

Between Sacred and Profane

Researching Religion and
Popular Culture

EDITED BY
GORDON LYNCH

I.B. TAURIS
LONDON · NEW YORK

Contents

| | | |
|---|--|-----|
| | Introduction | |
| | GORDON LYNCH | 1 |
| 1 | Why Study Popular Culture? Or, How to Build a Case for Your Thesis in a Religious Studies or Theology Department | |
| | LYNN SCHOFIELD CLARK | 5 |
| 2 | Studying Religion and Popular Culture: Prospects, Presuppositions, Procedures | |
| | DAVID MORGAN | 21 |
| 3 | Questioning Media and Religion | |
| | JOLYON MITCHELL | 34 |
| 4 | Reflections on the Past and Future of the Study of Religion and Popular Culture | |
| | JEFFREY H. MAHAN | 47 |
| 5 | “What We Make of the World”: the Turn to ‘Culture’ in Theology and the Study of Religion | |
| | ELAINE GRAHAM | 63 |
| 6 | The Eucharist and the Turn to Culture | |
| | PETE WARD | 82 |
| 7 | Popular Culture Scholarship as a Spiritual Exercise: Thinking Ethically with(out) Christianity | |
| | TOM BEAUDOIN | 94 |
| 8 | House Negro with a Field Negro Mentality: New Positions in Theology and Culture | |
| | ROBERT BECKFORD | 111 |

| | | |
|----|---|-----|
| 9 | What is this 'Religion' in the Study of Religion and Popular Culture? GORDON LYNCH | 125 |
| 10 | On a Mission from God: African American Music and the Nature/Meaning of Conversion and Religious Life ANTHONY B. PINN | 143 |
| 11 | Some Concluding Reflections GORDON LYNCH | 157 |
| | <i>Bibliography</i> | 164 |
| | <i>Contributor Details</i> | 179 |
| | <i>Index</i> | 182 |

Introduction

GORDON LYNCH

As the following chapters in this book attest, the study of religion, media and popular culture is a maturing discipline. Interest in the constructive study of the ‘popular arts’ (Hall & Whannel, 1964), associated with the creation of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University in 1964, pre-dated the emergence of the study of religion, media and popular culture in the 1970’s, and to some extent scholars interested in this latter field are still playing catch-up with leading edge theoretical and methodological advances in disciplines such as film studies, cultural studies and media studies. Over the past thirty years, though, there has been considerable consolidation and increasing sophistication in the study of religion, media and popular culture, with the work of scholars trained in theology, religious studies, and the sociology and anthropology of religion, being valuably complemented by contributions from scholars trained in other disciplines such as media, cultural and communication studies, media anthropology, film studies, popular music studies and art history. The chapters by Lynn Schofield Clark and Jeffrey H. Mahan in this book give a more detailed discussion of the highlights and achievements of this growing literature.

This field has become arguably one of the most interesting areas in the study of contemporary religion – reflecting the wider turn to practices and resources of everyday life in the study of religion (Ammerman, 2007) – not only because it offers the possibility of deepening our understanding of the meaning and significance of religion and the sacred in relation to cultural life, but because it also provides an exciting and challenging framework for advanced inter-disciplinary research in theology and the

study of religion. As David Morgan comments in his chapter, scholars working in this field typically find themselves working not so much within a particular academic discipline, but within an academic ‘inter-discipline’ – forced to engage with theoretical and methodological resources from a range of relevant disciplines. This raises issues such as the academic identity and training of scholars working in this field, which have a concrete bearing on where graduate students choose to pursue this kind of research and where they are likely to be employed (or not be employed) when they complete their doctorates. The study of religion, media and popular culture therefore provokes difficult and important questions, both about the world in which we and others live, but also about the nature of our work as academic practitioners and what it means to pursue valuable and rigorous research in this field.

This book is an attempt to pause for reflection on this emerging field. As Lynn Schofield Clark observes in her chapter, there have been a number of edited volumes on religion, media and popular culture published over the past ten years. This current volume is trying to do something rather different to these previous texts, however. Where as previous edited books have generally been collections of specific case studies, occasionally including broader theoretical or methodological reflections, *Between Sacred and Profane* attempts to offer a more sustained moment of reflection on the current state of this field. This project began its life as a panel discussion for the Religion and Popular Culture Group at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in November 2005 in San Antonio, TX, on ‘Exploring the research agenda for religion and popular culture’. Drawing on contributions from Lynn Schofield Clark, David Morgan, Tom Beaudoin, Jeffrey Mahan and Anthony Pinn, this panel focused on a range of theoretical and methodological challenges faced by research in this area (Lynch, 2006). Following this panel, a number of other writers were invited to add to this process of reflection by contributing to this book.

In writing their chapters, the contributors have sought to address a wide range of questions:

Why does research in religion, media and popular culture matter?

What is the role of the study of religion, media and popular culture in the context of wider debates about religion, culture and society,

and what distinctive contribution has the study of religion, media and popular culture made (or could make) to these wider debates?

