclaimed “prophet of rage,” Chuck D sees the meaning of American society as centering around the control and destruction of Black minds and bodies. Through raps such as “Fight the Power,” “Bring the Noise,” “Shut ’Em Down,” “Party for Your Right to Fight,” and “White Heaven/Black Hell,” Public Enemy outlines this control and the methods for breaking its grip. Public Enemy’s interpretive eye is not focused solely upon the larger society and its flaws, but also chastises African Americans for the role they play in their own destruction.

Of more direct interest here is Chuck D’s insight into Black religion. He argues that Black religion should contribute to the liberation of Black people. The meaning of Black religion is found in its support of Black identity and consciousness, and its rejection of status quo politics, economics, and social relations. Chuck D’s support of the Nation of Islam suggests that Black churches, as representative of
majority Black religious expression, are not in line with religion’s ultimate purpose and that the “Nation’s” praxis better fulfills the meaning of religion. Public Enemy understands the Nation of Islam as redemptive because it provides the quest for African American progress with a vivifying spiritual base. The 1990 album *Fear of a Black Planet* presents a musical interpretation of the Nation of Islam, inspiring critics to make comments such as this:

[Public Enemy] has become the spokesperson for a new wave of African-American consciousness shaped in the tradition of Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Louis Farrakhan. [It] is not the only rap group influenced by the symbols and rhetoric of the Nation of Islam, they are [sic] by far its most significant and most consistent proponents.  

Through its Islam-influenced lyrics and rebellious beats, Public Enemy provided a “jeremiad” calling attention to the hypocrisy of white America. Chuck D also reprimanded African Americans for involvement in their own oppression, while pointing out their potential for liberative action. Such a thick and layered message is the hallmark of progressive rap.

Although Public Enemy is generally the primary example used to define the nature and content of progressive rap, it is my opinion that some of the best progressive rap in this decade has been produced by Arrested Development (from Atlanta), notwithstanding the lack of attention given the group within academic treatments. AD, as the group is commonly called, exhibits a hybridization of Afrocentrism and the 1960s Black aesthetic. In keeping with the interpretation of American society provided by Public Enemy, AD sees the fundamental meaning of U.S. institutions and ideologies as demarcated by the ontological and epistemological demise of Black individuals and communities. Through raps such as “People Everday” and “Ache’n for Acres,” Arrested Development illustrates the self-destructive and community-eroding effects of consumerism and sociopolitical alienation. Seeing through the ideological platforms aimed at the extirpation of Black life, Arrested Development offers a regenerative program based upon pan-African cultural nationalism, social cohesion, economic cooperation, and proactive politics.

In stronger terms than the other groups mentioned, AD provides a critique of religiosity which demonstrates the tenacity of nitty gritty hermeneutics. A clear example of this is the rap “Fishin’ 4 Religion,” from their album *3 Years, 5 Months and 2 Days in the Life of...* (Chrysalis Records, 1992). In this rap, AD critiques Black ministers’ promotion of passivity as a sign of righteousness, as well as the lack of sustained and direct community involvement by Black churches. In part, this involves an attack upon the symbolic and imagistic grounding of Black religion, by critiquing the inconsistencies between the demands for liberation and the conception of God peddled by Black Christian churches. Using liberation as a theological norm, AD determines that many Black churches do not embody the true nature and meaning of Black religion’s objective. Black religion must promote ontological and epistemological “blackness” and thereby encourage the holistic survival of the Black community. Unfortunately, however, Black churches are “praising a God that watches you weep, and doesn’t want you to do a damn thing about it.” Thus the activism suggested by Black religion is actually counterproductive, because it does not extend beyond emotional outburst and spiritual platitudes. Resolutions of this nature have no relationship to temporal and proactive plans for social transformation; they are far too spiritualized to be of any worldly good.

When they want change the preacher says shout it,
Does shoutin’ bring about the change, I doubt it.
All shoutin’ does is make you lose your voice.
In the words of MC Speech (the group’s leader), Black churches fail to “nurture” African Americans, and instead enslave them within a web of opiacic eschatology and debilitating consternation. In this way, the essence or genuine meaning of religion is transmuted into a plea for religiously coded banality and “turn-the-other-cheek” benignancy. AD expresses this while relaying a particular church scene:

... sitting in church hearing legitimate woes.
Pastor tells the lady it’ll be alright,
Just pray so you can see the pearly gates so white.
The Lady prays and prays, prays, prays, it’s everlasting.
There’s nothing wrong with prayin’, it’s what she’s askin’.

According to this critique, many Black churches are unwilling to address the hard issues of life. Therefore, in Marx’s phrase, they are the opiate of the people. Individualistic and indolent religiosity promoted by churches is a major factor in the underdevelopment of Black America.

Arrested Development musically outlines a religiosity committed to the hands-on deliverance of Black people from a profusion of existential dilemmas, without respect to traditional theology and doctrine. In this—AD’s constructive project—one sees another aspect of nitty gritty hermeneutics: the uncovering and revitalizing of religion outside the confines of long-standing but ineffectual theological tradition. It is a project steeped in realism, in the primacy of experience over doctrine.

For example, in keeping with traditional African religions, Arrested Development extols the earth and calls union with the earth a “divine” source of power and a chief objective of any vibrant religious system. Such a religious system is constructed from the rudimentary and rather Manichean treatment of certain life principles, for example in the rap “Washed Away.” Here, the delusion of righteousness and goodness is metaphorically depicted as the destruction of a seashore by demonic tides. AD urges humans to fight the trickster serpent’s efforts to destroy the seashore:

Why do we let them wash it away
Why are we allowing them to take what’s good
Why won’t we teach our children what is real
Why don’t we collect & save what is real
Look very hard & swim the ocean
We must find what needs to be found.
Look all around & find a wise man
To feed us the truth & keep us sound.

From this sense of connectedness, to a scene much larger than oneself, comes the inspiration for transformation. That is, the proper working of a religion must involve both collective efforts to identify the sources of oppression, and the storing up (and sharing) of vital, self-affirming cultural information. Only a religiosity that participates in and affirms the cultural life of the community, and speaks plainly to pressing issues without paying tribute to unproved theological assertions—no new wine in old skins—is in keeping with the meaning of religion.

The interaction between religious ideals and popular culture is extremely important because it says something about who we are and what is of fundamental importance to us. But how are we to unpack this interaction, this dialogue? The answer rests within the interaction itself, within the contact; it is present in the depictions of life, the raw facts of existence exposed by the coming together of worldviews represented by religion and popular culture. I have labeled the interpretative process involved in the religion/popular culture dialogue nitty gritty hermeneutics. Hopefully this will help scholars of religious
studies recognize, among other things, that there are more than riddles in the rap rhymes.

NOTES

This essay is an altered version of Anthony Pinn, Why, Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology (New York: Continuum, 1995), chapter 5.


2. I thank one of my students, Abraham Wheeler, for valuable information on certain blues figures.


5. Part of this critique involves the sarcastic lampooning of repressive Christian sex codes. The blues responds to this aspect of Black religion by openly celebrating expressed sexuality as a vital component of freedom. Using easily deciphered metaphors such as “jelly rolling,” blues artists promoted sexuality as a vital and invaluable aspect of humanity. In this way, blues figures such as Ma Rainey, Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, Koko Taylor, and others moved away from provincial (church inspired) ethical codes and restraining sensibilities, and embraced the full depiction of their being in the world. This implies a hermeneutic or norm of interpretation that examines tradition and rejects religion’s allegiance to the nineteenth-century codes of conduct that problematized Black sexuality, thereby denying African Americans a full range of human expression. Nitty gritty hermeneutics, as expressed in the blues, interprets religious conduct codes as properly encouraging the full expression of one’s humanity as a symbol of freedom. Religious systems and practices that hamper full human expression are thus inherently hypocritical.


7. Quoted in Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning, 118.

8. Quoted in ibid., 128.


12. Break dancing and graffiti art did not remain exclusively within the Black community. Movies such as *Breakdance* and *Wild Style* commercialized these art forms and brought them to a larger audience. Rapper Fab 5 Freddy’s graffiti art, for example, was eventually displayed in New York City galleries.


Jon Michael Spencer is aware of the manner in which analysis of the music is often missing from discussions of rap music and other forms of musical expression. In much of his early work, Spencer developed a method for exploring both music and lyrics, as a way of better understanding the religious and theological importance of musical developments. He named this approach theomusicology. Information on his approach might prove helpful for readers: see Jon Michael Spencer, ed., *Theomusicology*, a special issue of *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1994).

14. Douglas “Jocko” Henderson was a disk jockey known for his rhythmic sign on. For an example of this, see Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying; The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor That Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon & Schuster — Touchstone, 1994), 297. Stagolee (or Staggerlee) is a major figure in African American folklore. He is a “badman” whose activities carve out a space of independence while also causing destruction within the African American communities he touches. For additional information, see ibid., chapter 11, especially 461–9.

15. It should be noted that other rap songs were recorded during this early period, including “King Tim III” by Fatback. However, this and others like it were small releases that did not make the same impact as “Rapper’s Delight.”


17. Ibid., 24. Houston’s Geto Boys also present a strong example of gangsta rap. ScarFace, formerly of the Geto Boys, continues this image as a solo artist in, e.g., *Mr. ScarFace Is Bak* (1991), *The Diary* (1994), and most recently *The Untouchables* (1997).

18. The distinction between the two schools of rap must not be too strongly stated, since the line between East Coast and West Coast is blurred as a result of rapid growth and blending of styles.


20. Quoted in ibid., 59.

21. Quoted in ibid., 55.
22. Michael Eric Dyson, “Rap Culture, the Church, and American Society,” in Spencer, Sacred Music of the Secular City, 268–73, especially 270.


25. Jonathan Gold, “Dr. Dre and Snoop Doggy Dogg: One Nation Under a G Thang,” Rolling Stone, 30 September 1993, 38–43, quotation from 124. There are certainly more recent examples of this “gangsta” attitude, including the recently deceased Tupac and The Notorious B. I. G. However, Dr. Dre and The Chronic mark a major turning point in the marketing of gangsta rap and, as a result, continue to serve as a useful example.


28. For examples of this sort of explicit critique in gangsta rap, see pieces such as Ice Cube’s “When I Get to Heaven” and ScarFace’s “Mind Playin’ Tricks on Me, 1994.”

29. Quoted in Adler and Beckman, Rap, 19.


31. William Eric Perkins, “Nation of Islam Ideology in the Rap of Public Enemy,” in The Emergency of Black and the Emergence of Rap, ed. Jon Michael Spencer (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 41–50, quotation from 41–2. This volume is a special issue of Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology 5, no. 1 (Spring 1991). Other rap groups such as Poor Righteous Teachers embrace the philosophy of the 5% Nation, a Nation of Islam splinter group formed by Clarence 13X. This group argues that 85 percent of the people are ignorant, 10 percent are capable of initiating liberation but fail to do so, and 5 percent have the truth and are poor righteous teachers.

32. The African basis of AD’s religiosity is hinted at in the group’s make-up, which includes the Baba (Ojay) figures. This name—Baba—is given to African spiritual advisors.
Amy Johnson Frykholm
THE GENDER DYNAMICS OF THE LEFT BEHIND SERIES

The phenomenon of the *Left Behind* series of books—60 million copies sold over ten years, recurrent number-one position on the *New York Times* best-seller list, millions of dollars in spin-off sales—took almost everyone by surprise, including the authors, the publisher, the mainstream media, and academics of all kinds. As a Christian evangelical series of fiction telling a rather obscure story based on an interpretation of the Bible few people outside evangelical circles have ever heard of, the series did not seem poised to have a significant impact on American culture. And yet, over the nine years of the publication of its twelve books, beginning in 1995, *Left Behind* has become a cultural phenomenon, the fastest selling Christian series ever. For some evangelicals, *Left Behind* came to represent a long-deserved cultural presence. For scholars of American religion, *Left Behind* is evidence that evangelicalism should no longer be described as a subculture, but perhaps as a cultural dominant.1

The *Left Behind* series drew detractors as well as fans. Among those who have reacted most passionately against *Left Behind* are feminists. For many, perhaps even most, feminists, *Left Behind* is evidence of a distressing and distasteful current in American society in which women accept a God-ordained position of social inferiority. The rhetoric of submission that female characters in the books use and evangelicalism’s vocal rejection of feminism appear to place the *Left Behind* series in profound counter distinction to contemporary feminism.

This chapter is written with a strong understanding of the complexity of the relationship between evangelicalism and feminism. Two scholars—Judith Stacey and James Davidson Hunter—have examined ways that evangelicalism has appropriated feminist principles even while rejecting the word *feminism* in no uncertain terms.2 Susan Harding has developed another phrase, “flexible absolutism,” to describe these seeming contradictions.3 The principles of evangelicalism often remain absolute and unswerving. The rhetoric is often strong and harsh. But underneath that absolutism lies a much more flexible and dynamic adaptation to modern life that allows this form of religious belief to flourish. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the gender dynamics of contemporary evangelicalism. By examining representations of gender in the *Left Behind* series and in the tradition from which it comes, we can illuminate the cultural negotiations in process as evangelicalism becomes an increasingly powerful social and political force. We can also see how the stories evangelicals tell about themselves are changing.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Conceived by Timothy LaHaye and written by Jerry Jenkins, the *Left Behind* series is based on belief in an
apocalyptic event called the “rapture.” Based on an interpretation of various verses and passages in the Bible, the rapture is an event in which Christ returns to earth at the beginning of the end of time. Taking only true believers with him, Christ then returns to heaven and those left behind suffer seven years of plagues, pestilence, war, and famine called the “tribulation.” At the end of the tribulation, a battle between Satan and Christ leaves Christ victorious and ushers in the millennium, the reign of Christ on earth.

For centuries, there have been stories in the Christian tradition of people being carried to heaven and there have been stories of the end of time. The story of rapture and tribulation, however, comes specifically out of the nineteenth-century teaching of a British itinerant preacher named John Nelson Darby who, as far as we know, was the first to use the phrase “secret rapture” to refer to the event described above. The teaching of the “rapture” and “tribulation” was part of a larger structure of belief called “dispensational premillennialism.” Dispensational premillennialism divided human history into eras or “dispensations” and argued that God had a discernable plan for history at each stage, culminating in a cataclysmic end. The “premillennial” part of this phrase referred to the belief that the second coming of Christ would come before the millennium in the midst of social crisis and cultural decline.

