

The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture

Kelton Cobb



Blackwell
Publishing

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	viii
<i>Introduction</i>	1
Part I Theories of Popular Culture	27
1 Popular Culture	29
2 Cultural Studies	53
3 Theology and Culture	72
4 Theological Tools	101
Part II A Theology of Popular Culture	133
5 Images of God	135
6 Human Nature	177
7 Sin	211
8 Salvation	229
9 Life Everlasting	262
<i>Conclusion</i>	291
<i>Notes</i>	295
<i>Bibliography</i>	324
<i>Index</i>	343

Introduction

In Battery Park in Lower Manhattan, next to a cart selling roasted pecans and hot pretzels, is a kiosk with Empire State Building pencil sharpeners, Statue of Liberty snow globes, and the standard-issue rack of souvenir postcards. On this rack are pictures of Grand Central Station, St Patrick's Cathedral, Central Park, the United Nations Plaza, the Chrysler Building, the American Museum of Natural History, the Guggenheim Museum, and Macy's Department Store. That each of these architectural marvels came to be built represents not only a confluence of political clout, engineering expertise, artistic craftsmanship and vast outlays of cash, but also a considerable level of public consent for what kinds of aspirations are worth enshrining in beautiful buildings.

This rack of postcards, like that at any tourist kiosk in any big city, can be read like a book that tells us what matters most to its citizens. The objects depicted on these postcards are human values that have been sheathed with rebar, stone, and glass and veined with romex and fiber optics. In this manner, they serve both as monuments to human values, and as instruments which can further extend the reach of those values into the community. They are *monuments* in that much creative genius has been lavished upon them to testify to the worthiness of a particular value; they are *instruments* in that they create a venue for that particular value to be pursued. We build magnificent buildings to provide physical bodies for our cultural values.

Thus, the landmark architecture pictured on New York City postcards can be read as an inventory of the particular human activities that are valued in American culture. Grand Central Station is a monument to and instrument of *freedom* (of physical movement); Central Park is a monument to and instrument of *leisure*; St Patrick's Cathedral is a monument to and instrument of *religion*; the Chrysler Building and Macy's are monuments to and instruments of the *economy*; the United Nations Plaza is a monument to and instrument of *politics*; the Guggenheim Museum

is a monument to and instrument of *art*; the Museum of Natural History is a monument to and instrument of *knowledge*. It is in this respect that ecclesial terms are sometimes used as metaphors in relation to such landmark structures: Macy's is a "cathedral of commerce"; the Guggenheim is a "sanctuary of art"; the Museum of Natural History is a "temple of science," etc. Some discrete cultural value is being venerated and practiced within the walls of each.

The use of this sacred space metaphor in landmark architecture has a parallel in more general discussions of the value spheres that the buildings are built to enshrine. It has become common to say "art is religion," that we should have "faith in science," or that "the market is God." What is meant in these expressions is that something like faith and worship has come to be attached to art, science, and the economy. Just as the veneration of certain values may be expressed through the beauty of great architecture, these values can also become objects of a more generalized religious piety. Sociologists such as Max Weber and Michael Walzer have argued that at an earlier period in the history of the West, our ancestors conceived of their primary identity as tribal or religious (these typically overlapped), but that there has been a gradual differentiation or separating out of the cultural value spheres (religion, family, art, science, politics, economy, etc.) such that it is now possible for a person to claim that their *primary* identity derives from any one of these – e.g., profession, economic status, national origin, etc. – and to view religion as a secondary attribute. What is happening here is that the *good* for which one of these other value spheres exists to serve is being asserted as the *most* central or ultimate good in one's life.

The status of art as "religion" in some quarters is a good illustration of this. It is common today to view the artist as a prophet or seer. Wassily Kandinsky's 1911 manifesto, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, captured this notion of the artist who "is not born to a life of pleasure," but undergoing scorn and hatred must "see and point the way," dragging humanity forward. He wrote,

Literature, music and art are the first and most sensitive spheres in which this spiritual revolution makes itself felt. They reflect the dark picture of the present time and show the importance of what at first was only a little point of light noticed by few and for the great majority non-existent. Perhaps they even grow dark in their turn, but on the other hand they turn away from the soulless life of the present towards those substances and ideas which give free scope to the non-material strivings of the soul.¹

This attribution of prophetic insight to the artist who has the power to see behind the surface of things, to reveal what is otherwise hidden,

developed into the prototype of the avant-garde artist who tells the truth of his feelings and sheds an unflattering light on a society's sins and the dangerous directions in which it is headed, and then pays the consequences for rendering this service. This is a modern conception in its assertion that art is an autonomous source of knowledge about the truth of reality. Previous to this, art was viewed as mediating an authority that was not its own, and in the West, this meant the authority of the religious tradition. As one author has described it, "Whatever moral passion a medieval artist brought to a fresco, contemporaries viewing it would regard the biblical story – not the artist himself or his illustration of it – as the source of authority."² The Renaissance was the turning point here. For a variety of reasons – disenchantment with corruption in the Church, diverging sources of patronage, the rediscovery of classical learning – iconography began to slide away from the monopoly of religion and re-root itself in other domains of culture – art and literature in particular. This had the effect of sacralizing art and literature as independent sources of wisdom and revelation.

Symbols once inseparable from religious myth and ritual thus began to wander, often in disguise, into other cultural spheres, carrying with them their inherent aura and an authority that was once derived from religion but became autonomous. Art is not unique in making this excursion. Science, politics, family, and the economy were also once acolytes of the religious sphere in the history of the West. Their justification as domains of human activity was that they served the good of religion – the knowledge of God and God's ways (science), the governance and the containment of sin in the kingdom of God (politics), the multiplication and nurture of souls on their journey to God (family), and management of the household of the children of God (economy). Here, too, it was with the Renaissance that these once dependent cultural spheres began a long protest that won their independence and progressed into the precious achievement of modernity, *viz.*, the refraction of our lives into multiple autonomous spheres of activity (art, science, politics, family, economy). In practice, we assume that each of these spheres stands on its own bottom – we presume a discrete good is being pursued within each one. There are clues to this assumption in slogans such as "art for art's sake," "science is the uninhibited pursuit of truth," "my country, right or wrong," "blood is thicker than water," and "the invisible hand of the market." Indeed, there is a distinct and legitimate good inside each of these spheres that each of the spheres exists to protect, proclaim, and foster – with all the instruments at their disposal: creeds, laws, institutions, poetry, monuments, schools, myths, and rituals.