How might the study of religion, media and popular culture inform broader concepts of religion and the sacred?

How can we understand the range of disciplinary interests and approaches that make up research in this field, and what are the particular challenges raised by developing inter-disciplinary research in this field?

What have been the strengths, weaknesses and omissions, of the previous literature on religion, media and popular culture, and what questions and approaches should be given more attention in the next phase of research in this area?

What do we bring to this field as researchers in terms of our assumptions, interests and motivations, and what role can reflexivity play for research in this area?

In addressing these questions, the following chapters fall into four different clusters. Chapters 1-4, by Lynn Schofield Clark, David Morgan, Jolyon Mitchell and Jeffrey Mahan offer different overviews of this field. Schofield Clark discusses the rationale for undertaking research in religion, media and popular culture, and provides an overview of key literature in this field to date. David Morgan similarly makes the case for the importance of work in this area, discusses the particular challenges of inter-disciplinarity and suggests an approach to future research which takes both issues of cultural production and consumption seriously. Jolyon Mitchell poses five questions which form an important research agenda for the study of religion and media, and Jeffrey Mahan reflects on both past achievements and future challenges for the study of religion and popular culture. Chapters 5-6 have a more explicitly theological focus, as Elaine Graham and Pete Ward explore the recent 'cultural turn' in the study of theology (particularly practical theology). Graham's chapter discusses the nature and significance of this cultural turn in theological study, whilst Ward uses the example of the ritual of the Eucharist to demonstrate how the cultural turn and concepts from cultural studies can inform theological reflection on this particular example of religious

practice. Chapters 7-8 address the issue of reflexivity. Tom Beaudoin argues that we should pay greater attention to the motivations, cultural location and discursive formation of ourselves as researchers in the study of religion and popular culture, arguing that work in this field can be undertaken as a self-consciously spiritual exercise. Robert Beckford's chapter offers a concrete example of this kind of reflexivity, as he reflects on the cultural gaze that he adopts through his work as a black theologian and film-maker commenting on contemporary culture. Finally, chapters 9-10 explore how the study of religion, media and popular culture might inform broader understandings of religion and the sacred. In my chapter, I argue that the study of religion, media and popular culture can make a valuable contribution to the contested debate about the nature of 'religion' by exploring the nature and significance of sacred objects within human cultures. Anthony Pinn argues that African-American religious studies has typically operated on the basis of limited notions of conversion and the religious life, borrowed uncritically from Christian theology, and that attention to the work of rap artists, Tupac Shakur and Snoop Dogg, provides an alternative way of conceiving of conversion and the religious life as a form of existential orientation to the world.

The questions that have driven this book are important and complex, and the chapters are intended not as the final word on these subjects but as provocations for future discussion. At the end of the book, I offer my own concluding reflections, as one interpretation of the preceding material. But the value of this book will lie in the extent to which it is able to stimulate different kinds of reading and response, and to encourage a new degree of self-awareness and areas of focus in future scholarly work in this area.

Editing this book has been an enjoyable experience, and I'm grateful to the friends and colleagues who have contributed chapters to it. My thanks also go to the Religion and Popular Culture Group within the AAR for providing the opportunity for this discussion to develop, and to Alex Wright, Jayne Hill and everyone else at I.B.Tauris, as well as Matthew Brown at Bookcraft, who has made the subsequent production of this book possible.

Why Study Popular Culture?

Or, How to Build a Case for your Thesis in a Religious Studies or Theology Department

LYNN SCHOFIELD CLARK

A young scholar had just finished presenting the final paper on a panel exploring the intersection of popular culture and journalism. The setting was an international conference of journalism and mass communication educators, and the audience included a mix of graduate students and junior to more fully established scholars. When the time came for the panelists to entertain questions from the audience, one of the senior scholars in the audience stood up and addressed the young scholar. ‘What you’ve said about video games related to the television program *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* is very interesting. It also seems like a fun topic to study. But how does this speak to any of the recent developments in theories of journalism and media?’ Her sample size was ‘anecdotal’ and too small for generalizability, he continued, noting that the data were too slim to build a case of media effects (e.g., that the media *cause* certain people to behave in certain ways). And despite the fact that she also seemed interested in how media were shaping public opinion, she didn’t reference either framing or agenda-setting theories, which explore how the news media, in the endlessly quoted words of researchers Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw (1992, p.176), tell us ‘not what to think but what to think *about*.’ How did this research contribute to our understandings of society and the role of the media within it, then, this senior scholar wondered?

The young scholar was understandably flustered. The senior scholar had not asked these questions in a way that was visibly condescending, but for everyone in the room it was clear that these were not completely innocent questions, either: they spoke to the differences in paradigms that cur-

rently undergird studies of the media within the field that is professionally devoted to the study of the role of media in society. A more senior scholar on the panel jumped in and explained that the young scholar's work was framed within the interdisciplinary theories of cultural studies and thus spoke to those theories and concerns rather than to those of more mainstream journalism and media effects theories. Unfortunately, this senior scholar did not explain what those theories and concerns of cultural studies actually *were*. And the junior scholar, emboldened by her co-panelist's comments, added (with the slightest *barrump!*), 'I guess if you don't know why cultural studies would be valuable, I don't know how to explain it to you.'

