
God in the Details

American religion in popular culture

Second Edition

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Preface

The thing that has been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done; and there is no new thing under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 1:9

And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful.

Revelation 21:5

Since the first edition was published in 2000, there seems to have been an explosion in scholarly interest in religion and popular culture. We are in no way claiming responsibility for this—if anything, we simply benefited from great timing. Rather, there are a variety of events and conditions that likely laid the foundations for the transformation. Depending on how far you want to go back, we could probably identify the Marxian influence on the study of history, starting in the 1970s, which brought into the conversation in a more significant way the influences of markets and class on society; the rise of the field of social history, which took greater interest in the lives of everyday people; and the subsequent rise of the study of material culture for clues to all of this. More than ever before—beyond the field of archaeology—the “stuff” of ordinary people’s lives mattered to those who were trying to understand “the people.” Shifts in the field of anthropology—which had always had an interest in that “stuff”—meant that a fascination with the “other” as “out there” could be refocused on the “other” as “in here,” providing greater analysis of phenomena in our own lives, in our own towns, and not just on islands or in jungles far away; the 1956 Horace Miner article to which we referred in the first edition’s Introduction—and to which we continue to refer in this edition—makes this point explicit. The rise of the field of media studies provided tools to investigate the impact of various and expanding media on the lives of the “mediated”—which, despite sounding like a group involved in conflict resolution, represents the mass of humanity affected by the growing web of media contact and the subsequent shrinking of the world. And last, but certainly not least, the coming of age of the

“baby boomers,” that generation of Americans born after World War II but before 1963, has meant that a generally affluent cohort of people has become sufficiently large to influence markets and marketers, and—for a variety of reasons, suggested in a number of the chapters that follow—has been sufficiently self-interested to make studies of them and their habits worthwhile commercial—in addition to simply scholarly—ventures.

As a result, we have experienced real growth in the field of the study of popular culture—with organizations such as the Popular Culture Association and its various journals and publications—and, more specifically and more recently, the field of religion and popular culture. The American Academy of Religion—the international professional association of more than 10,000 scholars of religion in all of its forms—established a unit devoted to the study of religion and popular culture in the 1990s. A number of journals dedicated to the study of religion and various aspects of popular culture—including *The Journal of Religion and Film* (www.unomaha.edu/~jrf), *The Journal of Religion and Theatre* (www.rjournal.org), and the *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* (www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc)—were all founded in the past 10 years, and (tellingly) can be found only on line.

Today, people are almost silly with the exploration of religion in popular culture. Entire published works can be found that address religion and religious meaning in works of fiction (including the real boon to the market, J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series); film (specifically religious films such as Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, but also less specifically religious films like the *Matrix* trilogy, and even seemingly non-religious films like George Romero’s *Living Dead* films) and filmmakers (such as Francis Ford Coppola and Woody Allen); television programming (such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its progeny); contemporary secular music (such as that of Johnny Cash); graphic arts (including advertising as well as the fine arts); and even tourism, capitalism, and sports. Unfortunately, one of the casualties of this profusion of publishing has been some confusion over audience, purpose, and method, and the works that are available seem to serve different masters; some are clearly written for fun, some are clearly meant for scholarly reflection—be it in an academic setting or not—and some are clearly meant for religious reflection. Advancements in publishing—and also in book distribution and marketing—seem to have placed all of these works into the same conversation.

It may be the proliferation of works for religious and theological reflection that is the biggest surprise for scholarly readers in this field. There can be no mistake that, in the past 30 years or so (but more rapidly recently), for some (but certainly not all) evangelical Christians, the possibility of finding religion in popular culture has led to a virtual explosion in that sub-genre. But this is not a new development; even in the waning years of the nineteenth century, as the film industry was just being born, conservative Christians were debating amongst themselves just what the medium of film meant to