This differentiation of the spheres has been an important achievement, one that ought not to be reversed. Nevertheless, it is worth noting a few

implications of this brief archeology of the concept of cultural spheres. First, the differentiation itself was driven by the belief that some transcendent good is at the center of each sphere and that the activities and pursuits distinct to that sphere are authorized by the good that is being served through it. Second, there is what has been called a “sovereignty” to each of the spheres that ought not to be violated by the other spheres.³ The good of the family, for instance, ought not to be violated by the good of the market. Frequent job transfers necessitated by one’s desire to climb the corporate ladder would be an example of such a violation – at the point when these moves threaten to unravel the family. But from the other side, the good of the market ought not to be violated by the good of the family – nepotism would be an example here. Third, given that each sphere is oriented to a distinct good, each sphere develops its own norms of inquiry and analysis. Norms are always subordinate to the good they seek to protect – different goods give rise to different norms. Thus, each sphere can be identified with its own discipline of inquiry. For art there is aesthetics, for politics there is political science, for the economy there is economics, etc.

To illustrate this last point, take the phenomenon of the American lawn. The Puritans did not find neatly trimmed expanses of grass when they landed on these shores. The lawn is a social phenomenon with a cultural history that can be submitted to different kinds of analysis, each one of which gives us a fuller understanding of what a lawn “means.” An *aesthetic analysis* might seek to better understand the peculiar notion of beauty or naturalism that inspires us to lay down yards of mown green grass on the landscape around not only our homes, but our factories, colleges, corporate headquarters, boulevards, municipal buildings, and graveyards. A *socio-political analysis* might concentrate instead on the City Beautiful Movement or the spread of Garden Clubs in the early twentieth century and their expressed desire to promote health and sanitation, civic pride, neighborhood stability and a work ethic among the urban poor through “beautification campaigns” designed to stimulate their desire for lawns and gardens. And an *economic analysis* might uncover the efforts of seed companies, mower manufacturers, and chemical producers to increase the national demand for lawns, or the lobbying of the US Golf Association, a private sector trade organization, for substantial government grants to develop turf-grass hybrids and to promote golfing and a grass aesthetic across the country.⁴

With this in mind, the purpose of this book is to undertake a *theological analysis* of ordinary cultural phenomena, such as the lawn, that will bring to bear concepts and norms that have been honed within the disciplines of theology and religious studies. It is not offered as a line of inquiry that replaces all others, but as a way of inquiring into aspects

of these phenomena that the norms and methods of other disciplines, such as aesthetics, political theory, and economics, are not designed to detect. What might a theological analysis of the American lawn discover? It might draw attention to the systole and diastole one finds in the Bible between city and wilderness, with recurring admonitions of the Hebrew prophets for the faithful to return to the wilderness as a place they had once traversed and where they had been closer to God. Or it might draw a connection between the myth of Eden, a place where the footsteps of God could be heard in the cool of the evening breeze, which was not raw wilderness but a cultivated garden, and the blend of nature and horticulture that the modern lawn represents. Or, it might review the long and honored tradition in America of looking to nature for direction and purpose, with various permutations from the Puritans who undertook a divine “errand in the wilderness,” to Emerson, Thoreau, and the Boston Transcendentalists who expected to find God more unobstructed in nature than in church, to various more contemporary deep ecologists who seek in the processes of nature a moral teacher and spiritual guide. In light of these more overt religious symbols and aspirations, what does it mean that we surround the lodgings of all our endeavors – our homes, schools, factories, corporate headquarters, government buildings, museums, highways, hospitals, and final resting places with green vegetation that someone has to fertilize and mow?

Again, while this line of inquiry is not meant to replace all others, it is my belief that it, in a literal sense, transcends them. It seeks to go beyond the limits of other inquiries, limits that they properly impose upon themselves (when they behave as they should). I am convinced that it is worthwhile to resume Paul Tillich’s efforts to interpret cultural artifacts for the religious substance that rumbles in their deeper regions. As he proposed and argued repeatedly, beginning with his groundbreaking 1919 essay, “On the Idea of a Theology of Culture”: while religions depend upon the cultures in which they find themselves for their forms of expression, cultures draw the meaning that they hold for those who inhabit them from an underlying substrate of religious faith. Without this, there is little passion for the culture’s achievements and aspirations.

Christian theology is an old discipline which has been used to make sense of human life through twenty centuries and from within virtually every culture in the world today. It is ancient yet still active, experienced on many fronts, capable of learning from grievous transgressions of which it has periodically been guilty (anti-Semitism, *autos-da-fé*, slavery, misogyny, witchhunts) and from other moments in which it has been a historically effective instrument of grace (the rise of the universities, literacy, democratic movements, abolition, women’s suffrage, prison reform, civil rights). In certain respects it is a large vessel into which

its practitioners – who have been around to observe, learn from, and sometimes instigate all manner of historical experimentation and popular movements – have deposited their accumulated lessons. I view this vessel as a resource of paradigmatic plots, symbols, ideals, visions of good and evil – reference points upon which to draw in trying to make sense of our collective life. Christian theology has certain enduring – although not changeless – conceptions about an ultimate reality in response to which we are to measure our actions, intentions, and aspirations. For this reason, it is a valuable resource for interpreting our cultural life as it is unfolding, and offering commentary and guidance, dissent and endorsement.

One historian, Eugene McCarragher, has recently argued that most of the effective cultural critique in twentieth century America – effective in the sense that it actually precipitated social reform – originated from certain strains of progressive Christian theology (Dorothy Day, John Ryan, H. Richard Niebuhr), and not from their secular counterparts. Their effectiveness can be attributed, he argues, to three things: first, that they really believed in the possibility and imperative of redemption; second, that their critical capacities were informed by norms that had been formed outside the immediate *Sturm und Drang* of the cultural situation; and third, that they were inside members of organized cells of workers, *viz.*, congregations, cells which already had so permeated the society that they could transform class struggle into a historical movement. As a historian applying these lessons to the present, he ventures: in the face of “a brawny and agile capitalism, religion may well become the last refuge of hope for a world beyond the rule of Mammon.”⁵

But theology could use some help, and coming to a better understanding of popular culture and its fascinations might assist theology to overcome some of its own prejudices and break through some of its impasses. It is worth noting that a great number of people are finding solace in popular culture, solace they find lacking in organized religion. Theologian Richard Mouw suggests that there is a middle range of concerns for ordinary people (health, financial resources, intimate relationships, loss of loved ones, depression, guilt) toward which “high theology” remains aloof. Consequently, people turn to things like folk religion, the New Age, superstition, belief in angels and demons, which offer an account of and techniques for dealing with these concerns.⁶ Trusting that there is a practical wisdom to be found in ordinary people, Mouw advises that it will be worthwhile to examine popular culture for legitimate critique of the shortcomings of theology that have so distanced it from people struggling to believe. He writes, “We must probe the hidden places: looking for the signs of eloquence and grace to be found there; listening for deep calling unto deep; searching, not only for the Deeper Magic, but

also for the Deeper Quests, the Deeper Pleasures, the Deeper Hurts, the Deeper Plots.”⁷