As I sat in the audience, I thought about the young scholar's statement. I could imagine her spending many hours after this exchange pondering, 'what I *should* have said...' But I also wondered: why does it seem to be so difficult to explain to more traditionally-schooled scholars the value of the study of culture, and the embrace of a cultural studies framework, specifically in the study of mass mediated popular culture? And I wondered: how would I advise junior scholars to explain why their studies of popular culture and their embrace of a cultural studies framework are useful and important? It seems to me that this kind of exchange is just as likely to happen among religious studies and theology scholars as among media scholars. Of course, among the latter, one would need to argue not only why the study of culture is important, but why the study of popular culture and mass mediated popular culture in particular is relevant to concerns within the fields of religious studies and theology. Thus, I begin this chapter with those questions in mind.

To begin, I will offer an explanation of what the term 'popular culture' refers to and how it has been studied in the past. I will then address this issue of why the study of popular culture is interesting and important for those in the fields of theology and religious studies, and why it has met such resistance, concluding with observations about how it is currently being studied in the fields of religious studies and theology.

What is Popular Culture?

I believe that the broadest and simplest reason for the study of popular culture in theology and religious studies is that the study of popular cultural artifacts can lead to insights into issues that transcend popular culture itself. In order to understand how this works, we have to understand how popular culture works – and that, inevitably, leads us to address why peo-

ple have such distaste and sometimes even disdain for it. Even within media studies, the study of popular culture has not been free of this disdain.

Until the 1960s, the study of popular culture within the field of media scholarship had been undertaken primarily in relation to an 'effects' paradigm in the U.S., exploring how popular culture – and popular media in particular – could influence the behaviors of vulnerable populations such as immigrants and youth. This is generally considered the 'mass communication' perspective within the study of media in society. The 1960s inaugurated a turn to what has been termed 'uses and gratifications' studies, marked by Elihu Katz's famous recommendation that scholars should spend less time pondering what the media do *to* people and more time considering what people do *with* the media, thus placing on the research agenda the various uses to which media were put and the gratifications people received in consuming it. This focus on the everyday uses of media and the meanings people made from them echoed the emergence of what has been variously termed cultural history, new history, or in France, the *histoire des mentalités* in the fields of history. Scholars in this tradition were (and remain) interested in popular cultural practices and phenomena of non-elite groups, and seek to reframe naturalized understandings of history by uncovering these accounts and practices of the non-dominant majority. Similarly, in literary studies the 1960s saw the emergence of reader-response theory, which foregrounded the role readers played in constructing the meanings of literary texts. And also during this same time period, the interdisciplinary field of cultural studies was emerging in Britain and elsewhere in Europe, focusing on how media and other artifacts of culture helped to contribute to subcultural identity, especially among youth cultures.

Whereas the rising interest in 'uses and gratifications' approaches in America held some theoretical and methodological overlap with British traditions, most scholars who identify with the American tradition of media cultural studies consider themselves at some distance from the uses and gratifications paradigm and identify more strongly with the British cultural studies tradition. This is because whereas uses and gratifications largely builds upon existing theories within mass communication studies and often employs positivist methods for investigation, those within cultural studies traditions are committed to interdisciplinarity and a wider range of methodologies, thus employing in their analyses learnings from feminism, anthropology and interpretive sociology, critical race theory, neo-Marxism, and postcolonial theory. Those within media cultural studies

have also been influenced by reader-response and cultural historical approaches, and some increasingly explore not only mass mediated artifacts, but aspects of popular culture that are commercially produced or mass mediated in some other way.

Although in the European tradition of media studies the psychological/behaviorist influence has never been as strong as in the U.S., like their counterparts elsewhere in the world the study of popular culture was considered rather less important than studies of high and middlebrow culture such as news reporting or the more traditional arts. Thus, the study of popular culture in the cultural studies tradition, with its emphasis on peoples' everyday lives and practices (practices that themselves have a history), is in many ways more closely allied *across* disciplines than within a particular discipline, sharing as it does a commitment to understanding everyday lives in order to reconstruct and reevaluate taken-for-granted notions of societal organization and individual experiences within it.