Premillennialism is most easily understood if seen as a dissenting view to the prevailing optimism of the nineteenth century. Many Americans in the nineteenth century had come to embrace fully the modern view of human progress. Campaigns like abolition, temperance, and women’s suffrage were all part of this optimism that human society could and would grow increasingly just and righteous until at last the millennium would come, the kingdom of God on earth, aided by human effort. Premillennialists, on the other hand, did not view these movements so positively. To them, the late nineteenth century looked like a time of extraordinary chaos. Immigrants, largely Catholic and Jewish, were pouring into the United States, challenging Protestant cultural dominance and the Protestant national foundation. Urbanization was also transforming traditional life and shining a spotlight on urban poverty. Radical innovations in intellectual life—Darwin’s *Origins of the Species* and the re-examination of the Bible because of archeological discoveries—challenged the very foundations of religious belief.

Amidst all of this social upheaval, one of the most troubling and personal changes for many conservative Protestants was the public life of women. American culture as a whole generally agreed that women were the pillars of both home and church. They were the measure by which the strength of a society was known. The social activism of women in the nineteenth century, the extension of their roles into the public sphere, horrified and shocked conservative Protestants. From their point of view, the very foundation of a godly society, the home, was simply falling apart. They pointed to everything from the economic and social changes that were increasingly taking women outside the home to work, to changes in the way that women dressed and wore their hair. In an essay entitled “Bobbed Hair, Bossy Wives, and Women Preachers,” John Rice, a southern evangelist in the 1940s, wrote,

Wives must be subject to their husbands if they fit into God’s order of things. Does some wife who reads this find her heart rebellious against her husband? You do not want him to rule over you? You do not want to obey? Then you feel just like all the criminals in the penitentiaries and jails feel. They, too, are rebels against God-given authority.

Rice’s rhetoric is particularly harsh, but his sentiments were not uncommon. Even women who preached and took positions of leadership in churches at the time, and there were no small number of these, often adopted a rhetoric that accommodated beliefs about the order of Christian households. Kathryn Kuhlman, who was a popular charismatic preacher and healer and had a wide audience on television and radio in the 1940s and 1950s, told an interviewer, “When it comes to women’s lib, I am as old-fashioned as the
Word of God. I still think the man should be the head of the family. I know how it was at my house. If Papa said it, it was just as though God said it. We never had any women’s lib, but we had a mighty happy family.” Such rhetoric from both a conservative male minister and a popular female preacher should sound familiar. If you walk into any Christian bookstore and scan the marriage-and-family section, you will find many similar sentiments, adjusted for the far more therapeutic and psychological tones of our day, but still eager to affirm a God-established order for family life at the center of which is male headship and female submission. One thing very important to keep in mind, something that we will see come to the fore in Left Behind, is that simply because the rhetoric indicates domination and submission, this does not mean that evangelical people live this way or that evangelical people uniformly embrace these views.

Such an argument about family relations is closely tied to the embrace of dispensational premillennialism, which also described a God-ordained order for human history and urged people to take their place in it. Women out of place was read as a sign, not just of social problems, but of the coming end of the world. All disturbances to a rigidly defined order were read in the same way. A loss of social order was a harbinger of the coming chaos of the tribulation, and conservative Protestants were urged to prepare themselves and their families for the end of days. George Marsden calls the rise of dispensational premillennialism in this period an “innovation” to “meet the challenges of the day.” The idea that true believers would disappear suddenly in the “twinkling of the eye,” leaving behind a chaotic world appealed socially, aesthetically, and politically, and it made a good story as well.

Throughout the beginning of the twentieth century, belief in the rapture gradually gained in popularity. While it has been most often and most readily associated with the fundamentalist movement, it both preceded and extends beyond the confines of fundamentalism. It came to be embraced as a common story among charismatics and Pentecostals, later by those calling themselves the “new evangelicals,” and widely into the non-denominational and broadly evangelical movements of today. In none of these movements was there ever a complete uniformity of belief about the rapture. In fact, there was and is widespread dissent and disagreement about it. But this disagreement only fueled its establishment as an important cultural and apocalyptic story. The story of the rapture has continued its popular appeal and is stronger at the beginning of the twenty-first century than at the start of the twentieth.

While socially and religiously conservative, those who embraced dispensationalism were extremely optimistic and progressive in another way. Many believed passionately and enthusiastically that the development of technology would provide the means to spread the gospel to all the world. When the gospel had reached the ears of all, Christ’s second coming could indeed be welcomed because everyone would have had the opportunity to accept or reject him before the secret rapture. Yet fiction about the rapture and tribulation was much more negative about technology, seeing it as a tool of Satan to control the lives of Christians. This contradiction can be understood by separating out a negative and a positive aspect of conservative Protestantism. Enthusiasm for technology is in fact enthusiasm for widespread evangelism. Evangelism led many conservative Protestants to embrace technology. On the other hand, fear of social chaos led fiction about the rapture, at least, to express terror that technology was not a tool of God. Fear of social chaos drove the negative aspect of dispensationalism; evangelism, the positive aspect. And the two worked together to spread dispensational belief widely across the United States, and to the world, continuing unabated to today. If the end is coming soon, people need to know Christ more urgently than ever. This urgent need led conservative Protestants, some more enthusiastically, some more hesitantly, to embrace the technological advances of the day, especially in communication and entertainment technology, and to take an important, if long underestimated, place in popular culture.
The development of mass culture and the broad movement of conservative Protestantism that we today call “evangelicalism” leads us to *Left Behind*. *Left Behind* is a complex union of dispensationalism with all its fears about social chaos and modern life (and, not incidentally, fears about the place of women in society) and evangelism, which uses the instruments of technology and mass culture for its cause.

**THE RAPTURED WOMAN**

For nearly one hundred years before the publication of *Left Behind*, the rapture was a form of popular belief that was occasionally translated into novels. Between 1905 and 1995, approximately fifty novels were published with the rapture and tribulation as their theme. Each of these novels is situated in a particular time and place, reflecting the concerns of that particular moment, but over time, certain patterns have emerged that give rapture fiction the quality of a formula fiction not unlike romance novels or westerns.\(^{14}\)

Characters play predesigned roles and act as types instead of individuals. Unlike formula fiction writers, however, rapture fiction writers have been less aware of the stereotypes and formulas on which they draw. They believe that the Bible itself gives their fiction its larger-than-life quality, and they believe that they are drawing the plot directly from biblical teaching. In part because of this, they tend to ignore novels that came before them while still repeating many of the same characters and patterns.

This section explores three characters that are commonly found in rapture fiction throughout the twentieth century: the Raptured Woman, the Worldly Man, and the Prodigal Daughter. Each type is readily found in almost every rapture novel before *Left Behind* and is present as well in the *Left Behind* series itself. The repeated use of these stereotypes gives us the opportunity to explore the gender dynamics of this fiction and how those dynamics change over time. Even though there are numerous rapture novels to choose from, this chapter will focus on a 1950 novel called *Raptured*, written by a faith healer and evangelist named Ernest Angley, who still has an active ministry.\(^{15}\) While *Raptured* remains in print, it represents a considerably older version of the rapture story than *Left Behind*, so I will use it as a counterpoint to *Left Behind* and allow it to stand in for an earlier moment in rapture fiction’s development.

The central figure of the traditional rapture narrative is the Raptured Woman. In this fiction, this woman is always pious and devout. She is always married or widowed, has children, and does not work outside of the home. She spends at least part of the novel urging her unappreciative family members to accept her faith, change their ways, and convert to Christianity. While one Raptured Woman always takes center stage until she disappears in the rapture, the fiction will sometimes offer a montage of several women, all of whom are raptured while others are left behind. For example, Angley tells us of a poor widow, an abused woman, and a woman with a cheating husband who are all taken up in the rapture while their husbands and children are left behind.\(^{16}\) This use of the montage highlights the suffering of godly women at the hands of ungodly men. Angley focuses his attention on Mother Collins, whose faith is so powerful that the Bible she used for daily devotions in her lifetime becomes a totem with almost magical powers.

Mother Collins lives in a “picture-book house,” impeccably tidy; her way of life is scrupulously predictable. She attends church, cleans her kitchen, and studies her Bible. She is committed to two things and two things only: her faith and her family, which now includes only a son, Jim, his non-Christian wife, and a young child. Mother Collins’ pleas to Jim, his wife, and a young neighbor girl to embrace her faith are ultimately ineffective. The “life of influence” she determines to live in order to “win them for the Master” eventually fails.\(^{17}\) Only after her disappearance do her loved ones recognize that the fantastic
story she told them was indeed the truth.

This depiction of the Raptured Woman teaches us how deeply rooted rapture fiction is in ideas about womanhood that were most prevalent in the nineteenth century. As pillars of home and church, women’s faith could, in a sense, stand in for the faith of all. *Raptured* repeatedly refers to the importance of the faith of mothers in guiding people to the right path. After the rapture, several characters lament that they have not had the upbringing they needed to ensure their salvation or that they did not listen to what their mothers had taught them. Mothers are both the emblem of faith and the emblem of failure, but the burden of faith unquestionably lies on them.

## THE WORLDLY MAN

If rapture fiction idealizes the Raptured Woman, it quickly condemns her opposite: the Worldly Man. These novels served as a kind of warning about what would happen if men continued to leave the realm of religion to their wives and mothers. In *Raptured*, the Worldly Man is Mother Collins’ son, Jim, who despite his mother’s impeccable example and repeated warnings still is “not a child of God, nor even interested in religion.” Instead Jim studies law, marries a woman who does not keep her house “spic-and-span” like Mother Collins, and always postpones his decision to “give [his] heart to God.”

When the rapture comes, Jim knows exactly what has happened, but despite his recognition of the truth, he still does not repent. Instead, he takes the “Mark of the Beast,” a symbol inscribed on his body that allows him to participate in the antichrist’s economy and ultimately ensures his condemnation. In a fit of demonic rage, Jim burns his mother’s Bible. We last see him facing the certainty of his judgment and calling out, “Fall on me! Fall on me rocks and mountains! The day of his wrath has come! I would repent, but there is no repentance for me. I am lost! I am eternally lost!”

In rapture fiction, this repeatedly describes the fate of the Worldly Man who chooses status, money, and power over faith, humility, and the teachings of his mother.

Rapture fiction serves as a warning to men. As part of a much larger movement to bring men back to church and into positions of leadership, rapture fiction urged men, as well as women, to take their places in the God-ordained order of things. It was not enough for women to uphold the church; men needed to participate as well. Where this fiction idealizes a certain model of womanhood, it condemns a certain model of manhood, one that pursues worldly aims and leaves religion to women.

## THE PRODIGAL DAUGHTER

The third central figure of rapture fiction is a young woman who is closely tied to the Raptured Woman, but left behind nonetheless. I will call her the Prodigal Daughter. Unlike the Worldly Man, the Prodigal Daughter immediately recognizes her mistake in not following the counsel of the Raptured Woman and in resisting her pleas and calls to faith. She confesses her sins and converts. For the rest of the novel, this woman is the emblematic believer who is then pursued, tortured, and killed by the antichrist.

In *Raptured*, the Prodigal Daughter is a neighbor of Mother Collins named Hester Bell Wilson. Hester attends Mother Collins’ church but dismisses the teaching of the rapture as nonsense. She does not come from a Christian home, and her mother drinks and plays cards instead of teaching her about God. After the rapture, Hester becomes a Christian and is eventually imprisoned by the antichrist where she appears like
an early Christian martyr, working miracles and bringing others to faith. After witnessing the hideous
deaths of many others, including her own parents who are boiled in oil, she is eventually burned at the
stake. Several times, the narrative teases us with Hester’s fate, making us believe she is on her way to
death, but then displaces her death with the death of another young woman. In one case, Angley describes
the following scene that Hester observes.

A beautiful frail young woman was pulled savagely down between two lines of soldiers by a crude giant of a man. Her golden
blond hair glistened in the sunlight, making a beautiful background for her milky complexion. Her eyes had the glow of divine
glory. Her lips quivered slightly, but that was her only sign of fear. Her shoulders were held erect with a sweet dignity that no
one watching could help but admire.  

Angley uses the woman’s femaleness and her whiteness to hint at blamelessness and purity. He celebrates
her as the height of virtue, with not-so-subtle hints of racial purity. He then juxtaposes her almost divine
femininity with a brutish and coarse masculinity.

When she is pushed down between the rows of leering soldiers, we see the hint of a possible rape, but Angley does not depict this rape. Instead the soldiers throw the woman into a pit of snakes. Angley
lingers over the horror on the woman’s face and over her screams as the snakes kill her. In a scene that
bears striking similarities to “snuff” pornography, “a fearsome boa constrictor coiled its huge body around hers, and her last scream was followed by a choking sound as the slimy snake squeezed the life
from her body.”

This scene gives us several replacements, as though Angley is comfortable depicting this level of
violence only by constantly shifting the object of our attention. The anonymous female martyr replaces
Hester; the “brute giant” replaces the ultimate symbol of evil in the book, the antichrist; and he is then
replaced by the snakes, who in a sense commit the rape and murder that seems initially to belong to him.
This level of violence is not common in rapture fiction, although the imprisonment and martyrdom of
Prodigal Daughters is. As prototype saints and martyrs, rapture fiction treats the Prodigal Daughters as
heroines and even gives this form of Protestant literature an odd form of hagiography—saints’ stories—
projected onto the future instead of told about a heroic past, cast as fiction and fantasy instead of as
glorified history. These young, female martyrs are, in a sense, the desire of all believers—male and
female alike. But the fantasized violence hints at another layer. While Angley glorifies these women, he
also punishes them in scenes of extreme violence. They are simultaneously celebrated and defamed.

The gender dynamics of early rapture fiction make clear the dichotomy between church and world
through which conservative Christians interpreted their situation. Women embodied the church both as the
raptured Bride of Christ and as the martyred convert. Men embodied the world, condemned, but were still
urged to repent and take their place among the righteous. This is the legacy that the authors of Left Behind
inherit when they begin to tell this story for yet another generation of readers.

**LEFT BEHIND AND THE REINVENTION OF
THE RAPTURE NARRATIVE**

In the years between the publication of the first rapture novels and the publication of Left Behind, the
movements that embraced dispensational premillennialism underwent considerable change. Charismatics,
Pentecostals, fundamentalists, and other diverse groups of conservative Protestants grew increasingly
unified into a broad movement we now readily call “evangelicalism.” While evangelicalism has no
overarching organizational structure, it maintains a surprising unity of religious belief, political commitment, and social vision. Possibly the greatest force in developing and maintaining unity is the mass market. Evangelicals have developed sophisticated tools in radio, television, publishing, and the internet. For a long time in the twentieth century, these groups merely developed parallel institutions—their own radio networks, television stations, and publishing houses, for example—and they remained largely hidden from the mainstream. The *Left Behind* series is evidence of growing partnerships with mainstream booksellers and publishers who are helping to make what was once seen as a small subculture into a more visible and dominant cultural presence. When Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* became the best-selling book of the 1970s, it did so without any of the tools of the mainstream media. It never appeared on the *New York Times* best-seller list, and mainstream booksellers were virtually unaware of the book’s existence. The *Left Behind* series, on the other hand, reached the *New York Times* list with the publication of the fifth book in the series when the majority of its sales were happening in non-Christian retail outlets. The next evangelical blockbuster will find a well-trodden path to Barnes & Noble, and marketers and publishers will be on the lookout for the next *Left Behind*. Evangelicalism has become good business.