Christian faith and values. Possibly reflecting some aspect of the “baby boom” media generation—or maybe in response to it—in 1967 John Knox Publishing—a representative of the Presbyterian movement in America—produced *The Gospel According to Peanuts*, a work by Robert L. Short (himself a Presbyterian minister) that used the famous comic strips illustrated by Charles M. Schultz to explore Protestant religious sentiment and biblical teachings in everyday life. By the summer of 2009, as this preface is being written, Westminster John Knox—the original press’s institutional descendant—has produced “Gospels” according to “America,” the Beatles, Disney, Hollywood, Harry Potter, science fiction, *Star Wars*, *The Simpsons*, Bruce Springsteen, J.R.R. Tolkien, Oprah Winfrey, and U2. Other publishers representing other parts of the conservative Protestant world—as well as a few representing traditional Catholicism—have explored other aspects of everyday life (film, music, television, the internet, as well as fashions and fads), seeking to understand how these current aspects of the human condition can be reconciled with various elements of their readers’ theology.

The mix could not be healthier. It not only brings more voices into the conversation, and adds to the nuance of reflection and analysis of any given topic—or the field generally—but it also reminds all involved that the materials under scrutiny are the warp and woof of our daily lives, and that we are all touched by them, regardless of the fact that we see and understand them differently. Or maybe because of it. The power of any symbol is not in its ability to transmit one meaning, but in its ability to transmit various meanings to various people in various places at various times. It is this that makes the study of religion and popular culture meaningful for so many, and now 10 years later, so meaningful for us again, too.

About the Second Edition

If you read the first edition, thank you! We have heard back from a number of readers, and we have designed this edition to reflect their comments. We felt that we had to remove some wonderful chapters from the first edition that were no longer timely, while at the same time we have updated others. In some cases, we have simply updated some of the language, or supplemented information for ongoing phenomena. In other cases, websites no longer exist, and web addresses (URLs) may no longer work but have been included in good faith with a note identifying them as inoperative. And we have added new chapters on issues that have emerged since the first edition was published. Enjoy!

E.M.M.
K.M.
September, 2009

Introduction

Finding Religion in American Popular Culture

If our thinking is not to be pseudo-thinking, we must think about life; for such a thinking is a thinking about God. And if we are to think about life, we must penetrate its hidden corners, and steadily refuse to treat anything—however trivial or disgusting it may seem to be—as irrelevant.

Karl Barth 1933, *The Epistle to the Romans*

What if God was one of us?

Joan Osborne

In a now-clichéd article in *American Anthropologist*, Horace Miner introduces his readers to the strange rituals of a tribe he identifies only as the Nacirema (Miner 1956). He focuses most of his attention on their bodily rituals, particularly their preoccupation with rituals of cleanliness and the body, and describes these people with a sense of wonderment, like the true “outsider” anthropologist, exposing a fascinating system of practices that seems both exotic and yet strangely familiar. Of course, the mystery of the identity of these people lasts only as long as the reader is unable to recognize words written backward and, like many exercises designed to make a point, Miner’s piece has proved to be a “one-gag bit”—once you know the Nacirema are in fact Americans, the anthropological point is made, and Miner ends his article quickly and mercifully.

But even after 50 years, Miner’s short article continues to have a value to the study of American¹ culture. On one level, it is a reminder that Americans do participate in rituals, like other cultures do, but that we rarely examine ourselves. By maintaining this apparent inability to find ritualized patterns in our own behavior, we all too often assume that rituals are activities only of nonindustrialized, unenlightened “others.” And yet, while Miner’s lesson was probably a healthy corrective for some early anthropologists, by now the literature examining our own culture is so voluminous as to be overwhelming. Anthropological studies of American culture have taken Miner’s jest seriously, and have provided us with ample discussions of our own ritualized behavior.

But there is another point in Miner's small piece that is still of value for analyses of contemporary American culture. If the evidence of ritualization in our own lives is not the lasting point of his article, maybe it is the ability—and even the need—to find meaning in the familiar, even if we exoticize it. We have been shown a method (albeit one that is firmly tongue-in-cheek) of finding meaning where we may not otherwise have looked. In the visit to the dentist, the bathroom, or the hospital, we find meaning—and greater understanding of culture—that would have been missed if we had simply overlooked these areas to concentrate on those events traditionally plowed for “deeper” meaning, such as life-cycle and rite-of-passage events, annual rituals of religious and quasireligious communities, and so on. For both the observer and the observed, religious meaning can be found in activities that are often considered meaningless. That premise is the point of departure for the chapters that follow.

