Popular Cultural “Worlds” as Alternative Religions

Originally published in *Christian Scholar’s Review* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 323-45

Abstract: To what extent can popular culture be understood as a collection of religions? Using a biblically informed appropriation of Paul Ricoeur’s theory of narrative as a threefold mimesis as his conceptual grid, Theodore Turnau explores how popular cultural texts can function as alternative religions. He focuses on two case studies: a group of romance novel readers, and a dance club in 1980s London. He concludes by suggesting a few ways we can engage popular culture more deeply as Christian academics, parents, neighbors, or practitioners in the arts and entertainment industry. Mr. Turnau is a Lecturer in Humanities and Social Sciences at Anglo-American College, in Prague, Czech Republic.

> You sit in the Neptune Theatre waiting for the thin, overhead lights to dim with a sense of respect, perhaps even reverence, for American movie houses are, as everyone knows, the new cathedrals, their stories better remembered than legends, totems, or mythologies, their directors more popular than novelists, more influential than saints—enough people have seen the James Bond adventures to fill the entire country of Argentina. Perhaps you have written this movie. Perhaps not. Regardless, you come to it as everyone does, as a seeker groping in the darkness for light, hoping something magical will be beamed from above, and no matter how bad this matinee is, or silly, something deep and maybe even too dangerous to talk loudly about will indeed happen to you and the others before this drama reels to its last transparent frame.
> Charles Johnson, “Moving Pictures”[1]

> This rock ‘n’ roll music, it came to Memphis out of whorehouses, juke joints, churches and cotton fields. And it flat-out changed the world. I believed in it before—and I damn sure believe in it NOW!
> Sam Phillips, founder of Sun Records, the man who “discovered” Elvis Presley.[2]

I have a picture at home from the cover of a free weekly circular listing the cultural events in the city in which I used to live. It is a portrait of Elvis, smiling that boyish smile of his, with a halo and a crown of thorns. The title of the article is: “Why Can’t We Get Over Elvis? Is It Time to Find Someone New to Worship?”[3] Setting aside the blasphemous connotations, the picture does make a certain amount of sense, as does the metaphor of the movie theater as cathedral, or rock ‘n’ roll as a source of faith. There is something undeniably religious about much of popular culture.

Yet many religious studies scholars are unnerved and eschew such evidence as not “genuine” religion. For example, evangelical professor of comparative religions, Winfried Corduan, briefly considers devotion to Elvis as religion, only to dismiss it. One of the core elements of religion, according to him, is the way it directs us beyond the mundane towards “transcendence.”

> Transcendence can come to us in many different ways, through supernatural agencies or through metaphysical principles (for example, the greatest good or the first cause), an ideal, a place or an awareness, to mention just some of the possibilities. Thus devotion to Elvis Presley—even the resurrected Elvis of the supermarket tabloids—lacks transcendence, and so it is probably not a genuine religion.[4]

I find the reasoning curious: transcendence comes to us in many ways, but whatever it is, Elvis does not have it (a fact that the true Elvis devotee would strongly dispute). The idea that popular culture can contain moments of transcendence seems to be dismissed out of hand. But transcendence seems to me to be exactly what Sam Phillips and writer Charles Johnson are asserting.[5] The roving cultural historian for Rolling Stone Magazine, Greil Marcus, has written a whole book documenting the bizarre ways the transcendence of Elvis has emerged in American culture since his passing on August 16th, 1977.[6] Many of these, I believe, are religiously significant. The religious aspect of popular culture is hard to overlook.

Notes for this page...
[1] In *Sudden Fiction: American Short-Short Stories,* ed. Robert Shapard and James Thomas (Layton, UT: Peregrin Smith, 1986), 190.
[2] Ed Baumgardner, "New Orleans Blues," *Winston-Salem Journal*, 15 August, 1999, A-5. The emphasis is in the original.
[3]Harry Blair, "Elvis," illustration, *Triad Style*, vol. 13, no. 10 (6 March, 1996), 1. Winfried [4]Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 21.
[5]See the epigraph above.
[6]Greil Marcus, *Dead Elvis: A Chronicle of Cultural Obsession* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

Religion as Je Ne Sais Quoi

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Why the hesitation of Corduan and other scholars of religion? It has to do with a debate over the definition of religion that has simmered for almost a century within the fields of sociology of religion and religious studies. Scholars have some difficulty pinning down exactly what religion is, and some even propose scrapping any attempt to define it altogether, claiming that religion is a pseudo-category.[7] The majority of religion scholars, however, are quite certain that religion is a valid concept, and that it is a useful and helpful tool for understanding different cultures.