Theologians in the past have tended to assume, correctly for the most part, that the believers they addressed had a basic working knowledge of the biblical stories, paradigmatic figures in the church, sanctioned ritual actions and symbols, and the essentials of the creeds. We are in a new era now, however, in which, for reasons that will be explored as we proceed, whole generations in the West have had their basic conceptions of the world formed by popular culture. Television, movies, a multitude of genres of music, amusement parks, fast food franchises, action heroes, Dr Seuss, Disney, DreamWorks, comic books, advertising, soundtracks, mail order catalogs, video games, contemporary fiction, sports, celebrities, journalism, wall art and science fiction have been the primary sources of the myths, parables, iconographies, hagiographies, devils and heroes that orient them in life. From this plethora of material whole generations now attempt through *bricolage* to invest life with meaning and find a justification for their lives. The mechanization of production, advances in communications technologies, and increased expendable wealth have made this possible. At least these are the material causes of this cultural development. They have not only made the artifacts of popular culture accessible to us, they have also altered the world of work and the demands of the household in ways that have shifted more of our time from work to leisure. And we spend more and more of our leisure time plugged in to the media-world⁸ of popular culture.

This has meant, for many, shifting to a different arena in our search for our identities as human beings. As rock critic Simon Frith has suggested, it is in our leisure activities that we find our “pathways” through life, more so now than through our “paid employment.” We find in pop music and other storytelling media the narratives about life that are most convincing to us, that best make sense of our lives, and we are persuaded that they express our “most deep-seated ethical views.”⁹

The media-world has, in this sense, become a new cultural sphere with its own distinctive good and guiding norms, its own protective institutions, its own creeds, laws, monuments, prophets, myths and rituals, and discipline of inquiry (culture studies). We are coming to inhabit this sphere with as much comfort and conviction as we have inhabited the spheres of science, art, family, economy, and politics in the past. It is telling that when all of our obligations (to the other spheres) are met, when we can freely choose what we want to do – at the end of the day, at the end of the week, during holidays and vacations – the vast majority of us, at least in the US, choose to enter the media-world. In the words of the advertising motto for Play Station video games: “Live in your world, play in ours.”

And we are finding more excuses to reduce our other obligations in order to spend even more time immersed in it.

What has been said so far is not intended to be a harangue, but rather a quick justification for what lies ahead in this book, and for why a theologian might venture into this territory, and why it is worthwhile to undertake a theological analysis of popular culture. Souvenir postcards, landmark architecture, Kentucky bluegrass – these and other cultural artifacts, properly interrogated, might divulge to us something about the ultimate yearnings of our culture. That’s what this book is about.

Reading the Signs of the Times

The Second Vatican Council tract, *Gaudium et Spes*, among the more significant documents to emerge from the Council, was organized around the proposal that “At all times the Church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task.” This trope, “reading the signs of the time,” is an allusion to Matthew 16.3, in which Jesus criticizes religious leaders who can interpret the skies for tomorrow’s weather, but cannot grasp the work of God in what is going on around them. The writers of *Gaudium et Spes*, in drawing on this trope, remind their readers that theological reflection which seeks to understand the ways of God must begin with an informed effort to ascertain the historical forces, convictions and hopes that are in play at a particular cultural moment. The paragraph goes on, “We must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings, and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live.”¹⁰ This admonition has become a standard feature of Catholic “social teachings,” with every papal encyclical beginning with reflections on some fresh cultural development. Such signs are to be approached as registers of God’s presence in the world, where God continues to be revealed.

This trope also echoes a question posed by the disciples to Jesus as he was issuing his apocalyptic warnings near the end of his life. “Tell us,” they asked, “what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Mt. 24.3). What signs will alert us, in other words, to anticipate that a new order is at hand. Jesus went on to describe to them a bleak scenario of wars, famines, earthquakes, and widespread lawlessness. Great upheavals precede the unveiling of a new order, his message seemed to be. With this, Jesus gave us one of the most enduring plotlines of Western history, internalized in our consciousness and rehearsed in probably every generation since to make sense of the tumult that never really desists for long. The belief that the tumult of our present moment in modernity is foreshadowing a new order is a pervasive theme in our culture, inside and

outside of the church, a preoccupation of sufficiently pressing importance that we have come to refer to our times as *postmodern*. This is a “sign” worth noting.

Antinomianism and Anarchy

In 1975, Robert Bellah, after reflecting on the cultural experimentation of the 1960s’ counterculture, made the comment, “A period of great social change always produces a certain amount of antinomianism and anarchism.”¹¹ Antinomianism is a rich term in Christian theology, referring to Gnostic sects in the early centuries of the church, some of them loosely Christian, who believed that spirit and matter were so opposed to each other that what one did with one’s body was of no consequence to the condition of one’s soul. This led to excesses of bacchanalian proportions among some sects. It found a justification in the Pauline view that because we are saved by God’s gracious action on our behalf, we are freed from a strict observation of the law – a conclusion to which Paul strenuously objected. Anarchism is the belief that external laws and moral codes ought to be overthrown in order to allow people to govern themselves by their own best judgment.

Bellah’s observation is a trenchant one, given that both antinomianism and anarchism have their advocates today, as much of the material that will be examined in the pages ahead will testify. Consumerism is a form of antinomianism, the therapeutic as a mode of life is anarchistic, and both antinomianism and anarchism travel well with the individualism that characterizes our time. If he is right that these two creeds are harbingers of “great social change,” then we are right to be on the look out for what is next.

A similar account of what distinguishes our time is found in those who draw attention to our loss of faith. Not the loss of faith in God, or in transcendent reality – that loss was already sustained in the early twentieth century, as reported in advance by Nietzsche – but a second-stage loss of faith in the very things that compensated us for our loss of God. According to this view, our time is suffering from a loss of faith in progress, the great promise of the Enlightenment. Moreover, there has been a loss of faith in the capacity of modernity to provide our lives with a sense of meaning, whether through science, art, democratic institutions, or modern master narratives of global harmony. And most recently, there is a gathering disillusionment with the promises of material consumption, with the ideology of consumerism itself. This disillusionment has been deferred longer than Marx anticipated, due to the genius of marketers who learned how to

harness the power of commodity fetishism and to insert brands into the sockets of our lives that were once filled with religious symbols and icons.