Today, the study of popular culture brings together three different, yet related, concerns: culture, the popular, and mass culture. *Culture* is the term used to denote a particular way of life for a specific group of people during a certain period in history. It also references the artifacts, narratives, images, habits, and products that give style and substance to that particular way of life. In an oft-cited discussion, Raymond Williams (1992) referred to culture as a 'structure of feeling', culture is something that informs the way that a group of people see and experience the world, even when they do not consciously recognize its collective organization or impact. *Mass culture* is a term that highlights the profit motive that directs the production of certain products made available for commercial sale. It refers to both these mass-produced products and the consumer demand for them that justifies their widespread production and distribution. *The popular* makes reference to 'the people' and *popular culture* therefore usually refers to those commercially-produced items specifically associated with leisure, the mass media, and lifestyle choices that people consume. Items of popular culture can include products such as reading materials, music, visual images, photos, film, television, advertising, video games, celebrity culture, professional sports, talk radio, comics, ipods, and items on youtube. But they can also include what we might call 'high culture' things such as live and performance theater, art, musical arrangements and performances, and museum installations designed for popular consumption. Popular culture also refers to a seemingly endless variety of goods, including modes of transportation, fashion, toys, sporting goods, and even food.

In short, popular culture is anything that can be successfully packaged for consumers in response to their desire for a means to both identify with some people, ideas, or movements, and to distinguish themselves from others (Bourdieu, 1984/2002).

In order to be successful and to receive widespread attention – in other words, to become a popular culture phenomenon – popular culture has to connect to something that holds meaning for people. Sometimes, popular culture expresses the *zeitgeist* of an era, speaking to deep-seated beliefs that are consistent with what we believe are the best qualities of our collective society. It is no coincidence that a rise in state support for civil unions and same sex marriages would occur in the same era in which a film like *Brokeback Mountain* attracts A-list movie stars and achieves box office success. While not exactly comporting with a specific political agenda, the film's appeal certainly was consistent with the growing desire on the part of many in the U.S. to embrace greater acceptance for gay and lesbian relationships even as past and current discriminations are acknowledged and mourned. But popular culture also reflects the unconscious, taken-for-granted views that we prefer not to admit to ourselves. Pepi Leistyna's (2006) work on representations of class in American sitcom television, for example, points to the longstanding pattern of portraying lower-wage working class men as bumbling, blustery, anti-intellectual subjects of humor, from *The Honeymooners*' Jackie Gleason and *All in the Family*'s Archie Bunker, to *King of Queens*' Doug Heffernan and *The Simpsons*' Homer Simpson. Leistyna's argument is that in this time of increased economic disparity, job loss, and employment insecurity, such depictions reinforce the notion that lower-wage workers are to blame for their own situation, and that people in lower-wage jobs are therefore distinct in their interests from working people with higher wages. In this case, the study of media representations might serve as a wake-up call to the fact that such negatively patterned representations cannot change until we work to change social reality. A cultural studies perspective on this notes that it is not so much that people are convinced by television, therefore (the 'media effects' perspective), but that television's entertainment value rests on its ability to articulate what we believe without doing so in a way that threatens our very sense of who we believe ourselves to be (and we prefer to believe ourselves to be tolerant, humane, accepting, non-racist, etc.). Popular culture such as television and film, as well as novels, comedy clubs, fashion magazines, and more, are locations in which these contradictions and negotiations are constantly played out through narrative and representation.

That's what makes them interesting as objects of study. We need to remember, as Robert Thompson has pointed out, that 'escapism and relevance are not mutually exclusive' (Rose, 2004). Indeed, Australian journalist Catharine Lumby (2004) observed, 'where critics of cultural studies go wrong is that they think the quality of thinking is somehow predetermined by the cultural value of the object being analyzed'.

This takes us back to the issue of how studies of popular culture are able to transcend concerns of popular culture itself.

Popular culture appeals to our emotions and our processes of identification, making it a prime location for communicating significant ideals and ideas. This is a fact, of course, not lost on the public relations and advertising industries. Scholars in religious studies and theology may feel understandable frustration in the ways in which the popular cultural industries have hijacked our identification processes for the purposes of profit. Most of us resent the flood of advertising and marketing that greets us at every point in our day in ever new and increasingly intrusive forms. Some of us worry, with Neil Postman (1986), that we are a society 'amusing ourselves to death.' And religion is increasingly getting into the act, employing branding techniques in order to appeal to prospective parishioners, to encourage giving in capital campaigns, or simply to increase awareness of religious organizations or to evangelize within their communities. Meanwhile, advertisers themselves continue to borrow from the language and imagery of religion, appealing to a sense of tradition and sentimentality, a desire for transcendent experience, or a love of beauty and Truth in well-crafted messages designed to invoke sales of everything from beer to running shoes. Politicians, too, increasingly see the benefit of what marketers call the practices of product placement and celebrity endorsement in their appeals. As an example, many were outraged to learn that a syndicated broadcast columnist in the U.S. accepted a payment of \$240,000 from the U.S. Education Department to promote the No Child Left Behind Act in columns supposedly devoted to his own opinions (Chaddock, 2005, p.1). These and similar efforts are surely undertaken out of a tacit acknowledgement in the role popular culture plays in informing public opinion. When scholars study these specific instances, they can gain insights into the role religion plays in politics, and in how the commercial marketplace is shaping the way in which persons of faith literally and figuratively clothe themselves in ways consistent with what they believe are a certain set of religious (or even post-religious) commitments (Clark, 2007). Studying popular culture in religious studies and theology therefore provides in-

sights into how commitments to faith communities and alternative communities are formed and maintained through connections to material goods, and what it might mean to be a faith participant, and a citizen and consumer in public life in a commercially-drenched world. Within a more historically informed perspective, studies of popular culture and religion can also demonstrate that such issues are not completely new, but in fact religious practices and beliefs have always existed in a context in which certain societal groups sought to persuade, influence, or sell something (Beaudoin, 2003).