If the story of rapture and tribulation is having a broad effect on popular culture and these widespread beliefs about the end of time are coming to the surface and garnering public attention, what effect is popular culture having on the way the story of rapture and tribulation is told? Training our eyes on the gender dynamics of the novels, we can see one place where this effect is broad and deep, where evangelicalism remains in negotiation with popular culture, and popular culture helps to shape the language and ideas at work in the fiction.

*Left Behind* opens with a scene that is vaguely reminiscent of much of rapture fiction that came before it. Here are the opening lines:

Rayford Steele’s mind was on a woman he had never touched. With his fully loaded 747 on autopilot above the Atlantic en route to Heathrow, Rayford had pushed from his mind thoughts of his family.

In this introduction to the central protagonist of the series, we can immediately recognize Rayford Steele as the Worldly Man. His mind is not on the things of God, but on the things of the world: in this case, on a potential extramarital affair. His body is not located in the sacred spaces of church and home, but in a machine that the writer of these lines closely identifies with Rayford’s sexual power.

Not surprisingly to those who know the history of rapture fiction, Rayford has a Christian wife at home who has repeatedly warned him of the coming of the rapture and the need for his repentance and conversion. In this rapture novel, we only meet the Raptured Woman through Rayford, his memories, and his thoughts. Irene Steele, we learn, was a person of persistence and passion in her faith. She was a loving mother and a good wife, whom Rayford never fully appreciated. When the rapture occurs in this opening scene, Rayford knows exactly what has happened. When he arrives home, his wife will be gone. As in previous rapture fiction, the Raptured Woman has more power and effectiveness in her absence than she ever did in her presence. She gains saintly status as the perfect and long-suffering exemplar of faith.

At this point, *Left Behind* departs from traditional rapture fiction. Instead of condemnation for Rayford, he is saved. He realizes his terrible mistakes, confesses his sins, and becomes one of the series’ post-rapture converts. He is then instrumental in the conversion of his daughter, Chloe, and many others. As a Worldly Man who is now saved, Rayford initially becomes more “womanly.” Conversion softens him. He suddenly appreciates the home his wife had created; all the domestic touches that had seemed frivolous and insignificant before become important emblems of his wife’s love and her faith. He puts on his wife’s
apron and works in the kitchen, using domestic tools to express love to his daughter the way his wife had expressed love to him. This attention to domestic detail shows how tied the story of the rapture remains to the home as the primary location of faith. It is not accidental that evangelical radio stations and publishing houses “focus on the family.” These have been the central concerns of American conservative Protestants since the Puritans.

Conversion domesticates Rayford, but rapture fiction does not seem quite comfortable with a tamed Worldly Man. Rayford goes through periods of intense anger, restlessness, and self-doubt throughout the twelve books in the series. He struggles to grasp and enact the leadership that has been placed on his shoulders. Eventually, he grows more comfortable in the seeming hybrid he has become between the Worldly Man and the Raptured Woman. He becomes the unquestioned leader of the Tribulation Force, a group of post-rapture converts, but in exchange for power, he develops a sensitivity to others, an emotional availability, and a willingness to listen that exemplifies faithful masculinity for contemporary American evangelicals, but is distinct from models of previous generations.

If *Left Behind*’s changes to the classic rapture narrative affect the fate and ultimate salvation of the Worldly Man, the changes to the Prodigal Daughter are more subtle but perhaps more significant. The outline of Chloe’s story is in many ways the same as Hester Wilson’s in *Raptured*. She did not heed her mother’s warnings before the rapture and so is left behind. She comes to see her mother’s faith as true, and she converts. Eventually, she is martyred by the antichrist’s regime and dies for her faith. Because the *Left Behind* series is a far more sustained and detailed work of rapture fiction than *Raptured*, Chloe has time to do lots of other things as well. She marries and has a child. She becomes the CEO of the Christian underground cooperative, organizing and executing the shipment and delivery of goods to hidden groups of Christians around the world. She travels widely and uses her elite education and sharp mind on behalf of the Christian cause. Meanwhile, she does something else no other Prodigal Daughter in the history of rapture fiction has done. She speaks a rhetoric of submission to her husband, asserting that she will “obey him, even when he is wrong” and requesting his leadership and headship in their marriage. Because the men often did not convert in previous rapture fiction, female characters like Chloe had no opportunity to see them as godly leaders and figures of unquestioned authority. In rearranging the gender dynamics of rapture fiction, by saving the Worldly Man, *Left Behind* makes a far greater case for male domination and female submission than its predecessors. *Left Behind* argues that whatever authority women assume, their true “heads” remain godly men.

In one scene, Chloe is giving birth to her son in the Tribulation Force bunker. The doctor who will deliver the baby secretly tells Rayford that the baby is in danger and his heart rate is declining. As Chloe’s labor begins, Dr. Charles tells her, “Your job is to be quiet. Don’t talk unless you have to.” The “humor” in the scene is that despite being told to be quiet, Chloe continues to talk and Dr. Charles repeatedly silences her. “Not another word,” he says. “Sorry Floyd,” she mumbles like a chastised child. The power of giving birth is transferred from Chloe to the doctor and her father who control information about the baby’s well-being and control Chloe’s behavior. She becomes the butt of a joke about her voice, scolded into silence, and rendered a passive observer of her own “labor.”

It is impossible to say what of the contradictory behavior of Chloe—her strength and authority on the one hand and her passivity and submission on the other—belongs to popular culture and what belongs to evangelicalism. Economic and social changes that have continued to bring women into the workplace and changed the way that women perceive their social roles have had as wide an effect on evangelicalism as they have had on the broader American culture. Neither Chloe’s willingness to speak her mind and assume positions of leadership, nor her words about submission, are strange to contemporary
evangelicalism. And while American society as a whole may be quieter than American evangelicalism about female submission, women's social equality is by no means a given. What is clear is that American evangelicalism is in a period of intense negotiation over the status and proper roles of women. Chloe’s contradictory behavior is emblematic of this.

THE RELEVANCE OF GENDER FOR READERS OF THE LEFT BEHIND SERIES

This chapter has dwelt on textual analysis and offered a reading of the Left Behind series in the context of the tradition of rapture fiction. But when discussing popular fiction, the text is not enough. What a literary scholar makes of the text and what readers glean from reading do not necessarily correspond. Readers of Left Behind usually have not read any other rapture fiction, and they have little interest in textual analysis. They read Left Behind generally for two intertwined purposes: to be entertained and to be strengthened spiritually. These are purposes they do not see as being contradictory to one another.

In 1998, just before the fifth book in the series attained the number-one position on the New York Times best-seller list, I began a qualitative research project that involved interviews with readers of the Left Behind series. As I conducted these interviews, I discovered that my ruminations about the gender dynamics of the series had very little relevance to readers. When I approached readers with questions about the female characters as females or the male characters as males, I received polite but puzzled responses. Readers were not, consciously at least, interested in the women in the series as women nor the men as men. They did not see Chloe as teaching them how to be good Christian women or Rayford as teaching them how to be Christian men. Instead they saw the characters as exemplars of the Christian faith. The characters taught them about how to persevere through hardship and how to live in a Christian community. Very few readers had any interest in Chloe as a character, but men and women alike identified with Rayford and Chloe’s husband, Buck. These responses from readers made me rethink the role that gender was playing and rethink the importance of gender to evangelicalism as a whole.

The primary lessons of Left Behind for many readers are twofold. The first lesson is the urgency of spreading their faith to others before the rapture takes place. The books powerfully reinforce the two-centuries-old central message of evangelicalism: evangelism. The second lesson readers often glean from Left Behind is a lesson about spiritual strength. They find models in the characters for their own spiritual battles. One reader put this explicitly when she expressed her affinity for Chloe’s husband, Buck: “I’m a survivor and he is a survivor.” Chloe was perhaps not a favorite among readers because her own spiritual strength often seemed compromised. Male and female readers alike did not find the ambivalence of Chloe’s character attractive. They described her as “bratty” and “selfish,” when they had anything to say about her at all. But the negotiated position of Rayford they routinely found more attractive, more interesting, and more expressive of their own spiritual struggles.

Paying close attention to the way that readers interpreted gender, and accounting for the difficulty that I had communicating with readers about the way that gender was portrayed, led me to believe that evangelical readers see no real difference between themselves and the general culture on questions of gender. While they perhaps appreciated the ordered universe modeled in Chloe’s rhetoric of submission to Buck or Left Behind’s overall assertion that authority is rightly concentrated in the hands of men, they find such rhetoric of little use or interest in their own lives. They read evangelical fiction in order to bolster their strength and courage in their spiritual lives, to confirm their worldviews, and to motivate themselves...
to be more assertive in their faith. Negotiating gender seems, at the moment, to be of little conscious value.

The difficulty with this interpretation of readers’ seeming disinterest in the subject of gender roles is that it does not tell the whole story. Popular culture engages us on many levels. There is, of course, the conscious level, and this is the level that the interviewing situation effectively gauges. But there are also levels of the social unconscious and personal unconscious to which I as a researcher have little access. Popular culture often has powerful influences that readers or viewers cannot put into words and do not speak about in interviews. It draws on social structures and perceptions that its consumers take for granted and therefore have no need to discuss. By limiting this discussion to what I learned in interviews with readers, I am effectively refusing to guess at what I cannot know: how the *Left Behind* series works in more subtle ways to influence the perception of gender roles. I refuse to do this, not because I do not believe such influence is present, but because I hesitate to speculate. I saw no evidence in the lives of the people I interviewed that Chloe’s rhetoric of submission had an explicit effect. They did not describe their own marriages in terms of submission and domination, and from all appearances, they did not live with that expectation. I did, however, note the profound effect that stories of spiritual strength had on the people I interviewed and also saw tangible evidence of those effects. I conclude, therefore, that that influence was the stronger of the two.

**EVANGELICALISM AND POPULAR CULTURE**

In understanding the relationship between evangelicalism and popular culture, particularly on the issue of gender, we have to contend with numerous complexities and contradictions. On the one hand, evangelicalism perceives itself as distinct and at odds with popular culture. Christian fiction is an alternative to popular fiction. Christian movies, music and television provide alternatives to mainstream media. They are not seen as working in conjunction with it. On the other hand, evangelicalism is increasingly indistinct from popular culture, fully engaged in its mechanisms, technologies, story lines and structure, often with a “God message” tacked on to signal its Christian content.

It may be best to view the religious belief that fuels the rapture and its stories as both distinct from and inseparable from popular culture, in constant negotiation and engagement. Evangelicalism has been particularly skilled at pitching its stories to make sense within popular culture, at evaluating mechanisms that have proved successful in non-religious forms, and at manipulating those forms to increase cultural strength. One of the main sites for this negotiation is gender, and writers of popular fiction mold their stories so that they ring true to readers in particular times and places.

Over time, what signals a Christian man and a Christian woman has changed to show less of an inclination to declare distance from popular culture and more inclined to claim its images and assumptions as part of evangelicalism’s interpretation. This positions evangelicalism well in popular culture, giving it both a position of strength and clarity and a position of flexibility, a “flexible absolutism” that is skilled at making strong and uncompromising statements, while quietly and constantly negotiating with the demands of contemporary culture. *Left Behind*, with its negotiated roles for both the Worldly Man and the Prodigal Daughter, performs this task beautifully and its authors have been richly rewarded.
1. At the American Academy of Religion in 2004, scholars began to speak of the “evangelical dominant” at various papers and panels, but this moniker still remains largely informal and has not yet been confirmed by specific scholarly study. One scholar who appears to be particularly forward thinking in this regard is Lynn Schofield Clark. See her From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).


4. Timothy LaHaye has been an important figure in evangelicalism since the publication of his manual on Christian marriage and sex that he wrote with his wife in 1976, The Act of Marriage: The Beauty of Sexual Love (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1995; 1976). He has written numerous books on prophecy, but Left Behind is his first work of fiction. He is credited with conceiving the idea for the novels and providing the biblical foundation. Jerry Jenkins is the lesser known of the two. He helped to write Billy Graham’s autobiography, Just as I Am, and has written several works of fiction. He is responsible for the development of plot and characters for the Left Behind series and did the actual writing.


7. Millennium refers to the reign of Christ on earth—a time of peace and prosperity. The “pre” refers to the idea that Christ will come before the millennium, that his victory over Satan will itself usher in the millennium. An alternative view of the time is called “postmillennialism,” the view that humans, aided by God, will build the millennium kingdom on earth.


10. Scanzoni and Setta, 243. Many scholars have teased out these surface contradictions to complicate our view of conservative Protestant women and how they make sense of the rhetoric of female submission. See, for example: Betty DeBerg, Ungodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1990); Brenda Brasher, Godly Women: Fundamentalism and Female Power...


16. Angley, 110–111; abused wife who had “suffered many cruel tortures from a sadistic husband who wanted to make her backslide,” 111; wayward husband commits suicide, 113–114.


18. Ibid., 8.

19. Ibid., 31.

20. Ibid., 218.


22. Ibid., 167.

23. Marsden, 82.


Jeffrey H. Mahan
CONCLUSION

Establishing a Dialogue about Religion and Popular Culture

In looking back on Religion and Popular Culture in America, it is clear that two sets of questions interest the contributors to this project. First, we are drawn to questions about how religion interacts with popular culture. We ask whether American popular culture has a religious face, and if so what it looks like, or wonder how religion has developed and adapted in the midst of a consumer culture. Second, we are interested in the form the conversation about these questions has taken. Who is thinking and writing about the relationship between religion and popular culture? What concerns, theories, and methodologies unite and divide the conversations about these relationships? What new things might we learn by paying attention to the questions others are raising about religion and popular culture and to the assumptions inherent in their approaches?

UNDERSTANDING POPULAR CULTURE

Traditionally, religious studies has tended to focus on the doctrine or practice of established religious groups and cultural elites. Yet in recent years, scholars of religion, like their counterparts in other fields of cultural study, have begun to focus more on the lives of everyday people. When scholars have turned their attention from the activities of religious leaders and institutions to the way ordinary people experience their religious lives, they discover a variety of relationships between religion and popular culture. In the opening essay of this volume, Bruce David Forbes lays out four distinct interactions between religion and popular culture which have interested scholars. As we have seen in the intervening essays, each of the four interactions reflects a distinctive concern about what studying religion and popular culture should tell us.