Life In The Borderland

From once dismissing it with disdain, academia currently appears to be in the throes of a full-scale infatuation with popular culture. One can read analyses of Hollywood movies, rap music, and comic books in the most highbrow academic journals, and humanities and social science programs now widely offer courses, if not majors, in the critical study of everything from graffiti to sitcoms. Both the field of popular culture studies and the material it examines, though, seem to be growing at a pace that outstrips the analytical categories and methods available. It is useful, therefore, to clarify what we mean when we use key words in this expanding conversation. What constitutes “culture” (popular or otherwise) and “religion,” and where do they meet in everyday experience?

In today's American culture, it seems that religion is everywhere. “What Would Jesus Do?” bracelets can be purchased at huge discount department stores. Pastors of suburban megachurches speak of their “target markets” and “product positioning.” There are churches of Elvis, and television dramas about angels. The lines between religion and culture blur in contemporary America in ways that leave scholars dizzy. Though this melding of religion and culture has been going on in the form of popular religion for ages, in the contemporary American world of high technology and late capitalism, the boundaries have blurred more than ever before.

The conventional distinction between popular religion and popular culture is worth noting. Popular religion, whether it be defined by its extrainstitutional status, its nonelite practitioners, its immediacy and informality, or the sheer numbers of people it draws, still refers to behavior and ideas recognized by both participant and observer as *religious*, even if the practices are not condoned by the religious elites. Included here are such phenomena as religious folk art, domestic altars, and practices of interreligious syncretism.

Investigation of this field is enjoying a burst of activity today, enriching and complicating our understanding of American religious identity, past and present.² Popular culture, by contrast, includes a much wider range of products and practices that, while they may take on religious connotations, remain ostensibly secular sites of experience that neither the participant nor the casual observer would identify, at least at first glance, as religious. American popular culture studies have examined the deeper significance of everything from soap operas to baseball trading cards, adding new material and methods to countless other fields of inquiry, from history and literature to class and gender studies. Of course, such a contrast between that which is religious and that which is cultural is intelligible only in a society like that of the United States which, for many at least, has made of religion a special category of experience, not the stuff of daily life that it is, and has been, in other places and times.

A major task is to draw attention back to this intersection of religion and culture in the ordinary experience of Americans. It is this strange terrain that these chapters visit: the borderland where traditional religious language, for instance, may not be spoken, but where its accent is clearly heard. Sometimes the authors included in this collection stand closer to the territory of popular religion, as in Jennifer Rycenga's report from the Precious Moments Chapel (Chapter 7), but the gaze from those positions is always outward toward the larger and more confusing world of popular culture. More often, they stand in the territory of popular culture itself, listening for the tastes, accents, and rhythms of the religious world across the border. These are not studies of popular religious ritual, for instance, but—as in the case of Vernon Andrews' study of LeBron James' pre-game behavior and its reception (Chapter 6)—of the *possibility* of ritualizing in the commercial entertainment setting of professional sports. As it turns out, the borderland where religion and culture meet in popular expression is also a borderland of another sort. As the following chapters show, these quasireligious popular culture sites serve as points of intersection—sometimes harmonious, often conflictual—for people of very diverse and disparate identities. The Burning Man festival finds wealthy urban art-lovers sharing tent space with disaffected college students and twenty-something Silicon Valley employees. On the animated television series *The Simpsons*, Hindu, Jew, and evangelical Christian are brought into a kind of dialogue that would leave many ecumenists reeling. Bruce Springsteen concerts bring together working-class conservatives and liberal intellectuals. What is noteworthy is that these are not the casual meetings diverse people experience every day in supermarkets and traffic jams; rather, these chapters show that they are encounters in which questions of ultimate meaning and identity are being struggled over, if not entirely worked out. They are places where members of a society that has tended to privatize religion and demarcate solid denominational lines come (or are thrown) together to explore some very interesting religious questions.