But there are multiple signs that our faith in the life-giving powers of commodities and even of the semiotic mythologies of brands and logos – the ethereal world that invests commodities with their meaning – is giving out, and that we are no longer satisfied by the compensation they offer. Take, for instance, the phenomenon of brands that have had virtually no marketing becoming the “underground darlings” of subcultures (like bike messengers and snowboarders) – subcultures whose strategy is not to avoid consumption, but to consume “square” and unknown brands as a form of protest. Recent beneficiaries of this loyalty to non-brands have been Doc Martens footwear, Pabst Blue Ribbon Beer, and Toyota’s new and unadvertised Scion line of cars. These under-marketed brands have been elevated to the status of “fashion accessories” for aspiring anarchists, a way of registering solidarity with a “lifestyle of dissent” that resents the omnipresent brandscaping of our culture.¹² Some view this and other losses of faith in the various promises of modernity as revealing an aporia that will create an occasion for a re-enchantment of the world.¹³ Others simply mark it as a feature of the malaise of the present that we must find a way beyond.

A poignant instance of this backlash is the 1999 film, *FightClub*.¹⁴ *FightClub*, based on a novel of the same name by Chuck Palahniuk, is a parable about the life-sapping grip of commodities and brands on our identities. It is built around a character named Jack who works for an automobile maker as a recall coordinator who flies around the country investigating gory car wrecks in order to determine whether mechanical failure was at fault, and, if so, to calculate, on behalf of his employer, the expense of initiating recalls versus the anticipated costs of out-of-court settlements. This macabre line of work has distanced him somewhat from his feelings. Jack (Edward Norton) is in his early thirties, calm, likable, but a bit bland, without friends or family. He lives in a stylish high-rise condo outfitted entirely with designer-name furniture, kitchenware, and wardrobe that he has acquired from mail order catalogs. Suffering from insomnia and a vague longing for something to matter in his life, he seeks solace in support groups for a variety of ailments he does not have. Then one night, returning from the airport, he discovers his condo has been blown-up, and out of the blue he calls a soap salesman he had just met on the plane, a character named Tyler (Brad Pitt) who is half Good Samaritan, half sociopath.

Tyler invites Jack to meet him at a nearby bar, and over beers Jack tries to size up his loss:

Jack: I don’t know, it’s just that when you buy furniture you tell yourself, “That’s it, that’s the last sofa I’m going to need. Whatever else happens,

I've got that sofa problem handled." I had it all. I had a stereo that was very decent, a wardrobe that was getting very respectable. It was close to being complete.

Tyler: Shit, man, now it's all gone.

Jack: All gone.

Tyler: All gone. Do you know what a duvet is?

Jack: It's a comforter.

Tyler: It's a blanket. Just a blanket. Now why do guys like you and I know what a duvet is? Is this essential to our survival, in the hunter-gatherer sense of the word? No. What are we then?

Jack: Consumers . . .

Tyler: Right, consumers. We are by-products of a lifestyle obsession. Murder, crime, poverty – these things don't concern me. What concerns me are celebrity magazines, television with 500 channels, some guy's name on my underwear. Rogaine, Viagra, Olestra . . .

Jack: Martha Stewart.

Tyler: F – k Martha Stewart. Martha's just polishing the brass on the Titanic. It's all goin' down, man. . . . But that's me, I could be wrong, maybe it's a terrible tragedy.

Jack: Naw, it's just stuff. It's not a tragedy.

Tyler: Well, you did lose a lot of versatile solutions for modern living. . . . Look, things you own end up owning you.

Thus begins Jack's apprenticeship to an ad hoc twelve-step program that Tyler devises to free Jack from his bondage to the dominant paradigm of consumerism. It involves Jack in making a lot of bad choices, and escalates to "Project Mayhem," a guerilla war on corporate America with missions ranging from bashing luxury cars parked on the street with a baseball bat, to "Operation Latté Thunder" (dislodging an elephant-sized bronze sphere from its pedestal above a corporate fountain and aiming it to roll down an embankment to crash through a franchise coffee bar), to the culminating assignment of a coordinated detonation of explosives in the skyscraper headquarters of every credit card company in the US, thereby completely erasing everyone's debt record, and ensuring that "we all go back to zero – total chaos."

This is a movie that has tremendous cachet with Generation Y. It has been compared to *The Graduate* as a work of popular art that speaks of the frustration and resentment that at least a large segment of this generation harbors toward their predecessors for the world they have been handed. The story does not advocate the measures it depicts, but it does intend to be a scathing critique of the ubiquitous branding of our lives. Palahniuk has said that his intention with the book was to offer people "the idea that they could create their own lives outside the

existing blueprint for happiness offered by society.” And this blueprint that is circulating has the logos of corporate sponsorship limned onto every square inch.

FightClub is a parable about the emptiness of a life full of consumable products. It commends, at least on the surface, a solution replete with aggressive anarchism and antinomianism. We do, it seems, live in a hinge period between eras. The anarchism and antinomianism that Bellah reminds us is to be expected in such a time has proven fruitful for much experimentation in both critiques and overarching visions of what life might mean in the new era we are just entering. Such experimentation tends to be fractal in the sense that it tends to generate clear alternatives that themselves come to impasses, and then new alternatives emerge. The counterculture movement of the 1960s, for instance, which was itself an assertion of freedom against post-war consumerism, has been charged with becoming the very “bourgeois bohemianism”¹⁵ or “therapeutic consumerism”¹⁶ – a freedom to consume whatever one wishes for the lofty ideal of personal fulfillment – that a film like *Fight-Club* protests. Here, Generation Y is openly criticizing the depthlessness of the world they have been handed by the generation who registered its complaint in *The Graduate*. The Hegelian movement of Spirit may be at work here – thesis, antithesis, synthesis. We seem conditioned with each rising generation to subvert the dominant paradigm, but then find some novel way to reconcile our rebellion with the enticements to consume.

Shades of Faith and Broken Faith

M. Night Shyamalan is a filmmaker who uses his craft to openly raise issues of religious faith. In the movie, *Signs* (2002),¹⁷ which he wrote and directed, crop circles are reported to have begun appearing all over the world and rumors are circulating of UFOs hovering in the earth’s orbit. When a crop circle appears in the corn field of their family farm, the lead character in the story, Graham Hess – a disillusioned and recently widowed Episcopal priest played by Mel Gibson – is asked by his brother what all of this means. He replies,

There are only two kinds of people. [The first] see the lights and they see a miracle. They believe there is someone watching out for them and they feel hope. [For the second] everything is chance. They see the lights and their chances are 50/50. Could be bad or good. Deep down they feel whatever happens they are alone. And they feel fear.

