Reader Response: Why I'm Not (Exactly) a Conservative

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Confession time: I am not the kind of writer who "doesn't give a hoot about my reviews." I do spend time tracking what people are saying, because I care deeply about whether or not Popologetics proves useful to Christians in engaging culture. That's why I wrote it, and I care. (Yeah, there is some unhealthy ego stuff involved too, no doubt. Working on it. Or rather, God's working in me on it). And, thankfully, almost all of the reviews have been positive. Until a couple of weeks ago. That's when I got what I'd call my first really hostile review on Amazon by a guy (I assume he's a guy) known only "a reader." Here's what he said in full:

> For this book to have been successful, the author would have had to attempt a refutation of the major Christian critiques of popular culture--from conservative perspectives such as the intellectual right (from Intercollegiate Studies Institute-type conservatism to Allan Bloom to Roger Kimball and the New Criterion to the "crunchy conservatism" of Rod Dreher); evangelical approaches from people as diverse as Ken Myers, Marva Dawn, Richard Winter, Michael Horton, Shane Hipps, T. David Gordon, and Gregory Reynolds; non-evangelical perspectives as diverse as Jacques Ellul, Stanley Hauerwas, Albert Borgman, Wendell Berry, E. Michael Jones, and the Pope; and culture critics such as John McWhorter, Neal Gabler, Carson Holloway, Thomas de Zengotita, Walter Ong, Daniel Boorstein, et al.
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> Instead of attempting to refute these perspectives that are more cautious and critical of pop culture, the author simply dismisses them. And he dismisses them by caricaturing them. The most blatant example of this is how he falls prey to the fallacy of excluded middle and sets up a false dichotomy between "high" and "low" culture, accusing authors such as Ken Myers and Neil Postman of perpetuating this dichotomy and even unwittingly being racist in the process!
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> Our author cavalierly dismisses Ken Myers's nuanced construction of "traditional" or "folk" culture, sweeping it under the carpet in one footnote. But this component of Myers's approach is the very thing that defends him against Turnau's false dichotomy. The folk culture of the immigrants that Turnau says wealthy Victorian elitsists were trying to suppress in their defense of high culture is the very culture that Myers and Postman extol--traditional, communal cultures that were the product of multi-generational folk traditions and ways of life, not that of mass-produced, generationally targeted, niche-marketed consumer entertainment products hatched in the boardrooms of Hollywood and Madison Avenue for mass consumption.
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> The author ought to have dealt seriously with the perspective to which he is setting himself up as an alternative, rather than simply caricaturing it. Instead, he simply zeroes in on Myers and Postman, showing a lack of awareness of the larger body of literature on which their critique is built. He (unwittingly??) builds his argument on the perspective of Lawrence Levine, the harbinger of PC multiculturalism on university campuses in the 1980s and 1990s. Levine famously disparaged Allan Bloom and William Bennett and Dinesh D'Souza for their defense of the "dead white male" Western literary canon and instead argued for the radical multicultural, race/sex/gender-oriented curriculum that was pushed at Stanford, when the radical multiculturalists promoted a change in the Western-Civilization-based core curriculum, shouting, "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western Civ has got to go!"
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> This postmodern critique of the "hegemony" of Western Civilization is an unsure foundation for a confessional Protestant understanding of art and culture. Yet Turnau seems oblivious to the implications of his employment of this line of argument. Readers need to understand that the entire conservative argument against radical multiculturalism in the university curriculum is upended by Turnau's thesis in this book. His thesis simply flies in the face of the whole

> classical school movement that has arisen recently in various segments of evangelicalism, Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Orthodox Judaism. Readers who are committed to a more confessional Protestant approach, and how that applies to forging a theology of culture, will need to look elsewhere. The sad reality is that Turnau's approach will only succeed in driving more and more thoughtful evangelical students who want to engage thoughtfully with the arts, culture, and humanities into conservative Roman Catholicism.

There's plenty to complain about here, but I cannot pretend that there isn't some merit to this critique as well. First, a minor point. He makes it sound as if I'm dismisive and caricature Myers. Nothing could be further from the truth. I took great pains *not* to caricature or dismiss his thought out of hand. That's why I spent two chapters, nearly 60 pages, dealing in detail with why I thought Myers was wrong. I wish Reader had mentioned the meat of those critiques instead of throwing around words like "caricature" and "dismisses."

He is right that I didn't deal with many of the conservative writers he mentions. And I did single out Myers because of the inordinate influence his *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes* has had on evangelical thinking about popular culture. I did also deal a bit with Ellul, but Reader missed that, I guess. And he's right that I did dispense with Myer's distinction (borrowed from leftist culture critic Dwight MacDonald) between folk and pop culture in a single footnote. I didn't argue it extensively (as maybe I should have) because I don't think Myers has a leg to stand upon here. I think the distinction between "folk" and "pop" is overly simplistic, especially nowadays when so much (arguably folk) culture is being made on the web, of all places. Further, for popular culture to find a place in the popular imagination, it cannot be simply imposed from above, as Myers and MacDonald would have it. It must also resonate with its audience in a way similar to the ways successful folk tales and folk songs would have in the past. The battlefield of popular culture is littered with expensive, well-marketed failures. For every *The Avengers*, there a dozens of ventures like *Waterworld* and Ang Lee's *Hulk*. We just don't remember them. It is simply mythical thinking to grant popular cultural producers that much power. In this respect, Myers and Marxist theorist Theodor Adorno sing from the same song sheet. And both are wrong for the same reason: consumers of popular culture are simply not sheep. They reject, they appropriate, and they are very active in the process as they use popular culture to construct their own worldviews. For all these reasons, a sharp distinction between folk culture and popular culture seems both aritifical and archaic.