Why should popular culture (rather than the church, the town hall, or the classroom, for instance) be the venue for such encounters? It has long been noted that religion has been edged out of the public square in American culture (Carter 1993; Neuhaus 1984). What this observation has missed, though, is that while institutional religion may indeed have been denied entry into such official public sectors as government and education, the unofficial public square of television, shopping mall, and stadium parking lot have expanded to accommodate the overflow. Media are especially important in this new religious landscape. As Catherine Albanese notes: “The media are mass language brokers and, so, mass culture brokers” (Albanese 1996, 740). In the same way that religion in the West changed dramatically with the introduction of the printing press, so has religion changed drastically with the invention of radio, television and, most recently, the computer. The ubiquitous quality of these popular culture venues (especially by virtue of technologies of mass distribution) make them accessible; that many are entertainment products makes them attractive; and their distance from “official” religious sites makes them flexible and open to many types and levels of interpretation. Church is church, but rock concerts, for instance, seem to be nearly whatever their followers want them to be, often including experiences of intense spiritual transformation. For these and other reasons, popular culture appears well situated as a contemporary religious venue.

Webs of Significance

One way of talking about what people are doing when they are engaged in a religious activity—whether they are singing a hymn, sitting in a Native American sweat lodge, writing theology, lighting a candle, or teaching a child right from wrong—is to say that they are making the world meaningful (or discovering it to be so). When we look at the world around us with this eye toward behavior that carries significant personal and collective meanings, a wide range of apparently nonreligious phenomena become religiously significant. The chapters in this volume represent some of those places where religion, conventionally understood, is not readily—or at least unambiguously—present, but where at least one observer has glimpsed its workings.

To those familiar with various theories of religion, it will not be surprising to find that many of our contributors draw on the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz. Though other theorists (sociologist Emile Durkheim, history of religions scholar Mircea Eliade, anthropologist Victor Turner, and cultural theorist Michel Foucault, among others) appear throughout the collection, a majority of the authors have relied on the approach articulated by Geertz because of their attention to the “doing” aspect of religion; his functionalist—rather than essentialist—framework permits them to explore what religion does for its adherents rather than what religion is. According

to Geertz, religion and culture are not really things in and of themselves; they are the systems of meaning that humans give to things, to the stuff of everyday life. They are the “webs of significance” (Geertz 1973, 5) that connect human thought and behavior, and not so much things that can be calibrated, measured, replicated, or easily diagrammed. They are real enough—or rather, their perception is clothed with “an aura of factuality”—and they are based on things out there (somewhere), but their significance lies in the meanings given to those things by the people who use them in whatever fashion. Using this view here, we are relieved of the burden of finding religious *things*, and can look more widely for the religious meanings attached, explicitly or not, to such activities as eating, dancing.

Important to our collective investigation is Geertz’s observation that cultural meanings are necessarily conversational, that is, social and dynamic. In assembling those webs of significance, he argues, we are creating ourselves as social beings. Individual humans don’t create culture as a hobby or a byproduct, but need the system of thought created and transmitted collectively in order to survive. Sociologist Peter Berger makes a similar observation when he argues that society is the collective effort to construct meaning that is conferred through processes both external (observed) and internal (intellectual) to the individual. Thus humans are incomplete without the information and meaning encoded in, delivered by, and internalized from the social institutions that they all create without recognizing that participation (Berger 1969). As Geertz concludes, since culture is the process by which collective symbolic meaning is negotiated among individuals, “Culture is public because meaning is” (Geertz 1973, 12).

If culture and meaning are public, it is the task of the observer to learn to read signs and symbols in order to interpret them. In our case, it means scholars need to learn the “language” of particular popular constituencies, language that is communicated often without words, but certainly in a different idiom than that commonly used in the academic world. The observer must get to know not only what the participant knows, but how the participant knows it, and must learn to see what the participant sees but may not question, since it is automatically understood by the participant. In the same way as a non-native must learn the mechanics of grammar as well as the basics of vocabulary in mastering a foreign language, so must the observer, often using terminology and logic unfamiliar to the participant, learn the mechanics as well as the language that the participant has simply “picked up” through the environment.

The Difficulties of Defining Religion

But if culture is the collection of all of the webs of significance, the problem remains of deciding what it is that counts as religious—how one draws the

boundaries (if there are any) between religious systems of meaning and other cultural systems. It is hard enough to say exactly what is religious about a sacred text or a worship service; to try to do so for a television cartoon or barbecue is to invite failure. Two principles seemed to serve the contributors to this volume in this effort, though no consensus on such things was sought.