The choice, as Hess boils it down for his brother, is between believing that there is an intelligence and purposefulness that underwrites the universe *or* conceding that we are alone in a randomly operating universe where the best we can hope for is a little good luck. As a place to start, this division of two ways that people respond to some anomaly in their experience offers two categories for analyzing overarching visions of the world that are now playing in popular culture.

But for the sake of capturing some important nuances in the prevailing visions of the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century in America, it might be helpful to consider some thicker terms by way of a detour through the work of two religious thinkers who have reflected on the phenomenology of faith: H. Richard Niebuhr and William James.

In his lectures on the nature of faith, published posthumously as *Faith on Earth: An Inquiry into the Structure of Human Faith*, Niebuhr describes a basic fault line to be found within faith. According to Niebuhr, virtually all of us, at least subconsciously, believe that our existence is worthwhile and that the whole world of being is meaningful. He writes, "There is in the background of existence, whether as memory of childhood, or as Platonic recollection of something heard in another existence, or as the echo of an inner voice, the sense of something glorious, splendid, clean and joyous for which this being and all being is intended." But in the normal course of life this fundamental faith is interrupted by "the great disillusionment," whether "in childhood or adolescence or later." A tragic chord is heard, a chord that reverberates through literature, art, and philosophy, which Niebuhr describes as the discovery "that things are not what they seem and that what they are is infinitely sadder, darker and more disappointing than what they appear to be . . ." This, he claims, is a constant in human experience.¹⁸ Each generation finds itself in a web of dissimulations spun by its forebears that its more contrary members must expose. They expose it, then begin to spin their own, and on it goes. For at least the last 40 years, we have become so accustomed to the great schemes and loyalties of our time being exposed as deceptions, or, at least, as "partly fictions," that we have developed a keen sense of irony in the way we regard all cultural conventions and all great causes.¹⁹

But it is important, Niebuhr insists, to understand that *both* fundamental faith *and* disillusionment do justice to reality. There *is* something "glorious, splendid, clean and joyous for which this being and all being is intended." For Niebuhr, drawing on a central theological symbol, this is a description of our innocent trust in God before the Fall that remains at the edges of our consciousness. But life in this world is post-Fall. We only know lives that have broken trust with the great and mysterious goodness at the center of all things, and generations of broken trust have built up massive defenses against it and diversions from it. Moreover, a profound

disillusionment with “that One from which we all proceed” is not entirely unjustified – how, after all, could things have been allowed to become this sad and cruel and wretched? Has not this One who ought to have been loyal *to us* failed us? Our disillusionment stems from an understandable “distrust toward a being which . . . ought to be loyal, yet is not.”²⁰ Niebuhr goes on to parse our disillusionment into three manifestations of “broken faith.”

- *Defiance* – Our broken faith in the Transcendent One gives rise to resentment and hostility. It may be a conscious defiance of God, or of the godless Nature of Things. “If the nature of things is the creation of a transcendent God,” Niebuhr writes, “then that God is our enemy, and if it is not then the world itself is our enemy, and must be resisted though the fight may be carried on without personal hatred.” In its noblest form, it begins out of a love for humanity, and particularly for the victims of cruelty, on whose behalf it “raises its voice against Omnipotence.” Its complaint is raised in “the name of humane feeling or of spiritual values.”²¹
- *Fear* – Overwhelmed by our awareness that human power is no match for the forces of reality that take so little regard of us, our broken faith expresses itself by trembling before “the powerful enemy.” Niebuhr draws the distinction: “Defiance says, ‘I am against God.’ Fear says, ‘God is against me.’” Such fear typically manifests itself through the terrors of conscience, the awareness of “an angry Otherness in the world which hunts out every secret fault.” The terrorized conscience is most ill-at-ease with an unknown Otherness, and so goes to work churning out objects it can picture or conceptualize – “ghosts and wraiths and demons and vindictive deities.” Once reified, these enemies are not resisted, but appeased. We bargain, grovel, and honor them in fear.²²
- *Escape* – Weary of so much metaphysical distrust, broken faith can also move one in the direction of isolating oneself from the aggravation of it all. Here, “the effort is made to put all thought of that Other out of the mind while the self devotes itself to the little struggles and victories of life.”²³ Retreating to an imaginary world of penultimate concerns to which we can attach our ultimate loyalties, the “bright gods,” as Niebuhr calls them, we can pretend to be at peace. Some who have opted for this mode of broken faith proceed to people their world with “kindly, beneficent powers.” Others simply place the sense of transcendent reality out of bounds and become Epicureans who “interpret the world as superficial, without depth or meaning, without foundation or superstructure.” Like Epicurus, they seek whatever satisfactions and pleasures can be had from those things that are within

reach. The consolation here, Niebuhr suggests, is that “if you are very wise and do not attract its notice [the world] will not hurt you.”²⁴

I suggest that these three manifestations of broken faith constitute three distinguishable subcategories for ascertaining the meaning of life in the larger category of lost faith. Many current works of popular culture that probe the meaning of existence can be organized into one of these three subcategories.

But there are also nuances within the larger category of faith itself. Just as not all faithlessness is the same, not all faithfulness is the same. In his 1901–2 Gifford Lectures, which were subsequently published as the now classic *Varieties of Religious Experience*, the philosopher William James proposed the terms “once-born healthy-minded souls” and “twice-born sick souls” to differentiate between different dispositions among religious believers.