For some, popular culture is primarily a subset of art. It includes the forms of music, film, television, and literature that have found the widest audiences. Robert J. Thompson’s examination of network television’s Christmas specials, like Mark D. Hulsether’s discussion of Madonna’s music videos and Robert Jewett’s analysis of the popular western movie Pale Rider, are examples of this approach. Here, “the popular” is identified with material that reaches a broad and general audience. Such readings help us to think about patterns that we might describe as normatively American. The danger of such approaches, cut off from other kinds of readings, is that they can suggest too homogenized a culture. Jane Naomi Iwamura’s reflection on the image of the Oriental monk in American film and television suggests the importance of hearing minority readings of dominant culture materials, while William D. Romanowski’s
Michael Jindra’s analysis of Star Trek fandom, and much of Joseph L. Price’s and David Chidester’s discussions of sports rituals, shift our attention from the “official” performance of the work of art to the performance activity of the audience. For such critics, the focus is not so much on the structures and themes of the art work, or on the game on the field, but on the use that audience members make of these things. Drawing on a term from religious studies, the Super Bowl game, the songs of a pop star, or the episodes of Star Trek might be said to provide a popular culture canon of legitimated “texts,” in which case the fans, as participant/consumers, are the “readers” of these “texts.” But, at least in the examples discussed in these essays, the fans are quite active readers and the popular culture event, properly understood, includes both the text and the activity of the readers. In other words, these essays counter the criticism that popular culture reduces its audience to passive viewers, by directing our attention away from the event itself towards other people’s engagement with that event. In fact, as is most explicit in Jindra’s discussion of Star Trek, the participant/consumers may even create non-canonical texts of their own. They write themselves into the popular culture event through their activity, which includes wearing costumes, belonging to fan clubs, attending conventions, memorizing lore, and even creating and enacting their own tales.

An adequate discussion of popular culture, and of its relationship to the religious, must therefore not be limited to a consideration of aesthetic texts as traditionally understood. Stewart M. Hoover’s discussion of the practice of Protestant worship, along with David Chidester’s reflections on Coca-Cola and baseball and Michelle M. Lelwica’s feminist critique of dieting, suggest that the concept of popular culture embraces much more than the art world. Ritual activities of everyday people and mass-produced cultural objects are a significant part of popular culture.

Setting limits remains difficult. “Popular culture” refers to a range of cultural material and activity which is understood, as Forbes discusses in the opening essay, at least in part by its distinction from high or elite culture on one hand and folk culture on the other. Those who find the concept of popular culture useful do so for the way that it combines an interest in aesthetics and cultural form with an interest in social meaning and influence and a concern for non-elite publics.

### UNDERSTANDING RELIGION

Intuitively, most Americans are confident that they know what is meant by “religion.” Most of us think of organized devotional practice focused on a concept of God or gods. Several of our authors reflect on these traditional expressions of religion: Hoover’s discussion of the famous megachurch at Willow Creek and Pinn’s critique of the black church are the most obvious reflections on the cultural expressions of traditional religious groups. Meanwhile, Knight suggests that novels about the divine feminine help women to re-image God. Romanowski is concerned with helping the evangelical community make sense of the way its faith and secular popular culture come together in the world of contemporary Christian music.

Some essays in this collection push us to expand our definition of religion still further, beyond the bounds of denomination or theological orientation, the examination of religious or theological images and concepts in literature, film, and television (Iwamura, Jewett, and Thompson) remind us that religion may be thought of as a particular consciousness which we bring with us to, or find expressed in, art. The
essays in the section on popular culture as religion (Chidester, Jindra, Lelwica, and Price) see religion primarily as ritualized activity expressive of ultimate values. In contrast, Chidester’s discussion of Coca-Cola as fetish sees religion as embodied in symbolic objects. A full understanding of religion must include religion as belief, as activity, as symbol or object, and as organization.

FOUR DIVERSE AUDIENCES

Within each of the four interactions between religion and popular culture we find writers not only addressing a range of different issues, but also writing for diverse audiences. Four audiences are implied in the essays, two of them primarily academic and two broader, each interested in a somewhat different set of questions. The first academic audience is interested primarily in the description and analysis of specific cultural phenomena which reveal particular relationships between religion and popular culture. A second academic audience is more concerned with reflection on the methodologies which help us see the broader relationships between religion and popular culture. A third audience is made up of religious women and men who want to clarify the practice of the religious life. A fourth audience is made up of thinking members of the culture at large, religious and secular, who are engaged in a conversation about social or cultural reform.2

Audience One: Seeks Description and Analysis

All of the authors in this volume are academics who write for students and scholars interested in thinking analytically about American culture and religion. This is perhaps most evident in the descriptions of the phenomena of fandom among sports and Star Trek enthusiasts, or in the discussion of television Christmas specials. The authors are seeking not to reform these cultural practices, nor to instruct the participants or audiences in the ways of this practice, but to help us make sense of these phenomena. The audience for this sort of study is interested in coming to a richer sense of what constitutes religion and how it is practiced in American culture. Simply put, their goal is to understand “what is going on.” Contrast this with the authors in the dialogue section, who write for an audience interested in clarifying and reforming religious and social practice.

Audience Two: Seeks Methodological Reflection

A second group, also addressing an academic audience, is primarily interested in helping develop the theoretical underpinnings of this emerging field of study. For Chidester, Hoover, and Hulsether, the specific expressions of religion or popular culture—the fetishistic function of Coca-Cola, the practices of a particular television preacher, the specifics of worship at Willow Creek Church, or the form and content of a specific music video—are not so important in and of themselves. Rather, they provide the critic with illustration of a broader argument which is really about the nature of religion and popular culture and the methodology of those who study them. These theoreticians and their readers are ultimately interested in clarifying our definitions and sharpening our analytical tools. For them, the compelling questions are about the theories of religion, culture, narrative, and art on which such analysis rests. This work teaches us how to think critically, and its intended audience is colleagues and students who want to deepen their
own analytical work.

Audience Three: Seeks to Clarify the Religious Life

Still other writers are particularly concerned with helping religious people and communities think about their practice of religion in a mass-media culture. Implicit in Romanowski’s essay is his desire to help evangelicals interact more freely with popular culture while remaining clear about their distinctive religious identity. Hulsether gives particular attention to our second audience, academics interested in theory, but his scholarly interest in reading Madonna grew out of efforts to interpret popular music with and to church youth groups. While Jewett is broadly concerned with American cultural values, he is particularly concerned with helping mainstream Christians access the Bible in ways which are culturally rich and formative. And, though Pinn’s essay is critical of traditional black church theology, it implicitly suggests a reformist concern for the church much like Jewett’s and Romanowski’s. The implied audience for these essays are thinking practitioners of religion who desire to more clearly understand the interactions between faith and culture, in order to enable lives of religious integrity.

Audience Four: Seeks Social or Cultural Reform

Most explicitly in the Dialogue category, several essays address society at large and hope to encourage social change, or at least social awareness. Jewett’s essay, with its attention to social practice around vengeance and justice, clearly bridges this and the previous category, and Pinn’s use of rap and the blues to critique the black church invites action as well as awareness. However, this commitment to moral suasion is evident in some of the essays in other sections as well. When Lelwica looks at eating disorders among women, or Iwamura at the portrayal of Oriental religion in the popular arts, they are doing more than describing interesting social patterns. They hope to establish a transformational conversation that will lead readers to make different choices. These writers share with the third group a desire to impact the behavior of their readers, but whereas scholars in the third group are primarily interested in addressing religious subcultures within the broader society, these scholars hope to enter into a broader cultural conversation. They bring a religious perspective into dialogue with the entire community about American cultural life.

TWO CAMPS OF SCHOLARS

In part, this diversity of audience, and the diversity of intention it points to, grows out of a fundamental division among students of popular culture in general. What is the purpose of studying popular culture and what methodologies best help us understand it?

On one side is the Popular Culture Association and its companion organization the American Culture Association (PCA/ACA), where humanities-based approaches to the study of culture predominate. The PCA/ACA, like the popular culture program at Bowling Green State University which has been important in the development of these associations, were formed at a time when the very idea of studying popular art and literature was suspect within academia. Those who saw the university’s task as initiating students
into elite culture attacked both the material of popular culture and the interest of scholars who studied it. Popular culture was dismissed as simple, boringly repetitive, and at odds with the best values of society. Needing to defend both the seriousness of their work and the material they studied, PCA/ACA scholars tended to focus on aesthetic patterns within the work and social practices in the audience. They gave little attention to the market forces which shaped and limited what was available to the audience, and to the question of how the values of those who controlled the means of cultural production shaped popular materials. They argued that studying popular culture brings to the surface the aesthetics, cultural values, and social and personal concerns of everyday people in society. As such, popular culture is worthy of respectful attention by scholars. These concerns and interests have lead the PCA/ACA scholars to focus on the relationship between popular material and their audience, and to draw conclusions about the audience’s values and concerns.

On the other side are cultural studies scholars, whose interests were shaped by theoretical developments in England that brought together social theory, Marxist analysis of race, gender, and class, and a focus on material and cultural practice. They gave particular attention to the means of production of popular culture. Whereas PCA/ACA scholars usually focus on the values of the popular audience, cultural studies critiques are likely to focus on the way that attitudes, values, and prejudices of the dominant society are expressed in popular culture, and on the ways in which it functions as a form of social control and release.

Those primarily rooted in cultural studies are inclined to see their PCA/ACA colleagues as too focused on narrative and as not sufficiently rooted in postmodern and deconstructionist perspectives. At the same time, cultural studies critics, with their roots in social theory and Marxist analysis, are often criticized by PCA/ACA-oriented colleagues as too ideological, too rooted in obscure theories and jargon, and unable to adequately understand the aesthetic and critical traditions which shaped the popular arts.

To understand how Americans experience the religious, we must continue to think about the religious content of mass media tales and rituals, and about the powerful institutions which produce and distribute popular culture. We must also reflect on the complex social process through which religious institutions both critique the media and remake themselves to respond to a media culture. It should be clear that no single approach to the study of religion and popular culture provides a complete analysis of their complex relationships. A diversity of approaches is likely to give us the fullest understanding of those relationships between religion and popular culture, and, as a result, our understanding of how religion and popular culture interact has not been well served by the fundamental distrust between PCA/ACA and cultural studies scholars. To expand our understanding of the varied and complex ways religion and popular culture interact, we must overcome scholarly distrust and learn from each other in order to see more fully how Americans and American culture give expression to the religious impulse.

NOTES


2. Note that these audiences do not align with the four relationships between religion and popular culture. We find authors speaking to different audiences in each of the categories.
FOR SMALL-GROUP CONSIDERATION OR PERSONAL REFLECTION

Introduction: Finding Religion in Unexpected Places

Bruce David Forbes

1. What could a person possibly learn by analyzing popular culture?
2. How does studying popular culture differ from studying folk culture or high (elite) culture?
3. This chapter and this book describe four different relationships between religion and popular culture. Do these four relationships make sense? Would you suggest any additional categories?
4. Are “religion” and “popular culture” distinct, separate entities that relate to one another, similar to two human beings who interact with one another? Or do the concepts of “religion” and “popular culture” express categories whose boundaries are intermixed, overlapping, or even indistinguishable? Explain. Does the categorization of four relationships between religion and popular culture imply the first assumption, or the second, or neither?

Chapter 1: The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture

Jane Naomi Iwamura

1. What are some other examples of the Oriental Monk in recent American popular culture?
2. Would you say that Americans are fascinated with Oriental monks, and eastern religion and culture in general? If so, why?
3. Iwamura argues that when an Oriental monk appears in American movies or on television, we really learn more about western perceptions and assumptions than we learn about the reality of Oriental monks. Do you think that is true? If so, what do we learn about western perceptions and assumptions about eastern religions?
4. What are the problems and advantages of looking at religion and religious practices through the eyes of outside observers, or through inside practitioners?
Chapter 2: Consecrating Consumer Culture: Christmas Television Specials

Robert J. Thompson

1. Thompson writes, “Aside from hymn lyrics, practically none of the network Christmas programming is overtly Christian.” What would be examples of other possible overt Christian references, and what would be examples of Christmas program content that is not overtly Christian? Do you agree with Thompson’s assertion?

2. If it is true that most Christmas television specials are not overtly Christian, what are the basic themes of Christmas specials? Are some themes explicit, while other themes appeal to people on a less conscious level?

3. Since this chapter was written in the late 1990s, do you think the presence of religion on commercial television (in characters, plots, and other references) has increased, decreased, or remained the same? Why?

Chapter 3: Re-Mythologizing the Divine Feminine in *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Secret Life of Bees*

Jennie S. Knight

1. Knight claims that interest in the divine feminine is one of the reasons that *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Secret Life of Bees* have become so popular. Do you agree? What are other possible reasons for the popularity of these novels?

2. What does Knight mean by “the divine feminine”? What are some other expressions of the divine feminine in American culture?

3. How is it different to consider religious beliefs or ideas through fiction, in contrast to reading more abstract, academic theoretical discussions? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?

Chapter 4: Like a Sermon: Popular Religion in Madonna Videos

Mark D. Hulsether

1. This chapter repeatedly refers to “liberation theologies.” What are they, and what are their principal emphases?

2. Madonna has exhibited several distinct phases in her career. In her earlier years, some people viewed
her music and videos as sacrilegious, while others saw them as profoundly religious and liberating. How do you account for this difference of opinion?

3. Can you identify other examples of religious images or ideas in more recent music videos, by Madonna or others? What viewpoints about religion and society do they express?

4. Do you think that popular music and music videos impact the beliefs and actions of the audience? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?

Chapter 5: Evangelicals and Popular Music: The Contemporary Christian Music Industry

William D. Romanowski

1. Contemporary Christian music, especially associated with evangelical Christianity, first arose to provide an alternative to other popular music, but it later crossed over into more mainstream markets. Should evangelical Christians see this crossing over as a positive or a troubling development? Why?

2. What makes a song “religious,” or in the case of this chapter, Christian? Is it the lyrics? The musical style? The faith and lifestyle of the writer or performer? (Can a non-Christian write Christian music?) The setting where it is performed (such as in church)?

3. Those who perform contemporary Christian music typically refer to their work as a ministry, suggesting that it serves to convert people to Christ. Others argue that it really serves to confirm identity and build community for those who already identify themselves as Christian. Which do you find the more convincing argument, and why?

Chapter 6: The Internet and Christian and Muslim Communities

Greg Peterson

1. Does the internet encourage religious “questers,” those who are not content with commonly accepted religious views? If so, how would this tendency of the internet impact traditional religions?

2. Peterson claims that while the internet promotes community, the internet also changes community. Do you think he is correct? How does the internet create community for Christians, and how does it change their community? Answer the same question in the case of Muslims. (By the way, just what does “community” mean?)