First, obviously, the conception of religion used here is necessarily very broad. If the chapters in this book assume any common definition of religion, it is probably that put forth by Geertz (1973) in his well-known essay "Religion as a Cultural System." Religion, he writes, is "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (Geertz 1973, 90). But we are content to let it remain fuzzier than that. The identification of such phenomena as Jimmy Buffett concerts, *Second Life*, and Disneyland as "religious" hangs not so much on a definition of religion as on a set of markers that are suggestive of religious meaning. These include the formation of communities of shared meanings and values, the presence of ritualized behaviors, the use of language of ultimacy and transcendence, the marking of special, set-aside "sacred" times and spaces, and the manipulation of traditional religious symbols and narratives. Where one or more of these markers are present, we collectively argue, we have entered terrain worthy of religious analysis. Of course, it is up to each individual author to make the case for the religious significance of the particular phenomenon he or she describes.

Second, aware of how complex, varied, and subjective such phenomena are, the authors of these short studies have strived to stay very close to the experience of those being studied. This is good practice for any well-trained ethnographer; it is vital when you are presuming to attach religious meanings to activities that participants do not recognize as such. Here we think of one of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's criteria for the "humane" study of those of a different religious tradition. While we would not go so far, as he did, as to accept as valid only those statements about our subjects that they themselves would accept (W. C. Smith 1981, 97), we do firmly believe that the participant should at least be able to recognize him- or herself in the scholar's descriptions. We see it as a strength of these chapters, then, that many of the scholars are themselves participants in the communities of meaning they describe.

Objectivity in religious studies, as elsewhere, is a problematic goal. Instead, we more commonly aim for clarity in the relationship between ourselves as observers and the people and things we observe. Anthropologist Ruth Behar speaks of the "vulnerable observer," who "is able to draw deeper connections between one's personal experience and the subject under study," developing "a keen understanding of what aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world and, more

particularly, the topic being studied” (Behar 1996, 13). In more or less explicit ways, this is the approach taken by the chapters in this book. The contributors are unabashed in their affection for the aspects of popular culture they analyze: Roof is a Southern meat-eater, Dalton and his colleagues are dedicated *Simpsons* viewers, Ingersoll is a self-proclaimed Parrothead. The challenge, then, lies not in overcoming the “otherness” of our subjects of study, but in choreographing the dance that allows us to come into intimate closeness with these subjects and then step back to do critical analysis, then to move in and out again.

A Profile of the Popular

A few comments about our sense of the “popular” in popular culture are also in order. Typically, it is taken to refer to the wide diffusion of the product, usually via mass media;³ its acceptance by the majority of a given population; or its source in non-elite segments of society. No one of these seems adequate in and of itself; neither can they all be used as criteria for defining the popular, since they are not necessarily compatible descriptors of a given cultural product.

What’s more, attempts at defining the “popular” in popular culture have themselves become politically charged acts. The very term “popular culture” implies for some a particular ideological position, a “facile populism that uncritically equates popular cultural forms with the voice of the ‘people’ and disregards questions of ideology and social control altogether” (Fluck 1987, 3). Aware of the naïveté of venerating popular culture as the source of an authentic, spontaneous expression of the mind and will of the common folk, we nonetheless maintain the connection between the “popular” in popular culture and its Latin root *popularis* (“of the people”).⁴ Certainly, as many theorists exploring the production of popular culture have noted, much of the mode of communicating popular culture is controlled by the dominant culture—or more specifically, those with the wherewithal to control the expensive technology so important for its dissemination—often making much of popular culture very one-sided. What’s more, the purveyors of many popular culture products effectively exploit the power of subcultural symbols and rhetoric in a way that renders the relations between dominant and popular highly opaque. This complex relationship is highlighted in Sara Moslener’s analysis of the strategic marketing of the faith-based abstinence movement (Chapter 10), which has cleverly appropriated the language of the sexual revolution for its decidedly culturally conservative crusade.