- *Once-born* – The healthy-minded soul is preoccupied with God’s kindness and mercy, is impressed with the beauty and harmony of the world which God has made, and takes solace in the conviction that ours is the best of all possible worlds, overseen by the benevolent providence of a loving God. All that happens is for the best. Such souls are not distressed by their own imperfections, nor by the energetic efforts of the sinners around them. Preachers in this camp avoid “magnifying our consciousness of sin,” and instead “seem devoted to making little of it.”²⁵ Sin and evil are imperfections that can be overcome. Healthy-minded souls are, as it were, temperamentally predisposed to cheerfulness, and forbid themselves “to linger . . . over the darker aspects of the universe.”²⁶ James refers to those with this type of faith as the “once born” because they embrace the world into which they were born, and persist in their belief that the God who oversees it is trustworthy. James gives as examples of the once-born: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, and turn-of-the-century liberal Christianity.
- *Twice-born* – The sick soul, on the other hand, is the believer whose faith in the goodness of the world and the kindness of God has stumbled into one of three obstacles: the vanity of our attachment to mortal things which spill through our fingers like grains of sand, the irresistibility of personal sin, or the fear of a hostility of the universe toward our happiness, to the effect that their “original optimism and self-satisfaction get leveled with the dust.”²⁷ The disequilibria this causes is akin to seasickness, a condition in which one contemplates all things with disgust. Sadness, dread, despair, and melancholy overtake the sick soul. But what impressed James was the testimony of

those who, like Leo Tolstoy and John Bunyan, had transcended these dark nights of the soul and, without denying the reality of the causes of their despair, had found a way to reaffirm their faith. James calls those who have undergone such anguish and come out the other side, confident of the goodness of existence and the meaningfulness of life, “the twice-born.”²⁸

So, under the guidance of James, it is possible to conceive of two subcategories for faith: the *once-born* and the *twice-born*. Add to these the three subcategories of broken faith and we have a useful template for sorting out different overarching visions of the world that are now playing in popular culture. The scripts of many songs, novels, movies, advertisements, television shows and music videos – at least those that purport to comment on what matters in life – enact these variations on the theme of faith.

To return to Niebuhr for a moment, it is worth noting that he views each of the three manifestations of *broken* faith (defiance, fear, and escape) as appearances of the Transcendent in our lives.²⁹ In fact, these forms of broken faith parallel the very obstacles to faith that James elaborates as necessary way stations *en route* to the sobered faith of the second birth. Niebuhr insists that each one is a response to a preceding trust that has been disturbed. Distrust and disbelief presuppose a previously established trust and belief. A primordial faith in the Power that has thrown us into existence is affirmed in the very disappointment that expresses itself through defiance, fear, and escape. Each kind of brokenness contains a testimony, in other words, to a Reality that is being defied, feared, and escaped. Let us consider each of these subcategories of faith as it is realized in scripts that can be found in popular culture.

Scripts of defiance

The theme of hostile resentment toward God or toward the metaphysical order of things is not hard to spot in popular culture. The classic example of this is Ivan Karamazov in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. After rehearsing a litany of grievances, from the soldiers who amused themselves by “cutting the unborn child from the mother’s womb, tossing babies up in the air, and catching them on the points of their bayonets before their mother’s eyes,” to the savage beating of an old and feeble cart horse, to the jagged disembowelment of a peasant boy by a pack of hounds set upon him by a Russian general, Ivan proclaims: even if there will be ultimate justice, whereby the perpetrators of these crimes are cast into hell and all wrongdoing will be rectified by an

avenging God – or made right through the restoration of harmony by a loving God – the suffering of these innocents cannot be undone. No divine scheme of justice can compensate for an earth “soaked from its crust to its center” with human tears shed on behalf of such extravagant cruelty toward innocents. The very idea of such a justice is so perverse, he declares, that he must “respectfully return God the ticket.” To accept a world like this is to endorse its misery. This is conscious defiance of God, protesting the nature of things on behalf of the countless victims who have suffered because of it.

This script of defiance, common in the mid-twentieth century, was an understandable response to two world wars. While it was seldom as explicit a rejection of God as Ivan’s was, it was a pointed questioning of the worthwhileness of living in an absurd universe that has already been vacated by God. This is seen particularly in the existentialist-tinged novels of Ernest Hemingway, Albert Camus and Joseph Heller, the plays of Jean Paul Sartre and Samuel Beckett, and the films of Alfred Hitchcock and Stanley Kubrick. Hitchcock used the genre of suspense to film a Nietzschean world in which God is dead or missing and the moral universe has lost its bearings. Many of his killers had nothing to gain from their actions – short of the exercise of their liberated genius or the pure sport of pushing on a universe that doesn’t push back. More recently, we’ve seen this defiance carried forward by Woody Allen, whose *Crimes and Misdemeanors* was a brilliant parable about how we are adjusting to the disintegration of the fanciful idea that the universe has a moral order, and also under the banner of postmodern “anti-narrative” fiction, such as that found in films like *Memento* (2000) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001).

Scripts of fear

Convinced as it is that the Powers that dominate reality are at best indifferent toward us, and at worst opposed to us, works of popular culture in this vein depict our helplessness in the face of unknown forces – forces both external to us and inside of us. The Gothic is the purest variety of this subcategory of broken faith. Slasher movies, vampire tales, films like *Silence of the Lambs*, *Kalifornia* and *Natural Born Killers* about the sociopaths among us, the work of Stephen King (who has 250 million books in circulation), a generous portion of music videos and rock star fashion, even comedy films such as *Beetlejuice* and *Edward Scissorhands* by director Tim Burton – terrify us with supernatural foes and, perhaps more interestingly, with the lingering effects of past human transgressions that haunt us with a vengeance. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is the ur-text of this genre. She established the archetype in which some

humanly initiated reordering of nature, often done with noble intentions, went awry and circled back upon its creator and any innocents who stood in its way. We can expect punishment for our hubris. This is a versatile idiom, and it is particularly useful for its identification of which specific acts of hubris dominate our collective consciousness at any given time. Apocalyptic novels and movies rise out of this Gothic fear script, warning us of the unforeseen and horrible consequences of our manipulations of atoms, genes, viruses, and the temperature of the atmosphere.

Scripts of escape

There are multiple ways to script escape, some of which provide invaluable lessons in how to live. One is to devote oneself to the immediate concerns of life and to view mundane struggles, achievements, and commitments as the most sacred plane of existence to be had. The novelist John Irving is very skilled at scripting escape, and his blend of tragedy and comedy teaches us that neither sorrow nor happiness are endless, that one will necessarily and inevitably prepare us for the other, and that the wonder of life is to be found in this ebb and flow. Nick Hornby (*About a Boy*, *High Fidelity*) is also good at this in his own way, inviting highly isolated individuals into the mysteries and deep satisfactions of human community, with all the attendant risks. Both Irving and Hornby are soft Epicureans, however, in that while they sacralize the ordinary, they don't absolutely foreclose on a reality that transcends it.