3. Does the availability of the internet help amplify the voices of people who are otherwise marginalized?
Contemporary Marketplace

Stewart M. Hoover

1. In part, Hoover’s chapter discusses a “marketplace approach to religion,” which has a long history but which has been accentuated in recent years. What is a “marketplace approach to religion”? What are its practical consequences? What is your personal evaluation of those consequences?
2. Another concept in this chapter is about being in a period of “transitional religion.” What form of religion is this transition from, and what form of religion is it moving toward?
3. Hoover argues that modern American religion exists within a commodity culture. If religion consciously adapts in order to relate to that commodity culture, does that make the religion less authentic, less serious, less genuine?

Chapter 8: It’s about Faith in Our Future:
Star Trek Fandom as Cultural Religion

Michael Jindra

1. Each chapter in this section (Popular Culture as Religion) compares an aspect of popular culture (Star Trek fandom, or weight loss programs, or sports, etc.) to religion. In each case, how do they define religion, in order to make the comparison?
2. Is Jindra saying that Star Trek fandom is a religion, or that it is like a religion? What would be the difference? (A similar question can be asked about each chapter in this section.)
3. If Star Trek fandom shapes the values and actions of participants, what are some examples of those values and actions?
4. The conclusion to Jindra’s chapter claims that many people perceive organized religion as “backward looking rather than forward looking.” He says that popular culture, including Star Trek, “attempts to fill the religious void.” Do you agree with this analysis? Why or why not?

Chapter 9: Losing Their Way to Salvation:
Women, Weight Loss, and the Salvation Myth of Culture Lite

Michelle M. Lelwica

1. Some theorists make a distinction between sacred and secular rituals, but Lelwica is not sure that the distinction is as clear as it seems. Why? Do you agree?
2. In addition to simply losing weight, what deeper needs or yearnings does this "Culture Lite" seek to fulfill for people? Do traditional religions seek to fill similar needs and yearnings?
3. Is Lelwica claiming that the quasi-religious culture of diet and fitness is a false religion, making claims and promises that are deceptive? What is your view?
4. Does this discussion have differing relevance for women than for men? Why or why not? Is the balance changing?

Chapter 10: An American Apotheosis:
Sports as Popular Religion

Joseph L. Price

1. For this chapter, perhaps even more than the other chapters in this section, it would be helpful to review the three kinds of definitions of religion summarized in the Introduction (see p. 14). How does Price’s argument fit with these three kinds of definition of religion?
2. In discussing whether sports should be considered a religion, Price acknowledges that some persons might make a distinction between the athletes themselves and sports fans. Is it easier to make the case that sports is a religion more for one group than for the other? Or is it the same for both (similar to priests and laypersons in a traditional religion)?
3. What difference does it make if we call sports a religion, or not?

Chapter 11: The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock ‘n’ Roll

David Chidester

1. Chidester suggests several definitions or models of religion, as “church,” “fetish,” and “potlatch.” What does each definition or model emphasize about religion? Do the different models help you think about what religion is?
2. Chidester suggests that our understanding of what religion is should not be left just to the academics. He says that we also should pay attention to the answers advanced by “participants in American popular culture.” Why?
3. Does calling baseball a “church” cause you to see baseball in a different way or in a new light? Explain.

Chapter 12: The Disguise of
Vengeance in *Pale Rider*

Robert Jewett

1. Jewett sees certain messages about vengeance in the movie *Pale Rider*. Do you agree, seeing the same messages? If so, are there similar messages elsewhere in American popular culture that constitute a wider pattern?

2. Jewett compares themes about vengeance that he detects in *Pale Rider* with understandings he derives from the biblical writings of Paul. In this comparison, what role does popular culture play for Jewett? Is it a source of insight? Is it a viable alternative view? Is it a negative example, to be corrected by Paul’s view?

3. American Westerns used to be very popular on television and in movies, but they are quite rare now. Why?

Chapter 13: Rap Music and Its Message: On Interpreting the Contact between Religion and Popular Culture

Anthony Pinn

1. Religious groups often critique popular culture. This chapter moves in the other direction; it is about how an aspect of popular culture (rap music) critiques traditional religion. Can you think of other examples in popular culture that offer critiques of traditional religion in some way?

2. Pinn asserts that one message of rap music is that the Black Church fails to deal adequately with the history of suffering by African Americans, avoiding the hard realities of life. What evidence would you give to support this critique or to respond to it?

3. One overarching theme in this volume is that popular culture both reflects us and shapes us. Is that true of rap music as well? How?

Chapter 14: The Gender Dynamics of the *Left Behind* Series

Amy Johnson Frykholm

1. The *Left Behind* novels are an expression of apocalypticism, the belief that God will bring a climactic end to human history and save the chosen ones. There has been an ebb and flow of popular interest in apocalypticism in Christian history. Why do you think there seems to be great interest in these ideas in the United States today?
2. Can a person be influenced by gender roles in popular culture (novels, movies, television programs, etc.), even if one does not consciously notice or analyze the roles played by women and men?

3. Feminists have been critical of the subordinate role of women advocated by many evangelical Christians. Frykholm’s discussion in this chapter suggests that viewpoints about gender roles have now shifted, or at least become much more complicated, among many evangelical Christians. Do you agree? Do feminists need to adjust their critique?
Contributors

David Chidester is Professor of Comparative Religion, Head of the Department of Religious Studies, and Director of the Institute for Comparative Religion in Southern Africa at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. His books on American religion include Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture (University of California Press, 2005), Salvation and Suicide: Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple and Jonestown (Indiana University Press, 1988; revised edition 2003); American Sacred Space, edited with Edward T. Linenthal (Indiana University Press, 1995), and Patterns of Power: Religion and Politics in American Culture (Prentice Hall, 1988).

Bruce David Forbes is Professor of Religious Studies at Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa. With a formal educational background and publications in American religious history, he also has published several articles on popular culture and religion and is a co-editor of Rapture, Revelation, and the End Times: Exploring the Left Behind Series (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). He has served on the national board of the American Academy of Religion and was founding co-chair of the AAR Religion and Popular Culture Group.

Amy Johnson Frykholm is the author of Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America (Oxford University Press, 2004). She has a Ph.D. from the Literature Program at Duke University and currently lives, writes, and teaches in Leadville, Colorado.

Stewart M. Hoover is Professor of Media Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder. A scholar of media and culture, he has focused on questions of religion in the media age. His publications include Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media, with Lynn Schofield Clark (Columbia, 2002), Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse (Sage, 1998), and Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture, edited with Knut Lundby (Sage, 1997).

Mark D. Hulsether is Associate Professor of Religious Studies and American Studies at the University of Tennessee. His research and teaching focuses on the interplay of religion, culture, and politics in recent U.S. history. He is the author of Building a Protestant Left: Christianity and Crisis Magazine, 1941–1993 (University of Tennessee Press, 1999) and numerous articles on the Protestant left, Protestant right, U.S. popular religion, and methodological issues in the study of religious culture.
Jane Naomi Iwamura is Assistant Professor of Religion and American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California. Her publications include the co-edited volume, *Revealing the Sacred in Asia and Pacific America* (Routledge, 2003). She is currently working on the monograph, *The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture: Race, Religion, and Representation in the Age of Virtual Orientalism*.


Michael Jindra is Associate Professor of Sociology and Global Studies at Spring Arbor University in Michigan. He was trained as a cultural anthropologist and has conducted fieldwork on “death celebrations” in Cameroon. He also has published in the areas of social theory and cultural change, including “Natural/Supernatural Conceptions in Western Cultural Contexts,” *Anthropological Forum* 13:2 (November 2003), and coauthored “The Audience Responds to The Passion” in *Re-Viewing the Passion: Mel Gibson’s Film and Its Critics*, S. Brent Plate, ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

Jennie S. Knight is Visiting Assistant Professor of Religious Education at Candler School of Theology, Emory University. She received her Ph.D. in Religion with a certificate in Women’s Studies from Emory University in 2005. From 2003 to 2004 she was the Interim Director of the Women in Theology and Ministry Program at Candler.

Michelle M. Lelwica is Assistant Professor of Religion and co-director of Women’s Studies at Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota. She currently is working on *The Religion of Thinness* (Gurze Press, forthcoming), a more popular version of her first book, *Starving for Salvation: The Spiritual Dimensions of Eating Problems among American Girls and Women* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

Jeffrey H. Mahan is Academic Vice President and Dean of the Faculty at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado. His publications include *Shared Wisdom* (Abingdon Press, 1993); *A Long Way from Solving That One: Psycho/Social and Ethical Implications of Ross Macdonald’s Lew Archer Tales* (University Press of America, 1990); *American Television Genres* (Nelson Hall, 1985); and articles in scholarly and popular journals. He has served on ecumenical juries at the Montreal, Cannes, and Berlin International Film Festivals, and was founding cochair of the Religion and Popular Culture Group of the American Academy of Religion.

Greg Peterson is Associate Professor of Religion and Philosophy at South Dakota State University. He has conducted research and published extensively on religion and science, as well as issues of religion and popular culture. His publications include *Minding God: Theology and the Cognitive Sciences* (Augsburg Fortress, 2002), numerous articles in the journal *Zygon*, and several book and encyclopedia article contributions.

Anthony B. Pinn is Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities and Professor of Religious Studies at Rice University. He is also the Executive Director of the Society for the Study of Black Religion. Pinn is the author/editor of fourteen books, including *African American Humanist Principles: Living and Thinking Like the*
Joseph L. Price is Professor and Chair of Religious Studies at Whittier College in Whittier, California. His long-standing interest in sports and religion is reflected in Safe at Home: Baseball and Religion in America (Mercer University Press, 2005) and his edited volume From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion (Mercer University Press, 2001). He also serves as general editor for the Mercer Series on “Sports and Religion.”

William D. Romanowski is Professor of Communication Arts and Sciences at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. His publications include Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture (Brazos, 2001); and Pop Culture Wars: Religion and the Role of Entertainment in American Life (InterVarsity, 1996). He is also a contributing author of Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture and the Electronic Media (Eerdmans, 1991); and coauthor of Risky Business: Rock in Film (Transaction, 1991).

Robert J. Thompson is Trustee Professor of Media and Popular Culture at Syracuse University, where he also directs the Center for the Study of Popular Television. He has written or edited Television in the Antenna Age: A Concise History (Blackwell, 2004); Television’s Second Golden Age (Continuum, 1996); Prime Time, Prime Movers (Little, Brown, 1992); Adventures on Prime Time (Praeger, 1990); and Television Studies (Praeger, 1989).
The following books have been selected from a much larger potential list of works. They are suggested as a helpful beginning to introduce interested persons to the field of religion and popular culture. This bibliography includes general works on the topic, as well as examples of literature pertaining to specific features of popular culture: film, television, popular literature, holidays, and so on. This list does not include basic works in related fields, such as cultural studies, popular culture, film studies, and others, unless they pertain directly to religion as well.


This wide-ranging discussion of religion and popular culture breaks ground in sometimes moving beyond American borders, and also in considering the role of invention, charlatans, and simulations in creating religious experiences.


Study of popular culture should focus not only upon examples of popular culture (movies, novels, etc.) and their creators but also on the audience, trying to understand how popular culture is received and understood. This volume, an ethnographic work based upon more than 250 interviews with teenagers and their families, is a good example of how that might be done.


Essays by a Baptist minister, professor, and cultural critic about religious meanings and African American culture.


Six essays about religious representations in, and the religious significance of, commercial television, including prime-time entertainment programs, advertising, and news.

A mainstream Protestant theological examination of a wide range of issues pertaining to television, including implicit values in secular television programs, controversies about media violence, concentrations of power in the media, and television evangelism.


Frykholm has studied the genre of apocalyptic fiction in American culture, including the *Left Behind* series and many other novels. Her work draws on interviews with readers of the novels, in an effort to analyze the books’ appeal.


An examination of the daily choices that human beings make, related to topics such as success, work, food, sports, entertainment, drink and sobriety, sex, and exercise, arguing that they constitute a domestic religion which also influences the shape of traditional religions.


A classic book by an art historian, which discusses television’s role as a “substitute for sacraments,” offering icons and rituals to its viewers.


A later addition to the discussion started by The TV Ritual, this book places television in the context of art history and the role images have played in “making meaning.”


A collection of essays about a great range of popular culture, from comic strips to Clint Eastwood to Madonna, discussed in light of what the calls the “Catholic theological imagination.”


Using mostly a literary approach, this volume examines the intersections between sports and religion and claims that both have been “warped” by the relationship.


This treatment of contemporary religious broadcasting includes interviews with representative television viewers as well as historical research and case studies.


An argument that the American genre of horror fiction is historically related to the Puritan use of terror for conversion.


With Bernard Brandon Scott’s *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories* (below), an example of a Christian Biblical scholar reflecting upon the themes of American popular films.
This is a republication of The American Monomyth, discussed in the introduction to our volume (see p. 11). However, approximately half the book has been rewritten, with new topics and extensive revisions, and a new title. Jewett and Lawrence argue that most American popular culture follows a singular mythic pattern, basically a redemption drama.


This special issue has the theme of “Religion and American Popular Culture.” While all other entries in this bibliography are books, this special issue deserves inclusion, since the American Academy of Religion is the largest academic association of religion scholars in the United States.


A discussion of the appeal of science fiction and the popular mythology it provides, focusing upon apocalyptic themes.


Although the study of “religion in popular culture” is not identical to the study of “popular religion,” they overlap. This book, along with the volume by Peter W. Williams below, provides a helpful introduction to the study of popular religion.


A collection of essays representing “theological, mythological, and ideological criticism” of popular movies, as a means to learn about American religion.


A discussion of religious material objects (such as the Bible in the Victorian home, or Lourdes water, or Mormon garments) aimed at helping readers understand the religious experiences and perspectives of average American Christians in the last 150 years.


A film critic’s attack on Hollywood as a “poison factory,” arguing that it is antireligious, antifamily, anti-American, violent, and offensive. Medved’s criticisms have served as a catalyst for responses of all kinds.


A cultural studies approach to issues such as religion, gender, race, class, and sexuality, noting movies that challenge existing norms and others that do not.


An historical survey of religion in American commercial culture, showing how religious leaders have
used commercial practices to promote religion, and how business leaders have used religion for commercial purposes.


An evangelical Christian assessment and critique of the importance of popular culture.


A classic early work on religion and popular culture that argues for the existence of an “American cultural religion,” and claims that popular culture serves as the “worship service” confirming the beliefs of that religion. Nelson includes chapters on film, country music, popular magazines, television, and detective fiction.


Pinn, a religious studies professor, explores religious dimensions of rap, related not only to Christianity, but also to Islam, Rastafarianism, and Humanism.