But the popular culture industry, however exploitative, is successful only to the degree to which it responds to its audience’s needs and desires, and therefore its products can tell us something authentic about that audience.⁵ In other words, the relationship between the products of popular culture, their producers, and their consumers is complex; each is significantly shaped

by the other two. We would expect, then, that the expressions of popular culture can serve accurately as mirrors of that culture, even while they are also reflective of the commercial interests that function as so powerful a part of culture. Thus one descriptor of the “popular” in culture is its authentic connection, however mediated and admittedly manipulated, with broad segments of the population. What’s more, modes of communication are democratizing the dissemination of popular culture, and many once subcultural products—notably rap/hip-hop music—have gained wider audiences, making mainstream popular culture somewhat more representative of the diversity of the American population.

A second feature of popular culture that these chapters highlight is its “everyday” quality. If culture is a web of meaning, it is important to note the ordinary source of most of the materials used in that web’s construction. What we watch and listen to for entertainment, the clothes we wear, magazines we read, even the foods we eat are the context of our meaning-making. These mundane products are themselves often the basis for much of the construction and maintenance of meaning that is so important in the fabric of culture, playing a larger role, often, than the “official” purveyors of meaning associated with religious and educational institutions.

Another aspect of the popular that bears especially strongly on these discussions of the American situation is what Catherine Albanese, in the introduction to an issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* devoted to the study of religion and popular culture, calls its “creole” character. Popular culture, she writes, “always pieces and patches together its universe of meaning, appropriating terms, inflections, and structurations from numerous overlapping contexts and using them as so many *ad hoc* tools to order and express, to connect inner with outer, and to return to inner again” (Albanese 1996, 740). There is thus a messy element in the study of popular culture. Just as each piece of popular culture is itself a pastiche of inherited bits and pieces, so each of us works with a wide range of cultural phenomena in making meaning for ourselves. People do not derive their worldview, for instance, solely from their time on *Facebook* or *Second Life*. The challenge is to try to see, as Daniel Veidlinger and Rachel Wagner do in Chapters 11 and 14, how participants in these online activities might be experiencing reality in ways that shape (and are shaped by) their offline experiences and worldviews.

But it is important to emphasize that these popular cultural products do not provide meaning unambiguously. Rather, they often represent those points in the culture where inherited values and actual experience conflict, as several chapters show quite forcefully. A final dimension of our sense of the popular, then, is this ambiguous quality. Popular culture venues are contested sites where multitudes come together and negotiate the conflicts with which individuals, and groups of individuals, must reckon in the course of social participation. In some of the following chapters this tension is the

focus of analysis; all of them operate on the assumption that popular culture products are interesting and revelatory precisely because they do not simply mirror or dictate cultural norms, but are ambiguous expressions of conflict and change in social groups.

Toward a Theory of Religion In Turn-of-the-Millennium America

It is entirely possible that those who are studied here will read these chapters and find the religious analyses completely superfluous, if not wrongheaded. As one of our students commented on an early draft of McCarthy's chapter, "Come on. It's just Bruce." Or, one might say of Roof's chapter, "sometimes a spare rib is really just a spare rib." Perhaps. But there is a larger purpose to these chapters that we believe warrants the risk of such responses.

Numerous scholars note that American religion in the second half of the twentieth century was considerably different from what it was in the first half. Sociologists including Phillip Hammond (1992), James Davison Hunter (1991), Robert Wuthnow (1988), and Robert Bellah *et al.* (1986) have all commented independently that in the years following World War II, the structure of religion in the United States changed to reflect the changes in American culture. Some of those changes include a wider mainstream acceptance of non-Christian, or even non-Western, religious traditions, as well as the increasing frequency of a lack of religious affiliation. As historian Robert Handy has noted (Handy, 1984, 1991), religion in the United States, legislatively freed from government control with the ratification of the First Amendment to the Constitution, was by the end of the nineteenth century also ostensibly freed from its Protestant monopoly. By the end of the twentieth century, religious affiliation was loosened significantly from all social institutions generally (Hammond 1992). More and more people have pursued religious commitments based on their personal preferences, and have either abandoned, reinterpreted, or supplemented the religious tradition into which they were born (Roof 1993). The public monopoly once enjoyed by a segment of Protestant Christianity is now a veritable *smörgåsbord* of religious groups, each relatively free to "advertise" to anyone willing to listen.