This is different from a more disciplined Epicurean escape route of *withdrawing* one's demand that life have depth or meaning, and seeking ultimate satisfaction from what is close at hand. The door on depth must first be closed, a bona fide Epicurean maneuver, before one can find grace in the surface of things. Sam Mendes' 1999 movie, *American Beauty*, takes this perspective.³⁰ This story is narrated by its central character, Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey), in the minutes after his murder. As his consciousness leaves his body, rises from the scene of the crime, and floats down the suburban streets of his neighborhood, he recounts events of the past year that led to this simultaneous moment of death and awakening. It was a year in which he realized his money-smitten wife, Carolyn, hated him, that his sullen and self-loathing teenage daughter, Jane, was embarrassed by him, and that his employer had concluded he was overpaid and obsolete. He plunged into a yearlong regimen of self-indulgence, chasing down every adolescent fantasy he had deferred in order to lead a respectable life in the suburbs. His conscientious pursuit of each passing desire, the "new me" as he described it, further alienated him from his family but, the story wants to tell us, also served as a kind of catechism

for the sudden epiphany he was to experience in the minutes before his neighbor shoots him in the head. Standing in his kitchen he catches sight of a framed photograph of his wife and daughter leaning into him on a spinning teacup ride, taken many years earlier at an amusement park and, as if scales were lifted from his eyes, he is startled at how happy they each look. The picture transfixes him. Sitting down, he rests his elbows on the kitchen table and folds his hands as if in prayer. Then he smiles – a knowing, sated smile – as if he has in this moment understood what it was all about. At this instant of *satori*, his next-door neighbor who has stealthily crept up behind him and raised a revolver to Lester's head, pulls the trigger. The screen goes white, we hear the sound of rushing wind, then we see Lester in his pajamas rising to the sky. In a voice over, he confides:

They say your entire life flashes in front of your eyes when you die. It's not really your entire life. It's just the moments that stood out. And they're not the ones you'd expect, either . . .

The moments you remember are tiny ones, some you haven't thought of in years, if you've thought of them at all. But in the last second of your life, you remember them with astonishing clarity because they're just so . . . beautiful that they must have been imprinted, on like a cellular level.

For me it was lying on my back at Boy Scout camp, watching falling stars. Or my grandmother's hands, and the way her skin seemed like paper. And the first time I saw my cousin Tony's brand new GTO . . . Carolyn . . .

He pictures his wife sitting across from him in the spinning teacup ride from the photograph, laughing as she spins the wheel.

And Janie . . .

He sees his daughter when she was seven years-old, dressing as a princess for Halloween and smiling at him.

I guess I could be pretty pissed off about what happened to me. But it's hard to stay mad, when there's so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I'm seeing it all at once, and it's too much, my heart fills up like a balloon that's about to burst.

We see Lester now, flying above the clouds and laughing.

And then I remember to relax, and stop trying to hold on to it, and then it flows through me like rain and I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life.

He is soaring higher and higher.

You have no idea what I'm talking about, I'm sure . . . but don't worry . . .

He floats out of sight.

You will someday.

The screen fades to black.

The epiphany he has undergone in the instant of his death is the astonishing optical beauty of so many forgotten moments of his "stupid little life." This vision is reinforced as the scene cuts to the final appearance of a white plastic bag wafting and falling in a gentle, swirling breeze, captured on video. This shot has appeared at intervals throughout the movie. We receive the instruction at its first appearance that it represents a beauty so stunning that it suspends all fear. Like a visual Greek chorus, the dancing bag coaxes us to pause over the ineffable wonder of such mundane beauty, whereby the image of a discarded grocery sack, swirling fairy-like, can take away all fears, even the fear of death. *American Beauty* directs us to invest much in beauty, a beauty captureable in photographs and on video, a beauty of surfaces. To derive happiness from ready-to-hand aesthetic delight is the "bright god" that Mendes offers. No need to be perturbed further with the meaning of life, nor to impose duties or disciplines upon oneself to acquire a deeper wisdom. Be content with modest aesthetic pleasures and the world will not hurt you. Even if you are shot in the head by a deranged neighbor in your own kitchen.

A final direction to push within this subcategory of escape is the impulse to project "kindly and beneficent powers" into one's world, lesser gods who exist to make our lives come out right. These may be angels (*Touched by an Angel*), the recently departed (Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*), the fool (*Sling Blade*, *The Green Mile*), cyber-technologies (the omniscient Internet, the omnipresent wireless network), space aliens (*ET*), superheroes, Mayan deities (*Chocolat*), product brands and totems (Levis, Ronald MacDonald, the Jolly Green Giant), dumb luck (*Forrest Gump*), or even the simple power of romantic love, which can overcome all obstacles (country-western music).

Scripts of the once-born

According to James, the healthy-minded soul trusts in divine providence and, while not ignoring the sin and evil in the world, trusts sufficiently in the benevolent intent of providence to not be intimidated by them.



Figure 1 Angels Daniel and Cassiel briefing each other on the captivating behavior of the citizens of Berlin in Wim Wenders 1987 film, *Wings of Desire* (used with the kind permission of Reverse Angle Library, GmbH, all rights reserved).

A common religious and literary symbol for divine providence is angels. In the past decade we have seen an explosion of interest in angels, and ample media outlets providing them. When angels are presented as actively intervening in human affairs, they fit best in the escape script described above. But there are artists who take a more minimalist view of angels – reflecting a more minimalist view of divine providence. One of the most poignant stories told of angels in recent memory is the 1988 Wim Wenders film, *Wings of Desire*.³¹ In this film we learn that angels live in our midst (although we cannot see them), and devote their time to watching us, recording in diaries what impresses them – dispatches from the front, as it were. Near the beginning of the movie, two angels, Daniel and Cassiel, are sitting in a convertible in an auto showroom in Berlin, reading to each other from their diaries (Figure 1). Their tone is admiring and curious with respect to the antics of the humans they have observed: A woman who folded her umbrella while it was raining, and let herself get drenched. At the U-Bahn station, instead of announcing the station’s name, the conductor suddenly shouted, “Tierra del Fuego.” In the hills, an old man read the *Odyssey* to a child and the young listener stopped blinking his eyes. These are the things that delight the angels. Daniel, who is pining to become human himself, confesses,

It’s great to live only by the spirit, to testify day by day for eternity only to the spiritual side of people. But sometimes I get fed up with my spiritual

existence. Instead of forever hovering above I'd like to feel there's some weight to me, to end my eternity and bind me to earth. At each step, each gust of wind, I'd like to be able to say, "Now, and now and now." And no longer say "since always," and "forever" . . . Not that I want to beget a child or plant a tree right away. But it would be quite something to come home after a long day and feed the cat, to have a fever, to have blackened fingers from the newspaper, to be excited not only by the mind, but, at last, by a meal, the curve of a neck, an ear. To lie! through the teeth! To feel your skeleton moving along as you walk. Finally to suspect, instead of forever knowing all. To be able to say, "Ah!" and "Oh!" and "Hey!" instead of "Yes" and "Amen." For once, to be enthused over evil.