Pinsky is a religion journalist who discusses the presence of religious themes in this popular animated television show. Because of the success of this book and Robert Short’s earlier *The Gospel According to Peanuts*, Westminster John Knox has developed a series of books with similar titles (“The Gospel According to . . .”) about Disney, Harry Potter, and more.


A critique of the impact of television, claiming that the nature of the medium itself is oriented toward entertainment and undermines coherent, serious, rational discourse (chapter 8 applies this thesis to religion on television).


Three essays by Prebish arguing that sport has become an American religion, plus five previously published essays by other scholars that expand upon his thesis.


A theoretical discussion of popular culture and mass communications, arguing that “mass-mediated
culture primarily serves the interests of the relatively small political-economic power elite.” Connections are made with religion in a chapter on Billy Graham, and in discussions of the Disney universe as morality play and the Super Bowl as mythic spectacle. A more recent text by the same author on many of the same themes, but with less attention to religion, is Exploring Media Culture: A Guide (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1996).


An evangelical Christian scholar, Romanowski wants to guide Christians in interpreting and evaluating popular culture, charting a middle course between blind acceptance and wholesale condemnation. This continues a discussion from his earlier book, Pop Culture Wars (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity Press, 1996).


An argument that country music “speaks” the life of working people, whereas mainline Christianity has lost touch with that social class.


A cultural history of the commercialization of American holidays (Valentine’s Day, Christmas, Easter, and Mother’s Day), not condemning the results of commercialization as spiritually empty but instead describing a blend of religious and secular forms.


Argues that television evangelists represent wider cultural tendencies of commodification and the focus on material success, and that these are issues for the culture at large, not televangelism alone.


An evangelical Christian critique of television by a communications professor who also critiques the “typical” Christian responses.


A collaborative effort by Calvin College faculty, examining music, videos, and other elements of youth culture from a variety of perspectives, without predictable adult critiques.


A Christian Biblical scholar’s discussion of more than fifty recent American movies, considering mythic dimension of both the films and Christian scriptures to encourage conversations and mutual criticism.


A survey of the mysteries available in English that feature clerics (rabbis, priests, nuns, ministers, and missionaries) as crime solvers.

The associate editor of New York Press argues that “Elvisism” is a religion, with pilgrimages, icons, miracles, canon, and priesthood.


Audience-centered essays, using social science research methods, unlike most studies of popular culture, which focus more on examples of popular culture and their content than on the audiences that receive them.


A book significantly influenced by the sociological theories of Raymond Williams, and intended to help religious people and communities acquire the basic skills and tools for analyzing and critiquing popular culture.


Like the Lippy volume above, a study of popular religion, which relates closely to the study of religion and popular culture.
Index

ABC News, 124
Abdul-Jabbar, Kareem, 38n4
ACA. See American Culture Association
“Ache’n for Acres” (Arrested Development), 263
Act of Marriage, The (LaHaye), 285n4
AD. See Arrested Development
Adams, Dale, 168
Advertisements, 6, 25, 91n7, 94n31, 182–83, 186–89; Christmas, 52–53; religion and, 221; time spent-watching, 180. See also Commercials
African Americans. See Blacks
Age to Age (Grant), 115
Albanese, Catherine, 14, 197
Alice (movie), 33, 34
Allen, Woody, 33
All in the Family (television series), 44
Amahl and the Night Visitors (television special), 45
Amazing Grace (television series), 45
American Academy of Religion, 7
American Culture Association (ACA), 3, 7, 293, 294
American Family Association, 94n31
American Monomyth, The (Jewett and Lawrence), 11, 12
American Studies Association (ASA), 7
A&M Records, 115, 116
Amusing Ourselves to Death (Postman), 12
Angley, Ernest, 275–78
Annaud, Jean Jacques, 35
Apple Computer, 25, 129, 136
Arete (journal), 210n10
Arrested Development (AD), 263–64; religiosity and, 264, 265
Artist formerly known as Prince, 72
Arts, popular culture and, 289
ASA. See American Studies Association
Asians, negative stereotypes of, 26–27
Athletes: spiritual experience of, 203–5. See also Sports
Atlantic Monthly, 147
Avia shoes, 188, 189

“Baby Baby” (Grant), 116
Bacon, Roger, 248
“Bad Niggers,” 257
Bally’s fitness centers, 186
Bambaataa, Afrika, 257, 258
Bann, Hasan al, 133
Baseball, 199, 288; cult of, 229; devotion to, 206; myth and, 206; religion and, 213–18, 227, 229, 230. See also Church of Baseball; Sports
“Baseball Magic,” 217, 218
Basketball, 207
Bataille, Georges, 226, 227
Batchelor, Steven, 39n23
Batson, C.D., 127
Behind the Eyes (Grant), 118
Being and Nothingness (Sartre), 203
Bell, Catherine, 175, 176, 190n4, 5
Bellah, Robert, 143, 144
Benveniste, Emile, 217
Bernstein, Richard, 42n25
Berry, Richard, 223
Bertolucci, Bernardo, 35
Bible, 63, 125, 127, 270–72, 275
Big Bank Hank, 259

*Birth of a Nation, The* (movie), 38n3
Bissinger, H. G., 207

“Black Boys on Mopeds” (O’Connor), 78, 79
Black church, 264; blues and, 254, 255; hard issues and, 265; theology of, 292
Black gospel, 108; overlooking, 109. See also Gospel industry

*Black Madonna*, 57, 65, 67, 69–72, 73n2
Blacks: marginalization of, 5; stereotypes of, 67–70, 82; on television, 5. See also Race; Racism
Blake, Robert, 45
Blevins, J. P., 207
Bloggers, 124, 131–32, 136–37
Blues, 253, 289, 293; attractiveness of, 256; Black life and, 254; Christian sex codes and, 266n5; nitty gritty hermeneutics and, 254–56; rap and, 236, 267n10; religion and, 254–56; spirituals and, 254, 256, 267n10; suffering/evil and, 236

Bly, Robert, 146
Bodies: evaluation of, 184; female, desirable, 177, 187; reducing, 186; ritualized, 176, 190n5; secularization of, 177; slenderizing, 184–85; socially informed, 190n5
Bordo, Susan R., 87, 97n45; on Madonna video, 88, 96n44; on weight-loss practices, 185
Boston Tea Party, 238
Boswell, Thomas, 215–16
Bourdieu, Pierre, 190n5

*Brady Bunch, The* (television series), 124
Braswell, Michael, 197
Break dancing, 257, 259, 267n12

*Bricoleurs, Star Trek*, 169
Bridge figure, 32

“Bring the Noise” (Public Enemy), 262–63

*Broken Blossoms* (movie), 28–30, 32; metaphor of, 28n3; reading, 29
Brown, Dan, 56–57, 63
Brown, Foxy, 260
Brown, John, 238
Browne, Ray, 3, 4
Buddhism, 26, 124; spiritual meaning from, 35; Tibetan, 127–28

*Bull Durham* (movie), 230n8; devotion in, 206, 216
Bunt, Gary, 134
Burke, Thomas, 28
Burns, Ken, 213; on baseball/religion, 215, 218
Burrows, Battlin’, 28, 29, 32
Bush, George, 82
Butts, Calvin, 252

Cady, Edwin, 197
Caine, Kwai Chang, 26, 31, 33, 34, 40n14
“Call for Reformation in the Contemporary Christian Music Industry, A” (Camp), 113
Calvin, John, 150–51
Camp, Steve, 113
Campbell, Joseph, 11
Candler, Asa, 219
Captain America, 240
Carol Burnett Show, The (television series), 46
Carpenter, Edmund, 102
Carradine, David, 40n14
Cash, Johnny, 46, 49
Catholicism, 125, 272; divine feminine in, 63
CCM. See Contemporary Christian music
CCM Magazine, 115, 116
Chamberlain, Richard, 46–47
Chandler, Joan, 197
Chapman, Stephen, 241
Charismatics, 273, 279
Charlie Brown Christmas, A (television special), 48
“Cherish” (Madonna), 89
Chicago Hope (television series), 54
Chidester, David, 158, 290–92; sports rituals and, 289
“Chink and the Girl, The” (Burke), 28
Chopra, Deepak, 26, 146
Chosen, The (movie), 10
Christ and Culture (Niebuhr), 19n24
Christian Bookseller’s Association, 113
Christian Broadcasting Network, 111
Christianity, 58; antiracist understanding of, 78; community in, 127, 133; cultural face of, 102; diet/fitness and, 189; divine feminine in, 56, 57, 61, 63–64, 72; evangelical. See Evangelicals; feminist spirituality movement in, 24, 58–61, 63, 65; fundamentalist, 135, 273, 279; Internet and, 102, 127–32, 134, 136–37, 138n8; sexism in, 70, 73, 272–73; technology and, 125

Christian music. See Contemporary Christian music

Christmas: advertisements on, 52–53; cultural mythopoetics of, 51

Christmas at Sea World (television special), 46

Christmas in the Holy Land (television special), 46

Christmas in Nova Scotia (television special), 48

Christmas in Paris (television special), 50

Christmas in Scotland (television special), 46

Christmas in Washington (television special), 47, 50, 51

Christmas in Williamsburg (television special), 49

Christmas television specials, 46–50; commercialization and, 51, 52; future of, 53–54; popularity of, 53; religion and, 55

Chronic, The (Dr. Dre), 261

Chuck D, 262; on Black religion, 263

Church, 214; mainstream culture and, 102; religion and, 228, 230

Church of Baseball, 158, 206, 213–18; irony of, 218; magic and, 218; unbelievers and, 216. See also Baseball

Churchill, Winston, 51–52

Church of Latter Day Saints (LDS), 127

Citizen Kane (movie), 79

Clarence 13X, 269n31

Clinton, Bill, 47

Clinton, George, and Parliament, 252

Coca-Cola, 290; advertisement for, 182–83, 221; cult of, 229; fetish of, 158, 218–22, 291, 292; religion and, 214, 219–21, 227, 229; as sacred sign, 219–21

Cockburn, Bruce, 120

Coleman, Alton, 237, 248

“Colors” (Ice-T), 258

Commercials: blacks on, 5; religious terms/idioms in, 180–81. See also Advertisements

Commodity culture, 141, 142, 145, 152

Communications: metalinguistic, 148; public, 149; technologies of, 125

Communitas, 226

Community: religious, Internet and, 102, 125, 127–37; symbolic, 148
Como, Perry, 47, 48, 53; Christmas special by, 46, 49, 50
Comte, Auguste, 162
Consumerism, 23; quasi-religious power of, 180–81; religion and, 288; visions of womanhood and, 184
Contemporary Christian Music (CCM), 289, 290; art world of, 107–13; business of, 104–5; consumer-oriented culture and, 109–10; entertainment industry and, 105; establishment of, 101–3; evangelicals and, 107, 110, 119; gospel and, 108–9, 121n11; Grant and, 117; popular culture and, 107; popular music and, 104, 118–20; reform for, 113; sales of, 106, 107, 112–13, 119; scandals for, 120; style of, 108, 120. See also Evangelical music industry
Cooper, Gary, 239
Corbett, Julia Mitchell, 9
Crenshaw, Kimberle Williams, 69
Crosby, Bing, 46
Cross, Brian, 258
Crossovers, 105, 114; success of, 117–18
Cross as prop, 139–40, 149–50, 152
Crouch, Andrae, 84
Csikszentmihalyi, Mihalyi, 201
Cult of thinness, 180–81; religious discourse in, 181–83. See also Thinness
Cults, 229
Cultural patriarch, 29, 32, 37
Cultural reform, 291, 293
“Cultural Relevance of Star Trek, The” (Mills), 164
Cultural studies, 82, 142
Culture: authentic, 91n1; faith and, 292; folk, 3, 4; high, 2–4, 24; low, 24; media and, 102; national/international, 4; religion and, 254, 295; sports and, 196. See also Popular culture
Culture Lite: democratic rhetoric of, 182; ethos/logic of, 183; fitness ethic and, 178–80; mechanisms of, 179; operations/conventions of, 184; ritualizing function of, 182–83; salvation myth of, 181, 183–84, 187, 188; soteriology of, 188; Truth and, 186
Cyberkoinonia, 129–32
Cyberummah, 132
Cypress Hill, 258
Dafoe, Willem, 35
Dalai Lama, 28, 128; interest in, 25–26; movies about, 25; Nobel Prize for, 34–35; as Oriental Monk, 35, 36
Dance of the Dissident Daughter, The (Kidd), 61, 70
Daniel (Karate Kid), 31, 34
Darby, John Nelson, 271
Darwin, Charles, 272

Da Vinci Code, The (Brown), 1, 24, 56–57, 60–61, 63, 65, 71, 72

Davy Crockett (television series), 159
dc Talk, 118
Dean, Howard, 124

Deep Space Nine (television series), 160

Defecting in Place (Winter, Lummis, and Stokes), 58–59
Deford, Frank, 196, 198
DeMille, Cecil B., 59
Denton, Sandy, 259
Denver, John, 46
Deutsche Welle, 160

Diary, The (ScarFace), 268n17

Diet: definitions of, 190n8; religion and, 189, 190n3; restrictions on, 177
Dieting, 174, 290; language of, 176; magazine articles about, 192n18; male, 193n41; as popular-cultural ritual, 176–78; religion and, 157–58, 175
Dieting business; promotions by, 186; revenues for, 178–79
Dispensationalism, 273, 274
Diversion, social politics of, 183–84
Divine justice, reliance on, 244, 246
DJ Kool Herc, 257
Dr. Dre, 258, 268n25; on gangsta rap, 261
Douglas, Mary, 175, 190n3
Dove Awards, 109, 118
Durkheim, Emile, 144, 226, 228; ecstasy ritual and, 223; on magic, 218
Dylan, Bob, 75
Dyson, Michael Eric, 16; on status rap, 260

E.T. (movie), 11, 159; Christ figure in, 10
Eastwood, Clint, 235, 241, 243, 249n2; vengeance and, 237–38
Eating disorders, 92n25, 174, 293; religious language of, 157–58
Eazy E, 258
Ecumenical-industrial complex, 53
Edwards, Harry, 197–98
Eliade, Mircea, 208–9; on rituals, 202
Eller, Cynthia, 58, 60–61, 66–67
Ellison, Ralph, 2566
“El Shaddai” (Grant), 115
Ely, Joe, 214
EMI-Capitol, 118
Encyclopedia of American Religions, 7–8
Enterprise (spaceship), 160, 166–68
Enter the Dragon (movie), 39–40n13
Episcopal Church, 72
Erotica (Madonna), 90
Escobar, Andres, 205–6
Essays (Bacon), 248
Essence magazine, 189n1, 192n21
Evangelical music industry, 103–5; growth of, 104, 113; mainstream music by, 113–18. See also Contemporary Christian music; Gospel industry
Evangelicals, 103; “altar call” ceremony of, 126–27; CCM and, 112; Christian music and, 104; popular culture and, 101, 290; gender and, 236, 270–85; marketing and, 107; musical styles of, 112; popular culture and, 109–11, 284–85, 292; religious marketplace and, 145; rock music and, 111
Evangelists, 143, 292; television, 126
Evolution, theory of, 272; religious antagonism toward, 135–36
Exorcist, The (movie), 1
“Express Yourself” (Madonna), 79