Popular culture is also a fundamental part of our social lives and our interactions with others; it provides an especially emotive language through which we communicate with others about those things that are especially meaningful to us. When we talk enthusiastically about our favorite independent film, or when we choose *not* to talk about our favorite trashy television program, we do so both as a way to communicate something about ourselves and to join a conversation that's already structured with regard to a certain set of cultural expectations. It is through the stories, myths, narratives, sounds, and images of culture that we are able to make sense of our lives, both for ourselves and for others. By communicating with others through reference to popular culture, we are able to place ourselves socially and to ascribe meaning to our own actions. In this way, popular culture provides the framework through which understandings of religion can be shaped or maintained: it gives us a way to evaluate in the presence of others who we are, what we believe and do, and why. It provides us with a cultural repertoire, to use the language of sociologists of culture. Studying what becomes popular therefore gives us insight into why society is organized as it is, and what deeply-held beliefs might need to be challenged in order to bring about change in its structure (or perhaps, why such change may be just short of impossible). These are some of the compelling reasons that one might strive to undertake a study of popular culture within the context of theology and religious studies.

Why is it that popular culture is associated with triviality, then? The roots of this approach go back to the earliest critiques of popular culture.

Popular Culture: Trivial or Threatening?

The phrase 'popular culture' first came into use in the English language in the early nineteenth century, when for the first time, it was possible to manufacture and widely distribute cultural products with relative ease and speed (Clark, 2006). Prior to the emergence of a capitalist market economy

with industrialization, 'the popular' was a term with legal and political meaning that derived from the Latin *popularis*, or 'belonging to the people.' The term was used as a way to draw distinctions between the views of 'the people' and those who wielded power over them. In the past, therefore, the term popular culture was used to reference the folk traditions created and maintained by the people outside of the purview of cultural authorities and away from the demands of labor.

As the working class that staffed the industrial landscape continued to grow in the 19th century, however, the bourgeoisie in industrialized Europe came to view the shared artifacts of working-class culture as evidence of both their unity and their inferiority. Early criticism of working-class popular culture therefore emerged in a context in which the bourgeoisie feared an uprising similar to that of the French Revolution. Known today as the 'culture and civilization' tradition, its first articulation appeared through the writings of Britain's famous poet, Matthew Arnold. In his book *Culture and Anarchy* Arnold argued that much of the problem of his generation lay in the emergent working class and their seeming refusal to adopt a position of subordination and deference to the elite and their culture.

The 'culture and civilization' tradition of popular cultural critiques found renewed expression in the writings of Frank R. and Queenie D. Leavis, who began writing about popular culture in the 1930s in England. Believing that popular culture provided a dangerous distraction to responsible participation in democracy, they advocated that public schools engage in education about the ill effects of popular culture on young people. In their writings, the Leavises promoted a mythic 'golden age' of England's rural past, in which they believed a 'common culture' (or 'folk' culture) had flourished. Their many treatises aimed to keep the expansion of popular culture's influence under control so as to maintain what they believed were the truly valuable aspects of England's cultural tradition.

A similar strand of thought has long been a part of U.S. approaches to popular culture. In 1957, Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White published *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, a collection of essays that bemoaned the supposed dehumanizing impact of popular culture, particularly mass mediated popular culture. In the shadow of the Cold War, the contributors to the Rosenberg and White volume feared that a passive audience in the sway of popular culture could be easily brought under the influence of a totalitarian government.

A fear of totalitarianism animated the writings of scholars such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Leo Lowenthal, and Herbert Marcuse of the Frankfurt School, as well. Like their U.S. counterparts, their intellectual roots were in Romanticism, although much more firmly located within Marxist critiques of labor relations and the power of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat masses. Ex-patriates from Hitler's Germany, scholars in the Frankfurt school feared the manipulative potential of popular culture through the workings of what they called the 'culture industries'. Although often dismissed as overly pessimistic in that they saw little potential for change in the relations between the privileged and the disadvantaged in society, these scholars (of the 'critical school') inaugurated several important streams of thought regarding popular culture. Particularly influential have been the ideas of critical theorist Walter Benjamin, whose attention to both the mass production and ideological role of images in contemporary society has been influential in debates of art, politics, and postmodernism. Equally important, the critical school spawned the scholarly tradition of cultural imperialism, which came to prominence in the 1970s as it explored the flow of mass media across national borders. Latin American scholars of media and popular culture such as Antonio Pasquali, Luis Ramiro Beltran, Fernandez Reyes Matta, and Mario Kaplun, as well as Herb Schiller in the U.S. and Dallas Smythe in Canada, were concerned about the ways in which multinational media corporations were, through the organization of profit and commerce, able to dominate the development of media, and by extension popular culture and the commercial marketplace, in smaller and less wealthy nations.