Most religion scholars have pursued one of two strategies for defining "religion": substantivism and functionalism.[8] The older strategy for defining religion is substantivism (or essentialism), which arose in the mid-nineteenth century. It seeks to understand religion in terms of a core essence or substance. That substance can be construed as, for example, a belief in the supernatural, or a key mystical experience, or a certain institutional structure. One example would be the great religion scholar Mircea Eliade's understanding of religion as an encounter with a numinous sacred that is clearly separated from the mundane, everyday aspects of life.[9] Functionalism, on the other hand, arose at the turn of the last century in anthropology when substantivism proved to be too narrow to deal with the religious behaviors of certain native peoples that were then being studied. Functionalism is more flexible in that it seeks to define religion not in terms of what religion is, but what it does. Religion is defined by how it meets certain human needs such as providing meaning, emotional comfort, or whatever. For example, a pioneer in the anthropology of religion, Emile Durkheim, proposed that religion is really a force for social cohesion. Whatever finally holds a society together, that phenomenon is, by definition, religion.[10] So religion potentially can be as extensive and multiform as human needs are.

The most recent addition to this debate has come from a small but growing number of scholars (mostly American) who work in a variety of disciplines: cultural studies, religious studies, anthropology, sociology, and even literary theory. Using the insights of the functionalist theories of anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner, they have sought to extend the accepted definition of religion further to include popular cultural phenomena. They seek recognition of popular culture's sacred spaces, the way it creates its own web of meaning, its own rituals, myths and communities.[11] For these scholars, even though religion is slippery and hard to define, it is nonetheless an indispensable category for understanding popular culture.[12]

This paper is an attempt to further this network of metaphorical associations to arrive at a specifically Christian understanding of popular culture as a functional religion. To get there, I will

appropriate the work of a language-philosopher, the late Paul Ricoeur. I will focus on his theory of narrative as a "threefold mimesis," especially his concept of "text worlds" and their transforming power in the lives of readers. Bringing his ideas into conversation with certain biblical concepts, especially the ideas of general revelation and idolatry, I will argue that religion can likewise be theorized as a threefold mimesis.

There is more at stake here than simply a subtle shifting of theoretical boundaries between cultural studies and religion. Rather, I seek a reorientation in the way we perceive popular culture itself. If popular culture constructs the worlds of meaning in which we dwell and through which we move in our everyday lives, then truly understanding its dynamics is well worth the time and effort. My broader hope is that Christians will be given tools with which to deepen their own engagement with the popular cultural worlds that surround us all.

Notes...

[7] See, for example, Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
[8]For a brief overview of these two definitional strategies, see Meredith B. McGuire, *Religion: The Social Context*, 3rd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1992), 9-15.
[9]Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1957).
[10] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1965), 463-76.
[11] Two fascinating collections of articles by such scholars are Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, eds. *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), especially the second half of the book; and Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, eds., *God in the Details: American and Religion in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001).
[12] Ironically, this project is met with hostility from both the established religious studies departments and cultural studies departments. Many popular cultural scholars feel that to see popular culture as a conduit of religious significance would distract us from the real business of cultural studies—to expose the ways popular culture is a tool for hegemony or symbolic resistance to oppression. In other words, for most popular culture scholars, popular culture is properly viewed only with a view to its political or economic effects.

Ricoeur's Theory of Narrative as a Theory of Popular Cultural Religion

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Although Ricoeur developed his theory of narrative with literary novels in mind, I would argue that it can also be read as a theory of religion, and as a theory of popular culture. Moreover, it can illuminate the connection between the two, the ways popular culture can function as religion.[13] We shall see that popular culture functions as religion in the way it represents reality, similar to the way a narrative represents reality. We shall explore parallels between popular culture, religion, and narrative as I lay out a précis of Ricoeur's theory of narrative as a threefold mimesis, using a group of women who read romance novels as an illustration throughout. Later, I will apply this perspective on another example, a 1980s London dance club. Finally, I will offer some conclusions and some possible directions for a deeper engagement between Christians and popular culture.