However, the increased religious freedom has not stopped simply with the expanded ability of non-Protestant religious communities to participate more fully in American society. Individuals can now choose among competitors in the marketplace of meaning construction and meaning maintenance, even among options that traditionally might have seemed nonreligious. As religious institutions have lost their monopoly on the construction and maintenance of meaning, religiosity has found expression in a wide variety of human activities. It is not that religion was slowly disappearing with modernity, as many scholarly observers have predicted throughout this century,

but that society was changing the manner in which it expressed itself religiously (Yamane 1997). Notes Hammond:

In any era, therefore, when religion, at least as commonly understood, is receding, vitality of the sacred may thus come as a surprise. The present era would seem to fit such a description, and we find ourselves unable to comprehend the sacred. The past accretions that transformed the sacred into religion—accretions which in many instances have been corroded by secularization—keep us from the refocusing necessary if we are to study the sacred in a secular age ... unless we can revise our thinking about secularization.

(Hammond 1985, 5)

Eric Mazur and Tara Koda make this their central foundation when they argue (in Chapter 16) that Disney (in all its various and extensive trappings) provides for some a possible replacement for religion. Careful not to suggest that Disney is in fact a religion, Mazur and Koda suggest that, in the creation of a sacred space and sense of sacred time in its parks, and through the inculcation of signs, symbols, and lessons in its various media enterprises, Disney provides for its fans (young and old alike) much that would ordinarily have been provided by religions, traditionally understood.

Does all this mean that every activity in which one can engage is religious? Well, yes and no. It could be that the chapters collected here will provide readers with a better understanding of the limitations of an expansive definition of the religious, just as they might see the limitations of a more restricted definition. The most important check on this possibility is the scholar's ongoing relationship with the popular culture (and its participants) that he or she hopes to illuminate. The academic study of culture and the role of religion in that culture is an endeavor that requires a close examination of the public, and a realization that academic solutions are only as successful as their ability to resonate among those whose activities we are interpreting.

In the end, our sympathies lie with the position taken by David Chidester in an issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*: "If we only relied upon the standard academic definitions of religion, those definitions that have tried to identify the essence of religion, we would certainly be informed by the wisdom of classic scholarship, but we would also still be lost" (Chidester 1996, 760). Like others before him (J. Z. Smith 1982, for example), Chidester suggests that by providing a definition for religion, the scholar limits what is and is not included in the study. Though working from a definition of religion is perhaps a necessary exercise, it is one that is often not problematized, and scholars fail to ask themselves why some things *shouldn't* be considered religious. "In the end," Chidester continues, "we will need to answer that question. By saying 'we,' however, I refer in this case to all of us who are in one way or another engaged in the professionalized and

institutionalized academic study of religion. Participants in American popular culture have advanced their own answers.”

Indeed. Part of the motivation behind this collection is to provide comparisons between the seemingly “secular” segments of peoples’ lives and the “religious” framework often used only sparingly by scholars of religion. As Geertz (and others) have argued, the search for meaning is at the heart of the question of religion and, though not everything is to be considered religious, everything connected with that search can certainly be compared with those elements usually reserved for institutional religion.

In addition, this collection problematizes the very definition of religion for the readers of these chapters. We want to encourage readers to think about what they mean when they say “religion,” particularly in contemporary America, and what others might mean when they deny its presence. We think that the fact that people engaged in the activities portrayed in the collection might deny the “religiosity” of their activities is itself evidence of the significance of the problem of defining religion in our culture. Theorists for decades have noted an increasing suspicion of religious institutions among Americans. Tom Beaudoin, author of *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (Beaudoin 1998), identifies this characteristic as central, for instance, to the spirituality of that generation. For many Americans, it seems, “religion” is identified with institutional religion, and it is precisely their resistance to those institutions that makes such things as music, food, sports, and film attractive alternative sites for meaning-making. It is therefore no surprise that so many would reject any reference to religion as a descriptor for their activities. But we strongly believe this does not mean that the observer ought to be barred from applying religious analyses. This is a difficult issue, and one that many of the contributors address directly in their chapters. It is also one of the most important and interesting issues raised by this project, critical for those who want to explore the meanings of contemporary culture to consider.