In contemporary studies and critiques of popular culture, one often witnesses strains of thought from these earlier explorations, from a dismissal of popular culture as banal and threatening to western civilization, to a concern about its potential to narcotize and depoliticize, to the fear that western popular culture's ubiquity will undermine the authenticity and uniqueness of those cultures at some distance from Hollywood. By the 1980s, however, some scholars of popular culture began to question these often-undermodulated concerns about the popular culture and the implications of its incursion into everyday life.

Studying Popular Culture and Everyday Life

With the rise of reader-response theory in literary criticism, 'pop art' that questioned 'high culture/low culture' distinctions, and the prominence of feminism, black, and cross-cultural perspectives in the late 1970s and

1980s, a new school of thought regarding popular culture had begun to take root in North America, Europe, Latin America, and Australia. Building upon interdisciplinary social theory and critical theorists' interests in the role the mass media play in social organization, the cultural studies approach to popular culture had its beginnings primarily in literature departments in the USA and in departments of sociology in Britain, Australia, and Latin America.

In the UK much of the early scholarship in cultural studies approaches to popular culture arose in response to the Frankfurt school's pessimism and the Leavis's bleak outlook on the demise of English high culture. In the 1970s and 1980s, scholars in cultural studies in Britain sought to demonstrate that audiences were not passive consumers of the products produced for them by the culture industries. Drawing upon the earlier scholarship of British historical cultural theorists, notably Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and E.P. Thompson, cultural studies scholars such as Stuart Hall, David Morley, Charlotte Brunsden, and those at the Birmingham School set out to demonstrate the importance of the 'decoding' rather than the 'encoding' processes of mass mediated popular culture, to quote an oft-cited essay by Stuart Hall (1990). Pointing to such factors as the vast numbers of heavily promoted popular cultural artefacts that failed to find a positive reception in the marketplace, cultural studies scholars argued that popular cultural artefacts must meet the emotional needs of their audiences in order to succeed in the cultural economy (Fiske, 1989). Methodologies differed, although many embraced textual criticism, semiotics, audience reception research, and cultural history (Ang, 1995; Zelizer, 2000).

In the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium, a reinvigoration of neo-Marxism through the emergence of postcolonial perspectives and critiques in anthropological methods, combined with a renewed interest in cultural history, everyday life, and issues of visual representation, redirected cultural studies toward its central concern with the ways in which specific narratives and representations contribute to maintaining power relations as they are.

The rise of interest in popular culture across scholarly disciplines is therefore intimately related to the emergence of 'grand theories' in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. During those decades, scholars across the humanities and social sciences were reading the works of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze, and later Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, each of whom foregrounded issues of represen-

tation, narrative, discourse, construction of meaning, and geographical contextualization in differing ways. Some in the social sciences began experimenting with what Clifford Geertz (1980) termed 'genre mixing', importing into scholarly narratives experimental forms of writing from the humanities while also borrowing from the humanities the metaphors of game, drama, and text as means to analyze social life and organization. Meanwhile, those in the humanities began more fulsome dialogues with the social sciences and the study of everyday life. After the 1960s, the field of theology began to move away from a model of a rational and reflective theological process to one that embraced a theology oriented not toward thinking but toward 'doing', 'experiencing', and practicing. Religious studies, too, followed this trend toward the everyday, while also seeking to depart from what Ninian Smart (1986, p.158) has referred to as the 'grip of the Christian establishment' on that field. This grip 'prevents an openness of approach, and means that interested agnostic, Jewish and other 'outsiders' are discouraged from taking up the subject.' After the 1960s, religious studies therefore became a more wholeheartedly 'secular' discipline, interested in exploring religion and the beliefs, behaviours, and institutions associated with it. Husserl's phenomenological approach became highly influential on religious studies, encouraging scholars to come as close as possible to understanding the 'meaning' of religious phenomena studied and to explore ways to communicate that understanding with as much depth as possible.

This focus on everyday life and on meaning is therefore central to an important argument for the study of popular culture in theology and religious studies, as Gordon Lynch has argued. Lynch notes that the study of popular culture should be seen within the context of the growing interest in the study of everyday life that dates at least to the end of the nineteenth century. It is 'part of a longer tradition in which the environment, practices, and resources of everyday life have been considered to be suitable subjects for critical academic study' (Lynch, 2005, p.15). As Lynch (*ibid.*) continues, 'thinking about popular culture as the shared environment, practices, and resources of everyday life is a useful way of approaching this subject because it both helps us to maintain an open mind to studying whatever may be significant in everyday life and in a particular social context.' To the extent that scholars want to understand life as experienced from the ground up, popular cultural studies are going to be an inevitable and highly salient way for us to probe meaning-making practices of everyday lives.