Another point: I do reject the attitudes behind the high/low culture distinction which Myers embraces (although he mentions folk culture, he actually pays it little mind, preferring to talk about Brahms). I do reject the elitist attitudes that despise the culture of other people who are not as rich or educated as a culture's privileged class. And, to be honest, I was influenced wittingly by Lawrence Levine, by way of evangelical media critic William Romanowski (especially his *Pop Culture Wars*). It's that history of proclaiming high culture to be the true culture, and popular culture to be culture-*manque* to try to bully another group into cultural conformity that I found so compelling. And I think Myers' book fits that mold, even if unintentionally. It's *not* a "false dichotomy" that I impose on Myers, as Reader would have it. Back in the Victorian era, the kinds of critiques directed at popular culture were *also* directed at what is now regarded as folk culture (blues, minstrel shows, Vaudeville, etc.). And that kind of neglect of folk culture in favor of high culture continues. If Myers had any words of praise for the blues, I missed it. He uses the category of "folk culture" *in the abstract* to fend off the high/low dichotomy, but the blue suede shoe still fits. So in my estimation, he's got to wear it.

BUT this does not mean that I am all of a sudden a champion of political correctness. Just because I find Levine convincing in his critique of cultural hierarchies in culture and their history in the 19th century does not mean that I am anti-classical anything, anti-cultural traditions, or anti-"Dead White European Males." I *do* take exception to treating high culture (or any kind of culture) *sacramentally*, as I think some within the cultural conservative camp are tempted to do. That makes high culture into a kind of latter-day Baal, and I think that's dangerous ground for a Christian to be on. I think we can respect the culture of the past, learn from it, *and* appreciate what is excellent in popular culture today (and there is a lot that frankly is excellent). As I've said to friends and students from time to time, if Shakespeare were alive today, he'd be writing scripts in Hollywood or for the BBC. Why? Because that's where the money is that keeps afloat the writing talent today. Not too much going on writing-wise at the Queen's court these days. And I think there are contemporary Shakespeares to be

found, if you care to watch enough films or television. Not all popular culture is excellent, but a lot is, especially today (e.g. TV has grown as a medium by leaps and bounds since I was a kid in the 1970s).

But to the larger point: Reader accuses me of being a champion of multiculturalism, the politically correct attitudes that have proved so damaging to academic and public discourse in these past few decades. This is not the case. I am not a stooge of political correctness. But I would challenge him (and other cultural conservatives) to try to see the elements of grace even in something as noxious to them as multiculturalism. Non-Western peoples (and, by implication, their cultures) bear God's image and deserve our respect. Their voices need to be heard because they are human. That is the call of Christ for how we treat human beings. Period. When that respect crosses over to a condemning censoriousness of what is perceived as the hegemonic culture (white, male, Christian), then that is clearly wrong. And that is how multiculturalism is being used too often, as a sort of assumption that everything but evangelicals are OK, a sort of ABC (Anything But Christianity) mentality. I think that sort of thinking is bad for the university, and society, which should include all sorts of voices in the ongoing debates without censoring any of them. Respect the voice of the other, and be open to the truths it has to share, and the "other" should do likewise; a sort of Golden Rule of cultural politics.

But this is precisely what is missing in so much evangelical and conservative cultural engagement with the culture of the "other": a posture of listening respect, an inkling that perhaps there is something we can learn, something of God's grace showing through. You don't have to agree with everything, whether it's the "other's" pro-choice or pro-gay marriage stance, or whatever. I certainly don't. But the difficult task we're called to is understanding those cultural works (and the people who created them), appreciating in them the grace that is there, *before* we critique. Otherwise, we become dismissive, disparaging, and ultimately, a polarizing force in society. That's what I find so problematic in people like Postman, Bloom and Myers, and in dyed-in-the-wool conservatives in general. It's the rejection of common grace, the rejection of careful listening, and the posturing and trench-digging for the culture-war *du jour.*

Listen: I am theologically conservative. I am an inerrantist. I believe in a robust, confessional, supernatural Christianity where sin is real, the spiritual realm is real, resurrection is real, the Second Coming is coming, and where all of us are hopelessly lost without the intervention of the God of grace. And that is why I feel uncomfortable identifying as a cultural conservative, which seems to be all about building walls and circling wagons. As I think about it, it seems more likely that cultural conservatism is doing more harm to the confessional Protestant church than whatever opinions about popular culture I spout. Protestantism festers and putrefies when it shields itself from the surrounding culture. It only thrives when it engages the culture with respect, sharing the light of the gospel with those around. So that's my Reader response: I'm not a dyed-in-the-wool conservative, but far from undermining confessional Christianity, rejecting conservatism's automatic denigration of the culture of the other may be the only way to further the mission of the gospel.

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