Four Organizing Categories

It would be tempting to sort the following chapters according to genre—music, television, radio and film, mass public events, and the like. Such a structure would make it easy for those interested in a particular cultural area to move from one case study to the next, and would likely prompt interesting comparisons and conclusions. But genre, it has become clear, does not necessarily closely correlate with the kinds of religious meaning being found and made in these events. In some cases, authors studying very different kinds of phenomena reached strikingly similar kinds of conclusions about their religious significance. In this case, it seems, the medium is not the message.

In order to bring these religious dimensions to the foreground in the most provocative way, then, we have organized the popular culture expressions

examined here into four categories widely used in the study of religion: myth and symbol, ritual, spirituality and morality, and institution (“churches”). These are hardly exhaustive headings for the analysis of religious phenomena; contemporary studies of religion also often employ doctrinal or theological, philosophical, and historical categories, among others. When looking specifically at the quasi-religious aspects of popular culture, though, these four broad categories seem especially useful because of their inherent elasticity. “Myth,” for instance, in both its specific references to the sacred narratives of religious traditions, and its broader evocation of powerful, culture-defining symbols and stories, proves to be a fascinating lens for looking at such things as the commercial use of the image of the Buddha and the end-time visions of Hollywood films. Juxtaposing the celebratory displays of professional athletes and the Burning Man festival under the heading of “ritual” likewise raises very interesting questions about the meaning, and indeed the possibility, of shared symbolic activity in a multicultural, multireligious society. Turning to television cop dramas and the social web, for instance, as venues for popular “spirituality and morality,” challenges us to take seriously the extent to which such popular forms function for their audiences as spiritual directors and maps of a moral world, complementing if not replacing those offered by traditional religious communities. As alternative “churches,” such phenomena as hip-hop culture and the Disney empire are treated in the final section of this book, provoking perhaps the most radical interpretive possibility, that in these popular culture activities we are seeing not only elements once reserved for religious institutions, but fully wrought alternatives to traditional religion.

Overlaying these four religious categories on these (mostly) apparently nonreligious activities does at least two things. It offers a way of demonstrating that what is going on in these activities, because it fits the traditional definitions of myth, ritual, spirituality and morality, and institution, may be comparable with religion as it is traditionally understood. At the same time, it stretches those categories, and therefore our understanding of religion itself, to better accommodate the strange new world of religion in contemporary America. At the beginning of each of the four sections we offer a short introduction highlighting the major themes and possible implications of the chapters that follow—though we hope each reader will be drawn into the interpretive act and will come to see how it is that many Americans are finding God in the details of their lives.

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Notes

- 1 By "American" (here and throughout the text) we mean to refer to citizens and residents of the United States.
- 2 For a few examples of the excellent work being done in this area, see Hall 1997, McDannell 1995, Moore 1994, Orsi 1985, and Williams 1989. For an annotated bibliography, see Lippy 1996.
- 3 According to Catherine Albanese, this is the defining feature of popular culture for the contributors to the issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* for which she wrote the introduction (Albanese 1996, 737).
- 4 *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (2nd college edition, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1991) defines "popular" as: "Widely liked or appreciated ... Of, representing, or carried on by the common people or the people at large ... Fit for or reflecting the taste and intelligence of the people at large ... Accepted by or prevalent among the people in general ... Suited to or within the means of ordinary people ... Originating among the people." (The second definition, referring specifically to a person as the object of popularity, has been omitted.)
- 5 In this vein, Camille Paglia has written: "Academic commentary on popular culture is either ghettoized as lackluster 'communications' tamed up with semiotics, or loaded down with grim, quasi-Marxist, Frankfurt School censoriousness: the pitifully witless masses are always being brainwashed by money-grabbing capitalist pigs. But mass media is completely, even servilely commercial. It is a mirror of the popular mind. All the P.R. in the world cannot make a hit movie or sitcom. The people vote with ratings and dollars. Academic Marxists, with their elitist sense of superiority to popular taste, are the biggest snobs in America" (Paglia 1992, ix).