Fab 5 Freddy, 267n12
Faith: challenges for, 207–9; culture and, 76, 292
Family Channel, 46
Family Ties (television series), 50
Farrakhan, Louis, 263
Fasting, 177; dieting and, 175
Father Dowling Mysteries, The (television series), 45
Father Murphy (television series), 45
Fatness: positive connotations of, 191n10; sin and, 192n24. See also Thinness
Fear of a Black Planet (Chuck D), 263
Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), 225

*Feminine Endings* (McClary), 96n44

Feminist theology: Madonna and, 75; spirituality movement and, 24, 57–59, 61, 63–67, 70; re-imaging God in, 59–60, 64

Feminist theory/thinking: evangelicalism and, 270–71; sex-positive, 90

Fetish, 214, 292; commodity, 221; problem of, 151–52, 221–22; religion and, 222, 228, 230; state, 222

“Fight the Power” (Public Enemy), 262

“Fishin’ 4 Religion” (Arrested Development), 264

Fishwick, Marshall W., 221

Fitness ethic, 189; Culture Lite and, 178–80

“Flashlight” (George Clinton and Parliament), 252

Flow, theory of, 201

*Flying Nun, The* (television series), 44

Fonda, Jane, 182

Forbes, Bruce David, 162, 171n6, 290; on folk culture, 91n1; on religion/popular culture, 252, 289

Ford, Harrison, 35

Fore, William, 16

*For God, Country, And Coca-Cola* (Pendergrast), 213, 218

Foster, Alan Dean, 241

Foucault, Michel, 190n5, 253

Fourteenth Dalai Lama. See Dalai Lama

Franklin, Aretha, 75

Franklin, Kirk, & The Family, 121n11

Frazer, James, 40–41n18

Freud, Sigmund, 217, 221

*Friday Night Lights* (Bissinger), 207

Frith, Simon, 76

“Fuck Tha Police” (NWA), 260

Fuller, Charles D., 111

Fung, Richard, 40n15

Furious Five, 262

*Gandhi* (movie), 10

Gandhi, Mohandas K., 26, 34

Gaylord Entertainment, 118
Geertz, Clifford, 182, 249; on religion/cultural system, 175; on religion/symbols, 213, 231n14; on thinness, 175

Gender, 16; evangelical Christianity and, 236, 270–85

*Generation of Seekers, A* (Roof), 140

Gere, Richard, 35

Giamatti, A. Bartlett, 206

Gifford, Kathy Lee, 49, 53

*Gilligan’s Island* (television series), 124

“Girls, Girls, Girls” (Motley Crue), 86

Gish, Lillian, 28

GMA. See *Gospel Music Association*

Gnostic Gospels, 56

*Gnostic Gospels, The* (Pagels), 63

God: confrontation with, 54; percent belief in, 7; re-imaging, 59–60, 64 television and, 45; vengeance of, 237, 249, 250n12

“Goddess, the,” 60, 69, 71; worship of, 57

*Gods Must Be Crazy, The* (movie), 220

Goizueta, Roberto, 220

“Good Asian,” 29, 39n6

Gospel industry, 114, 120n2; CCM and, 108–9; crossovers and, 117–18; evangelical network by, 112; marketing ministry and, 110–11. See also Black gospel; Evangelical music industry

Gospel Music Association (GMA), 114; Christian music and, 118; Convention of, 109, 117; Dove Awards and, 118

Graceland, 14

Graffiti art, 257, 267n12

Graham, Billy, 111, 285n4

Gramsci, Antonio, 190n5

Grandmaster Flash, 257–58, 262

Grant, Amy, 106; crossover by, 105, 115–16, 118

Grateful Dead, 14

Greeley, Andrew M., 12, 77

Greenberg, Eric, 11

Griffith, D. W., 27–28, 31, 32, 38n3; Yellow Man and, 29, 30, 39n6, 10

Guttman, Allen, 211n22

Hall, Donald, 215
Hallmark Hall of Fame (television series), 45, 51
“Happy Losers” weight loss program, 181
Harding, Susan, 271
Harrell, Dan, 119
Haug, Frigga, 185
Head of Christ (Sallman), 149
Hearn, Billy Ray, 108
Heart in Motion (Grant), 105, 115–17, 119
Heaven’s Gate cult, 173n32
Heavy D (Dwight Myers), 259
Hell Town (television series), 45
Hemsley, Sherman, 45
Henderson, Douglas “Jocko,” 257, 267n14
Heroes, 201, 203
Herrigel, Eugen, 197
Heston, Charlton, 10–11, 59
Higgs, Robert J., 197, 210n10
Highway to Heaven (television series), 45, 53
Hinckley, George, 127
Hinduism, 127, 128
Hip hop culture, 257
Hitler, Adolf, 246
Hobbes, Thomas, 217
Home team, identifying with, 200, 215
Homicide: Life on the Street (television series), 54
hooks, bell, 68, 85, 95n35
Hoosiers (movie), 207
Hoover, J. Edgar, 292; “Louie, Louie” investigation and, 225
Hoover, Stewart M., 102, 290
Hope, Bob, 46
Horton, Willie, 82
Houston, Whitney, 121n11
Howard, Jay R., 222
How the Grinch Stole Christmas (television special), 47–48
Huckleberry Finn (Twain), 88
Ku Klux Klan, 82
Kundun (movie), 35
Kung Fu (television series), 26, 40n14, 41n24; Oriental Monk in, 31, 33
Kung Fu: The Legend Continues (television series), 33

LaHaye, Timothy, 271, 285n4
Lalane, Jack, 181
Lambert, Mary, 94n32
Lanigan’s Rabbi (television series), 45
La Rock, Scott, 258
Larson, Sheilah, 143–44
Last Poets, 251
Late Great Planet Earth, The (Lindsey), 279
Lause, Kevin, 5, 7
Lawrence, John Shelton, 11
Lear, Norman, 54
Lee, Archie, 219
Lee, Bruce, 39–40n13; Kung Fu and, 40n14
Left Behind series (LaHaye and Jenkins), 1, 236, 270, 271, 273–75, 278–84, 285n4
Lelwica, Michelle M., 157–58, 290, 291, 293
Lennon, John, 230
Levenstein, Harvey, 191n10
Lévi-Strauss, Claude, 169
Liberation theologies, 82–83, 93n2; articulating, 83; Madonna and, 75, 81, 84, 85, 89, 90
Life Is Worth Living (television series), 45
“Like a Prayer” (Madonna), 1, 24, 86, 89, 90; antiracist theology of, 78; interpretation of, 93n22; Jackson video and, 82; liberation theologies and, 85, 88; as marketing tool, 88; saturation play for, 83
Li’il Kim, 260
Lindsey, Hal, 279
Lippy, Charles H., 198
Little Buddha (movie), 10, 35
Little House on the Prairie (television series), 45
Living in the Lap of the Goddess (Eller), 58
Los Angeles Times, 116
“Louie, Louie” (Kingsmen); FBI investigation of, 225; sacred rhythm of, 223, 224; secret of, 214
Macintosh computer, 129
Macola Company/Ruthless, 258
Madonna, 1, 75–80, 289, 292; advertisement by, 91n7, 94n31; antiracist theology of, 78; Christ imagery and, 94–95n34, 95n35; controversy promotion by, 88–89; criticism of, 80; eroticism/religious imagery of, 24; female sexuality and, 86, 98n51; feminism and, 89, 97n48; lesbianism and, 78; poststructuralist gender theories and, 78; reconciliation vision of, 80; religion and, 76, 79, 97n48; sexual images of, 85–86, 89; shifting images of, 88–89; videos by, 87–89; white maternalism/paternalism and, 95n35
Madonna Studies, 76–77
Magic, 217, 218
Maharishi Mahesh, 26
Mailer, Norman, 77
Malcolm X, 263
Malinowski, Bronislaw, 40–41n18
Marcus, Greil, 226; on “Louie, Louie,” 223; on rock music/potlatch, 225
Marketing, 88, 110–11, 140–41; evangelism and, 107
Marketplace, cultural/symbolic practice of, 144, 149
Marley, Bob, 75, 79
Marsden, George, 273
Marsh, Dave, 214, 223–26
Martha Stewart: Home for the Holidays (television special), 49
Martial arts, 31, 39–40n13
Martin, Dean, 46
Marx, Karl, 265; commodities and, 151; fetish and, 221
Mary Magdalene, Gospel of, 56–57
Mass-Mediated Culture (Real), 6
Mathisen, James, 197, 208
Mauss, Marcel, 225, 226
McFague, Sallie, 64
MCI, 262
McLuhan, Marshall, 13
MC Speech, 264
Media, 124; culture and, 102; images from, 37–38, 38n1; religion and, 15, 141–44, 147, 294; as social/cultural space, 140; sports coverage by, 198. See also Television

Medved, Michael, 85–86

Megachurches: criticism of, 147; marketplace and, 146–48; phenomenon of, 110, 140; popular culture and, 102, 140; seeker religiosity at, 148; visiting, 139–41. See also Willow Creek Community Church

Melrose Place (television series), 50

“Message, The” (Grand Master Flash/Furious Five), 262

Metaphors, 5, 38n3

Methodologies, 292; description/analysis of, 291

Metropolis (movie), 79

Miller, Mark Crispin, 52

Mills, Jeffrey, 163–64

“Mr. Big Stuff” (Heavy D), 259

Mr. Magoo (television series), 50

Mr. ScarFace Is Back (ScarFace), 268n17

Miyagi, Mr., 26, 34

Model minority myth, 26–27, 39n6

Models of God (McFague), 64

“Modernizing White Patriarchy: Reviewing D. W. Griffith’s Broken Blossoms” (Tchen), 28–29

Modern Language Association (MLA), 7

Monhanty, Chandra Talpade, 41n19

Monomyths, classical/American, 11

Monroe, Marilyn, 76

Montana, Joe, 195

Moody, Dwight L., 111

Moore, R. Laurence, 17, 145

Mormons, 127

Motley Crue, 86, 87

Movies, 4, 124; popular culture and, 159, 171; religion and, 10–12; theological themes in, 12. See also Westerns; titles of specific movies

MTV 82, 83; Madonna and, 89, 90; women represented on, 81

Mohammad, Elijah, 263

Multiculturalism, 29n10

Murray, Anne, 48, 49

Music. See Contemporary Christian music; Evangelical music industry; Gospel industry; Popular music; Rock music
Muslim Brotherhood, 133
Muslims. See Islam
Myers, Dwight. See Heavy D
Myers, Kenneth, 6
“My Father’s Eyes” (Grant), 115
Myths, 12; baseball, 206; of divine feminine, 24, 62–64; origin, 167; popular culture and, 15, 16, 159; Star Trek, 169; understandings of, 157

Nachbar, Jack, 5, 7
National Religious Broadcasters, 114
Nation of Islam, 263, 269n31
Nelson, John Wiley, 14, 15
Nelson, Thomas, 118
Neopaganism, 57–58, 124, 128–29
Nestle, 187
New Age movement, 9, 143, 162
Next Church movement, 147
Niebuhr, H. Richard, 19n24
Niggaz With Attitude (NWA), 26, 260, 261
Nitty gritty hermeneutics, 253–54; blues and, 254–56; rap and, 256–66
Northern Exposure (television series), 54
“Notion of Expenditure, The” (Bataille), 226
Notorious B. I. G., The, 268n25
Novak, Michael, 197, 198, 200, 201, 203, 208
NWA. See Niggaz With Attitude
Nye, Russel, 3
NYPD Blue (television series), 54

Oates, Joyce Carol, 196
O’Connor, Sinead, 235; antiracist lament of, 78–79; John Paul photo incident and, 79
Oglala Sioux, 197
“Oh Father” (Madonna), 79, 80, 89
Omega Man (movie), 10–11
O’Neil, Buck, 213–15, 230
“Open Your Heart” (Madonna), 86, 90, 96n44, 98n51; feminist viewers of, 87
Oriental Monk, 23, 24, 289; celebrity endorsements for, 35; gender/sexuality of, 40n15; icon of, 26, 27, 33–37; Japanese/Chinese versions of, 36; narrative of, 34; on-screen, 28, 32, 33; spiritual legacy of, 32–34, 37. See also Dalai Lama

Origin myths, 167

Origin of Species, The (Darwin), 272

Osborne, Joan, 1

Pagels, Elaine, 63

Pale Rider (movie), 235–36, 249n2, 289; miracle of, 240; myth of, 244; positive Christian values in, 242; redemption by, 241; vengeance in, 237–38; Virginian and, 240

Palmer, Robert, 86

“Papa Don’t Preach” (Madonna), 80, 89

Parents Music Resource Center, 76

Parliament, George Clinton and, 252

Parton, Dolly, 49

“Party for Your Right to Fight” (Public Enemy), 263

Passion of the Christ, The (movie), 10, 132

Paternalism, 92n7, 95n35

Paul, 248; inconsistency of, 246–48; on Vengeance, 235–38; vigilantism and, 243, 244

Pavorotti Christmas, A (television special), 51

Pax Network, 143

PCA. See Popular Culture Association

Peirce, Charles Sanders, 150

Pemberton, John, 219

Pendergrast, Mark, 213, 214, 218–10

Pentecostals, 273, 279

“People Everyday” (Arrested Development), 263

People magazine, 104, 181

Peterson, Greg, 102

Pew Internet and American Life Project, 124, 127

Phinehas the lyncher, 238

Picket Fences (television series), 54

Pinn, Anthony, 292, 293; on rap/blues, 236, 289

Plumpness, 177, 191n10

Poor Righteous Teachers, 269n31
Popular art, religious, 104
Popular culture: analysis of, 2–7, 9, 17–18, 288–89, 294; critics of, 6, 235; discourse of, 227, 290; divine feminine in, 71; evangelicals and, 109–11, 284–85, 292; influence of, 4, 6, 17; meanings of, 6, 7; metaphor about, 5; religion and, 1–2, 9–18, 18n14, 23, 72–73, 141, 157, 159–60, 217, 227, 229, 235–36, 253, 265–66, 288–89, 291–94, 295n2; as religion, 14–15, 17, 101, 102, 235; rise of, 105