Studying Religion and Popular Culture Today

Today, scholars are engaging in the study of religion and popular culture across a range of disciplines. The study of religion and popular culture is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing upon theories and methodologies from sociology, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, history, literary criticism, and media studies. Differences in methodology, concerns, and philosophical commitments tend to vary according to disciplines, and thus whereas the field (if indeed it might be called a field) will never be standardized, there are ways in which scholars might learn from compatriots who hail from different disciplines. The remainder of this chapter is therefore devoted to highlighting some of the most significant works in this area, categorizing them according to how they articulate their reasons for study.

Within the field of religious studies are several scholars who primarily see their work as speaking to others in religious studies, offering popular cultural analyses that shed light on pressing problems in the methodologies and theories of religion. Perhaps the most thorough explication of why scholars in religious studies and theology might want to study popular culture and how they might go about it can be found in Gordon Lynch's (2005) *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*. This book explains roots of popular cultural studies in a way that complements and extends the argument presented here, while also modeling how one might engage in author-centric, reader-response, and cultural analytical approaches to the exploration of popular culture and religion. A similar approach is taken in Kelton Cobb's (2005) *Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*.

Some of the most influential studies of popular culture and religion in recent years have come from historians of religion and material culture, such as R. Laurence Moore's (1995) *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*, Colleen McDannell's (1995) *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*, David Morgan's (1998) *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*, and Leigh Eric Schmidt's (1997) *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays*, all published in the mid-1990s. More recently, David Paul Nord (2004) has published what is sure to become a standard in exploring the role of the conservative Christian religion in the development of the U.S. media industries, called, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America*.

Studies of religion and popular culture, and courses on this topic within religious studies and theology departments, began to proliferate from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s. This led to several edited volumes on the

topic, such as Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy's (2001) *God in the Details: American Religion and Popular Culture*, Bruce Forbes and Jeffrey Mahan's (2000/2005) *Religion and Poplar Culture in America*, John Giggie and Diane Winston's (2002) *Faith in the Market*, and David Morgan and Sally Promey's (1996) *Icons of American Protestantism*. Also included here but more specifically focused on religion and mass mediated elements of popular culture would be my edited volume, *Religion, Media, and the Marketplace* (Clark, 2007) and Birgit Meyers and Anneleis Moores' (2005) *Religion, Media, and the Public Sphere*, and the earlier edited volumes *Mediating Religion* (Mitchell & Marriage, 2003), *Religion and Popular Culture* (Stout & Budenbaum, 2000), *Belief in Media* (Horsfield, Hess & Medrano, 2004), *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media* (Hoover & Clark, 2002), *Quoting God* (Badaracco, 2004), *Star Trek and Sacred Ground* (Porter & McLaren, 2000), and *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* (Hoover & Lundby, 1997).

By the middle of the first decade in the new millennium, several books on popular culture and religion modeled an approach that took seriously the experiences of religion in everyday life and the intersection of popular culture with those everyday concerns. Diane Winston's (2000) *Red Hot and Righteous* traced the ways in which the Salvation Army employed forces of urbanization and commercialization to its advantage but ultimately could not control the way the movement was portrayed in the media. Tona Hangen's (2001) *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, and Popular Culture in America* followed the evangelical use of radio from the early part of the 20th century, tracing how this movement experimented with uses of communication technology in order to build a coalition of like-minded believers. A similar book with a more theological orientation was Jolyon Mitchell's (1999) *Visually Speaking: Radio and the Renaissance of Preaching*. My own *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (Clark, 2005) explored how popular culture's stories of the supernatural provided a framework for both religious and not-so-religious young people to think about religion, the afterlife, the supernatural, and the paranormal in a way sometimes remarkably similar to the evangelical/fundamentalist 'hellfire and brimstone' approach of two centuries earlier. Rebecca Sullivan's (2005) *Visual Habits: Nuns, Feminism, and American Postwar Popular Culture* similarly traced how representations of religious sisters shaped understandings and acceptance of jovial and traditional nuns even as their roles in society were dramatically shifting away from the peaceful to the activist and feminist-inspired sisters of today. Heather Hendershot's (2004) *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* offered an

historically grounded exploration for why the Christian retailing industry had taken off by the end of the 20th century, exploring the dubious negotiations the creators of such popular cultural products underwent to make their efforts palatable to those outside the fold while satisfying their primary market of conservative Christians. And in *The Religion of the Media Age*, Stewart Hoover (2006) explored the growth of more individually-oriented religious practices in the U.S. and the development of an individually-oriented consumerist marketplace that both reflects and takes advantage of this new spiritual orientation.