This is the confession of the faith of a once-born soul. It has all of the elements of gratitude for the wondrous routines of ordinary life, a trait it shares with broken faith in the escape mode. But here it is a disposition formed out of the deep trust in divine benevolence and the corresponding view that we live in the best of all possible worlds. Its elevation of the ordinary is sacramental – receiving the simple pleasures of gravity, sensuality and the passage of time as tokens of transcendent grace. These words come, after all, from an angel, a self-aware agent of grace – at least of graceful observation. Damiel's seeming endorsement of evil in his last remark is folded into his privileged awareness that the Good will have the final word.

Scripts of the twice-born

The faith of the twice-born is distinguished by its having passed through the dark night of the soul and transcended it to gain what Paul Ricoeur has called a "second-naïveté." This is a faith sobered by the awful grace of God, the faith of many saints – perhaps the primary requirement of sainthood, although not the only one. This script can be found hidden within the sometimes prurient humor of the movie, *Dogma*, by the young filmmaker Kevin Smith.³² Like *Wings of Desire*, *Dogma* is a story about angels, but of the sick-soul type, which requires a shift of locale from Berlin to New Jersey. The movie opens with a cardinal in New Jersey launching a campaign he's named "Catholicism, Wow!" in an effort to freshen up the image of his Church and increase its appeal to a younger crowd. As part of the festivities surrounding the launch of the campaign, he invokes the ancient rite of plenary indulgence, whereby the Church draws on the accumulated merit of the saints to cancel in its entirety the punishment due to sinners to whom it is granted. Cardinal Glick gets the word out through a press conference that all who pass under the arches of the cathedral in Red Bank on the opening day of the campaign will be granted a plenary indulgence.

Meanwhile, we learn that two angels, Loki (Matt Damon) and Bartleby (Ben Affleck), have been whiling away the last 4,000 years in Wisconsin, where they were banished by God following a small act of rebellion in the wake of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Loki was the very Angel of Death whom God had ordered to open the sluice gates of heaven in the time of Noah and, later, to rain sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah. Bartleby was a Gregorian Angel, one of the choir of angels, and a trusted friend of Loki. Loki had misgivings about the destruction of Sodom, and quietly raised the question with Bartleby about how it is that a loving God could be so full of wrath. Commiserating with each other, the two got drunk and gave God the finger. As punishment they were banished to Wisconsin, where they were to remain until the end of time itself, when they will be destroyed.

They are resigned to their fate and their tedious life in Wisconsin until they read a press report of the offer of plenary indulgence that has been extended by Cardinal Glick. Finally, a window of opportunity – to flee Wisconsin, escape their pending destruction, and “go home” to the God who rejected them. They board a train bound for New Jersey.

En route, however, they encounter one of Jesus’ apostles, Rufus, who has been sent to stop them. What they had not realized is that if they return to heaven it will force a reversal of God’s decree on their transgression, which was binding until the end of time. The reversal of any of God’s decrees entails a metaphysical paradox that will result in the total negation of the whole of creation. All of existence will unravel in the instant they re-enter heaven. Rufus and his companions throw them off the train, and, reassessing the situation, Loki and Bartleby have the following conversation:

Loki: Look there is more to this than we thought about. That guy said there will be consequences.

Bartleby: You know what? My eyes are open. I had an epiphany. In the beginning it was just us and him, angels and God. Ours was designed to be a life of servitude and worship and bowing and scraping and adoration. But he gave [humans] more than he ever gave us. He gave them a choice. They choose to acknowledge God; they choose to ignore him. All this time we’ve been down here I’ve felt the absence of the divine presence and it’s pained me, as I’m sure it must have pained you. And why? Because of the way he’s made us. Had we been given free will we could choose to ignore the pain like they do. But no, we’re servants.

Loki, alarmed at Bartleby’s agitation: Look, all I’m saying here is that maybe one of us could use a nap.

Bartleby: Wake up! These humans have besmirched everything he has bestowed upon them. They were given paradise, they threw it away. They were given this planet and they destroyed it. They were favored best among all his endeavors, and some of them don’t even believe he exists. And in

spite of it all, he has shown them infinite f – g patience at every turn. What about us? I asked you, once, to lay down the sword because I felt sorry for them. What was the result? Expulsion from paradise. Where was his infinite f – g patience then? It's not right, it's not fair. We paid our debt. Don't you think it's time? Don't you think it's time we went home? And to do that I think we may have to dispatch our would be dispatchers.

The astonishing revelation here is that these two long-suffering angels desire to “go home” at all, to return to bask in the divine presence of the One whose justice they doubt and whose judgment of them had been their undoing. After 4,000 years of stewing on God's wrath and their own rejection, they want back in. Behind the strange empyrean world of the film is the further revelation that Kevin Smith, a filmmaker who turned 30 the year the film was released, appears to agree with them, given the way he directs our sympathies on behalf of these two characters in his telling of the story. The story seems to concur with the idea that even a God whose exercise of justice is faulty is worthy of the longing of creatures who scramble to return to the divine presence. This is different from an earlier generation that, as William James observed, so objected to the image of a wrathful God that they either exorcised this attribute from God's countenance or abandoned their belief in God altogether. Like Tolstoy and Bunyan, Loki and Bartleby have undergone the depths of despair, suffered the dark flank of God, and come out the other side through a second birth. Smith, their creator, displays his own twice-born, sick soul in making use of arcane Catholic rites and symbols to explore a range of theological conundrums – theodicy, divine transcendence and immanence, God's wrath and mercy, human sin and divine forgiveness – conundrums he takes seriously. His use of these arcana suggests that there is still life in them, that their power to interpret our existence has not been exhausted.

Conclusion

Paul Ricoeur has described the present as a “period of mourning for the gods who have died,” an intermediate time in which the ancient gods of morality have died of obsolescence and exhaustion. An essential theological task demanded in this period of mourning, he goes on to suggest, is a long recuperative wandering, a detour through the texts of our culture. In this detour we might discern a new way of being-in-the-world in response to a new understanding of divinity.³³ I suggest that the five scripts just assembled (defiance, fear, escape, once-born, twice-born) are the products of some of the most creative minds of our time in

American culture. Within each type assertions are made about where trust ought to be placed or withheld, and about what may be fairly expected of the powers upon which our lives depend. This is a good place to begin in reading the signs of our time, a task that I believe, in good company, theology has a responsibility to undertake.

Aware, however, that a discipline for investigating popular culture already exists and hoping to stand on its shoulders in the investigation that is undertaken in this book, I turn first to examine the field of cultural studies in its various paths.