*Popular Culture: An Introductory Text* (Nachbar and Lause), 5, 7

Popular Culture Association (PCA), 3, 7, 293, 294

Popular Culture Formula, 5

Popular music, 4; charismatic worship and, 110; Christian music and, 105, 118; divine feminine in, 71–72; evangelical message in, 111; religious issues in, 80–85; spiritual dimension of, 108

Postman, Neil, 12, 13

Postmodern perspectives, 77, 294

Potlatch, 2214, 229; performance of, 225–26; religion and, 228, 230; rock music and, 224

Powter, Susan, 181–82

“Praise the Lord” (Grant), 115

Prayer-Diet Clubs, 192n24

*Prayers and Seven Contemplations of the Sacred Mother* (Kingsley), 70

Prebish, Charles S., 199, 203, 208

Premillennialism, 271–72, 286n7; dispensational, 273, 274

Presley, Elvis, 14, 78

Price, Joseph L., 291; sports fans and, 158; sports rituals and, 289

“Prime Time’s Search for God” (TV Guide), 53

Printing press, invention of, 125

*Promised Land* (television series), 53

Protestantism, 125, 272; absence of divine feminine in, 63; conservative, 273, 279, 280, 286n10. See also Evangelicals

Psycho-spiritual plantation system, 37

Public Broadcasting System, 51

Public Enemy, 82, 262–63

*Purity and Danger* (Douglas), 175

Questers, 102, 129

Qur’an, 133, 135

Race, 16; divine feminine and, 61, 65, 67–71

Racism, 27, 33, 34, 40n16, 73, 83, 85; Christian, 88
Rainey, Ma, 266n5
Rap, 252, 253, 289, 293; black manhood and, 261; blues and, 236, 267n10; categories/style of, 258, 259; gangsta, 87, 259–62, 268n25; history of, 257; nitty gritty hermeneutics and, 256–66; political agenda of, 260; progressive, 259, 262; roots of, 257; status, 259–61; suffering/evil and, 236; violence/crime and, 261
“Rapper’s Delight” (Sugar Hill Gang), 258, 259, 268n15
Rapture, the, 271, 273–74; novels about, 236, 274–84
Raptured (Angley), 275–78
Reagan, Ronald, 88–89, 268n15; Asian Americans and, 39n6; Christmas specials and, 47
Real, Michael, 6
Recovery Network, 143
“Redefining the Body” (Vogue), 186
Redemption: quick/effective, 240; secularization of, 11
Reed, Ralph, 76
Referents, 148, 150
Reformation, 125
Re-Imagining the Divine (Schneider), 62
Religio, 217
Religion: academic study of, 227; as belief, 289; as commodity, 141; contemporary culture and, 142, 161–62; cultural, 14–15; decline of, 196; defining, 7–9, 177n6, 227–29, 290–91, essence of, 229; heathen, 30; high/low concerns of, 24; as organization, 291; popular culture and, 1–2, 9–18, 18n14, 23, 72–73, 141, 157, 159–60, 217, 227, 229, 235–36, 253, 288–89, 291–94, 295n2; in popular culture, 10–12, 15–17, 23, 101, 212, 227–30; popular culture dialogue with, 235–36, 266; racially coded, 41n19; segregation of, 162; as social/cultural space, 140; study of, 228–29, 290–91; substantive/functional/formal definitions of, 14; technology and, 125–26; traditional forms of, 157; transitional, 148–50
Religion in America (Corbett), 9
Religious studies, 142, 149
Revelation, 241, 243
Rice, John, 272
“Richard Wright’s Blues” (Ellison), 256
Riggert, Michael, 228
Rimes, LeAnn, 118, 120n2
Rituals: ecstasy, 223; fitness, 189; origin myths and, 167; play and, 169–70; popular culture and, 15; sports, 199–200; understandings of, 157; weight-loss, 176, 181
Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice (Bell), 176
Robertson, Pat, 111
Rock music: cult of, 229; divine feminine in, 71, 72; potlatch of, 158, 222–27; religion and, 214, 222–27, 229, 230

“Rock the Vote” advertisement, 91n7

*Rocky Mountain Christmas* (television special), 46

Rodenberry, Gene, 163, 165, 168–69

Roiphe, Anne, 49–50

*Rolling Stone*, 261

Romanowski, William D., 290; CCM and, 101, 289; evangelicals and, 292

Romans, 237, 238, 244–46; vengeance and, 235–36

Romero, Oscar, 81

Roof, Wade Clark, 140, 143; on seekers, 39n12, 145, 146

Roper, Dee Dee, 259

Rose, Tricia, 257

Sacred/profane, 228

Said, Edward, 27

*St. Elsewhere* (television series), 54

Saliers, Emily, 72

Sallman, Warner, 149

Salt-n-Pepa, 259–60

Sankey, Ira B., 111

Santayana, George, 196

Sartre, Jean-Paul, 203

*Saturday Night Live* (television series), 79

Savoy, Annie, 206, 216

Scarface, 268nn17, 28

Schmidt, Leigh Eric, 53

Schneider, Laurel, 62

Schooly D, 258

Scorcese, Martin, 35

Scott-Heron, Gil, 257

Seagal, Steven, 35

*Secret Life of Bees, The* (Kidd), 24, 56, 57, 60–61, 63, 65, 67, 69–72, 73n2

Secularization, 18n14, 119; Arab, 133; social theories of, 143

Seeker religiosity, 31, 140, 146–48; superficiality of, 144
Selld, Roberta, 178, 191n10
Self-control, 186–88
Self-understanding, 204

*Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (Moore), 17

Semiology/semiotics, 148, 149

*Seven Years in Tibet* (movie), 35

Sexism, 83, 90; in Christianity, 70, 73, 272–73; popular culture and, 97n49

Sex Pistols, 226

Sexuality, 16; core images of, 90; female, stereotyping, 86

Shedd, C. W., 192n24

Sheen, Fulton J., 45

Sheilah-ism, 143–44

“She’s Saving Me” (Saliers), 72

Shore, Dinah, 50, 51

Siegel, Jerry, 11

Signs, 148, 150

Silberner, Joanne, 191n18

Simmon, Scott, 28n2

Simmons, Richard, 181

“Simply Irresistible” (Palmer), 86

*Simpsons, The* (television series), 1, 54

“Six in the Morning” (Ice-T), 258

Sledge, Delony, 220, 230

Slenderizing rituals. See Thinness

Smith, J.T. “Funny Paper,” 255

Smith, Michael W., 106, 118

Smith, Red, 211n15

Snoop Doggy Dogg, 258

Social reform, 83, 291–93

*Sonny and Cher Comedy Hour, The* (television series), 46

Soteriology, 178, 184, 188

Soul Sonic Force, 258

SoundScan monitoring system, 113

Space, ritual, 202

Sparrow Communications, 118
“Spectacular” artist showcase, 109
Spencer, Jon Michael, 267n13
Spinderella, 259
Spirituality, 31, 37, 151; Eastern, 30, 39n12; feminist, 78; religion and, 8
Spirituals, 254, 256, 267n10
Spiritual seekers. See Seeker religiosity
Sports: authenticity/individuality and, 212n39; challenges for, 207–9; character building and, 208; as civilizing agent, 208; corruption/distortion of, 205; culture and, 196; devotion to, 205–7, 291; media and, 198; popular culture and, 196; religion and, 2, 8, 9, 14, 195–201, 203–5, 208, 209; solitary quest of, 203, 204; spirituality of, 201–5; theological analysis of, 208; transformative potential of, 203. See also Athletes
Sports Illustrated, 196, 206–7, 227–28
Stacy, Judith, 271
Stagolee (Staggerlee), 257, 268n14
Star Trek, 7, 259, 289; dictionaries for, 168; egalitarian ideology of, 16; entertainment of/seriousness about, 169–70; filling out, 168–70; first broadcast of, 160, 164, 165; frontier myth and, 163; future and, 164; merchandise/games from, 166–68; modernism and, 166; popularity of, 7; positive views in, 162–63; as religious phenomenon, 161, 162, 164–66, 170, 171, 172n14; values in, 124; worldview of, 162–64
Star Trek: The Next Generation (movie), 160, 167
Star Trek Chronology: A History of the Future, 167
Star Trek Encyclopedia, 168
Star Trek fandom, 14, 157, 171n3, 291; conventions by, 164, 165; inspiration for, 164, 167–68; mythological activities of, 169; phenomenon of, 160; as religious movement, 161; ritual/play and, 169–70; symbolic communities and, 166; tourism/pilgrimage/participation of, 166–67
Star Trek universe, 168–70; present and, 167–68
Star Wars (movie series), 160
Stereotypes: Asian, 26–27; Black rapist, 82; of black women, 67–70; in rapture fiction, 275; sexual, 260; about weight loss, 185
Stevenson, MacLean, 45
Stewart, Martha, 49, 53
Stockburn, Marshall, 241–43, 246
Stokes, Allison, 59
Stone, Sharon, 35
Stop the Insanity (Powter), 182
Stout, Harry S., 120–21n7, 146
“Straight Outta Compton” (NWA), 258
Streisand, Barbra, 120n2
Sugar Hill Gang, 258, 259
Sugar Hill Records, 258
Sunday, Billy, 111
Sunday Dinner (television series), 54
Super Bowl, 129, 289; attention for, 195
Superhero stories, 11, 240, 247
Superman, 240; Jewish ethical themes and, 11
Superstitio, 217
Suzuki, D. T., 26
Sweet, Leonard, 13
Symbols: Christian, 24, 56, 139; commodified, 148; controlling/defining, 149; popular culture and, 15; religion and, 213, 214, 231n14; visual, 149
Talmud, 64
Tapa Wanka Yap, 197
Taussig, Michael, 222
Taylor, Charles, 95n34
Taylor, Koko, 266n5
Tchen, John Kuo Wei, 29
Teams: identification with, 196, 201, 215; successful, 205
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (movie), 34; Oriental Monk in, 31, 33
Televangelists. See Evangelists
Television, 4, 6; blacks on, 5; Christmas and, 46–53, 55; commercialism and, 52–53; God and, 45; image-based culture and, 13; Islamic, 134; popular culture and, 159, 171; religion and, 13, 44–45, 53–54, 125–126; as unifying cultural force, 124. See also Media; titles of specific programs
Temkin, Barry, 213
Ten Commandments, The (movie), 10, 59
Theomusicology (Spencer), 267n13
Thinness: cultural/religious perspective of, 175; fitness rhetoric and, 179; naturalness of, 180; pursuit of, 175, 179, 183, 184, 188. See also Cult of thinness; Fatness
thirtysomething (television series), 54
Thomas, Carolyn, 203
Thompson, Robert J., 23, 289, 290
3 Years, 5 Months and 2 Days in the Life of . . . (Arrested Development), 264
Tibet, 36, 42n25, 127–28
Tibet House, 35
Tillich, Paul, 8, 150, 252
Time magazine, 111
Time for play, 202
Tolkien, J. R. R., 168
Touched by an Angel (television series), 53
Tracy, Dick, 238, 240
Tricycle magazine, 36
Truehart, Charles, 147
Truth, pursuit of, 204
Truth or Dare (documentary), 90
Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 245
Turkel, Sherry, 129
Turner, Bryan S., 177
Turner, Tina, 96n40
Turner, Victor, 169–70, 226
Tutu, Desmond, 24, 248
TV Guide, 53
Twain, Mark, 88
Twain, Shania, 71
Twelve-step programs, 9, 147
Tylor, E. B., 227, 228
United Federation of Planets, 164, 170
United Paramount Network, 33
Universal Studios theme park, 166
Untouchables (ScarFace), 268n17
Urbanization, 3, 272
USA Today, 116
U2, 1, 120

Vanishing Son (television series), 33, 40n17
Vengeance: cinematic miracles and, 240–41; countering, 247; God and, 237, 249, 250n12; moving past, 243–44; personal, 238, 243, 247; revenge and, 245; transformation and, 245; vigilantism and, 238–
40; yearning for, 237–38
VH-1, 78, 83
Vigilantism, 238–40; glorification of, 247
Violence, 261; media and, 15–16; popular culture and, 6; sexual, 83, 85
Virginian, 239; mythic paradigm of, 247

Virginian, The (Wister), 244, 246, 249n3; movie based on, 239; vengeance in, 238–39

Virtual church, 123

“Vogue” (Madonna), 89

Vogue magazine, 186

Voyager (movie), 160

Waltons, The (television series), 45, 49–50

“War” (Marley), 79

Warner, R. Stephen, 144

Warner Communications, 114

Warren G., 258

“Washed Away” (Arrested Development), 265

Wassell, Martin, 41n23

Waters, Muddy, 266n5

“Way You Make Me Feel, The” (Jackson), 81–82, 89, 94n28

Weight-loss practices/strategies, 14, 176, 178, 186, 188; concerns about, 174; cultural stereotypes of, 185; dangerous, 189n1; fitness ethic and, 179; social approval and, 185

Weight Watchers, 183

Weiss, Richard, 168

Western philosophy/theology, 37

Westerns, 11, 15. See also titles of specific movies

“[What if God Was] One of Us” (Osborne), 1

Wheeler, Barbara, 145

White, William Allen, 220

White Christian nation, 39n10

Whitefield, George, 109

Whitehead, Alfred North, 126

“White Heaven/Black Hell” (Public Enemy), 263

Wildmon, Donald, 16, 94n31

Williams, Andy, 46
Williams, Delores, 68
Williams, Ted, 199
Williams, Vanessa, 53
Willow Creek Community Church, 102, 292, 294; cross a, 149–52; marketing surveys by, 140–41; religious seekers at, 141, 146; symbol/meaning at, 148–49; visiting, 139–40. See also Megachurches
Wilson, Thomas, 244
Winans, BeBe and CeCe, 118, 121n11
Winfrey, Oprah, 179
Winter, Miriam Therese, 59
Wister, Owen, 238–39, 249n3
Wizard of Oz, The (movie), 54, 159
Womanhood: ideals of, 185; reinventing, 188–89
Women: bodily concerns and, 177; cyberspace and, 236; in rapture fiction, 274–82
Wonder, Stevie, 75
Wong, Sau-ling C., 37
Woodruff, Robert, 219
Wooley, Susan and Orland, 189n1
WORD Records, 114–16, 118
World Class Wreckin’ Crew, 258

X-Files, The (television series), 1

Yahya, Harun, 135–36
Yang, Dr., 33
Yauch, Adam, 35
Yellow Man, 28, 32, 39n6; end of, 30; moral/spiritual orientation of, 29
Yinger, J. Milton, 218

You Light Up My Life: Inspirational Songs (Rimes), 118
Your God Is Alive and Well and Appearing in Popular Culture (Nelson), 14
Yo-Yo, 258

Zen in the Art of Archery (Herrigel), 197