By the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, religious studies scholars were also entering into this field with a host of manuscript-length contributions. In the book *Rapture Culture*, Amy Johnson Frykholm (2004), a professor of religion, literature, and cultural studies, sought to add a correction to the fact that whereas many in religious studies discuss the importance of understanding everyday life experiences and meaning making practices of religious practitioners, they rarely extend popular cultural studies to examinations of their reception. Frykholm therefore conducted a reader-response study of the popular *Left Behind* book series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Frykholm's book illuminated why some people read the books and others find them appalling, shedding light on why the story of the apocalypse is found to be so compelling among conservative Christians in the U.S..

Frykholm's work built upon an earlier practice of exploring media texts as influential in the construction of religious social movements and their relation to mainstream U.S. culture. In Mark Hulsether's (1999) book, *Building a Protestant Left: Christianity and Crisis Magazine, 1941-1993*, a detailed history of a significant left-leaning religious publication provides insights into the religious support of peace activism, feminism, and civil rights, among other issues.

Similarly, Sean McCloud's (2004) book *Making the American Fringe: Exotics, Subversives, and Journalists, 1955-1993*, scholars in religious studies are introduced to the analysis of mainstream media reports in the exploration of how certain beliefs are portrayed as 'fringe' whereas others are taken for granted as reflecting the 'mainstream'. His book looks at important considerations in religious studies such as the role of emotions in religion, the different perceptions of normal versus 'abnormal' levels of piety in religious practice, and the role of the media industries in constructing religious understandings.

Complementing the study of evangelicals and their culture, the Protestant Left, and the study of the religious fringe, religious studies scholars such as Brent Plate (2003) have examined how films and popular cultural artifacts from various places around the world might be helpfully placed in dialogue with one another to illuminate key concepts in religious studies such as myth, memory, creation, and redemption. Employing writings by Walter Benjamin, Plate (2004) looks at developments in architecture, art, and film in light of religious developments around the world, thereby shedding light on religion as well as on the larger cultural textures that shape and reflect its sensibilities at particular moments in history. Also writing on film but from a more theological vein, John Lyden (2003) discusses the ways in which moviegoing performs religious functions in U.S. culture, and Tom Beaudoin (1998) has explored both the role of popular culture in 'Generation X' religious sensibilities and the rise of branding and its implications for the development of an economically-informed spirituality.

I have referred to these religious studies as 'brave', in that they have foregone the previous tendency in religious studies to explore popular culture as a dilettante or as a form of 'scholarly slumming'. For a long time, conventional wisdom held that those in religious studies in theology should attain expertise in something suitably ancient and respectable, only to 'dabble' in popular cultural studies after tenure had been safely secured. I have argued that those interested in the study of popular culture and religion should make it a point to read and cite works by these scholars, for their work represents a truly pioneering turn within the field of religious studies. I have also suggested that one way that scholars in this approach can build a body of work that is viewed as legitimate by the larger field of religious studies is to intentionally seek out ways to put popular cultural scholarship in dialogue with more traditional approaches, co-organizing panels in such American Academy of Religion divisions as the History of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, or Comparative Religion sections. In this way, those interested in popular culture can be in conversation with issues considered to be of key importance among religious studies scholars in these various sections and divisions. Similarly, I encourage those interested in legitimating the study of popular culture in the wider fields of religious studies and theology to invite those from other fields to participate in cross-disciplinary conferences, organizing panels including established scholars from other fields to the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion, the Society for the Scientific

Study of Religion, and the British and American Sociological Associations, among others. Such efforts are likely to help to deepen relationships across disciplines, while also developing scholarship on popular culture and religion that will be of broader interest to those beginning to consider the topic.

Conclusion

The question that started this chapter, then, has multiple answers. Why should one study culture, and popular culture in particular in the context of theology and the study of religion? As has been discussed, the study of popular culture enables the scholar to transcend popular culture and reflect upon wider issues of religion's role in society. Such studies offer insights into how various religions might be represented and understood, how various popular cultural artifacts become adopted by religious subcultures as a means of establishing and reinforcing identity, how popular culture becomes a resource through which people can reflect and discuss with others their own views and practices, and how religious traditions might be meaningfully communicated to future generations through emotionally captivating stories, images, sounds, and rituals. The study of popular culture, therefore, does not need to have a particularly salvific aspect to it, or a politically motivated purpose that might lead scholars to better understand how to contribute to a social revolution that they (or we) may feel is necessary. David Morgan, one of the foremost scholars in the study of popular culture and religion, has explicitly argued against these politically-motivated aims. He writes (personal correspondence, March 18, 2007):

I am wary of defending the study of popular culture (let alone any other forms of culture) on the basis that it will enhance people's lives or lead to greater social justice or pursue Truth. What it will lead to, it seems to me, is richer, more perceptive analysis and understanding of why people do what they do and how they build and sustain the imagined and lived worlds in which they exist.

The study of religion and popular culture may therefore be viewed as a particularly accessible way in which scholars can explore everyday life. Through its study, we may gain insight into how people construct and maintain the world in which they live, and how they are able to imagine a way in which to behave within that world.