Mimesis and Emplotment

Ricoeur's theory begins as a theory of representation, that is, how we interpret reality and re-display it to ourselves. As such, this theory has applicability to all sorts of cultural products and actions: art,

religion, popular culture—wherever humans try to show themselves what life is like. Ricoeur calls this process “mimesis,” imitation.

In considering different theories of mimesis, Ricoeur rejects the Platonic, “specular” model, where representation is judged according to how realistically it mirrors reality.[14] The specular model leaves no room for human interpretation, for art. In other words, the humanness of the human reflection of reality in mimesis is ignored. So Ricoeur turns instead to Aristotle’s Poetics for a model of representation where human agency is necessary for mimesis. For Aristotle, mimesis is always a creative and interpretive representation. Aristotle is most interested in the mimesis of human action and suffering,[15] and that happens through a process of “emplotment”: the arrangement of events into an ordered narrative whole, a plot.[16] In this way, narrative actually augments the meaning of the world of human action and suffering by creating a fictional “world” with its own intelligibility, its own coherence.[17]

Already we can begin to see how this theory might clarify some of the functional connections between popular culture and religion. Once we start talking about ordering the meaning of the world of action and suffering, we are beginning to enter religious territory. Religion, in many cases, concerns interpreting our world, our actions, and our suffering.[18] And this kind of religious activity happens in popular culture. Consider the experience of going to a good movie, the experience of being drawn into a “world” apart, a separate reality where human action and suffering is augmented, and the feeling of returning to the everyday world once the credits roll. All of a sudden, Johnson’s description of the movie theater as cathedral that I quoted in the epigraph starts making more sense, because what happens in the dark is akin to a sacred experience, the ephemeral creation of a world of meaning, a quasi-holy mimesis. Or consider how youths can find a metaphysical focal point in a rock ‘n’ roll song, using it to express their discontent with the world as it is, and expressing a vision of the world as it should be. All of a sudden, Sam Phillips’ statement about rock ‘n’ roll changing the world (also in the epigraph) does not seem quite so overblown, for just there a religious mimesis occurs. When considered in this way, popular culture clearly encroaches on themes such as the suppressed knowledge of God and idolatry—territory that Paul addresses in Romans 1:18-25 (more on that below).

The Threefold Mimesis

But the connections, I believe, become even clearer once we consider Ricoeur’s theory of narrative in more detail. Ricoeur analyzes the way narrative mimesis mediates our experience of time in terms of three dialectically connected moments that he calls $mimesis_1$, $mimesis_2$, and $mimesis_3$; or prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration respectively.[19]

$Mimesis_1$: Narrative Prefiguration as Revelational Provocation

$Mimesis_1$ has to do with the network of structures of everyday life that call forth narrative and make story-telling possible: the symbolic rules for interpreting action, social and ethical norms, even the way our experience of time changes subtly when we are practically engaged (what Heidegger calls “within-time-ness”).[20] This pre-narrative network of structures gives our lives a quality of stories-not-yet-told, the “living imbrication from which the told story emerges.”[21] This life-context provokes stories and renders such stories intelligible. Further, Ricoeur says, “We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated.”[22] Ricoeur brings to his theory a presupposition about the worth of human lives, that they are worthy of attention, worthy of storytelling.

Is this pre-narrative context simply the neutral background noise of our lives? A Christian theory of popular culture as religion would have to say, “No.” In fact, the language Ricoeur uses is strongly reminiscent of the kind of “background noise” that Paul talks about in Romans 1:18-25, what theologians call general revelation: the knowledge of God that is built into the cosmos. It is a passage that is worth quoting at length:

> The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is

> plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the beginning of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.
>
> For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.
> Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

In this remarkable passage, Paul asserts that God has built into the universe a dynamic whereby he is continually being revealed , but also where that knowledge is continually being suppressed by sinful humans as we reorient our core desires towards substitute gods.[23] Though Paul does not tell us exactly how this knowledge is communicated, he does point us in the general direction: the arena of creation that displays God's "eternal power and divine nature." Paul sees a significant connection between this revelation that comes through creation and the tragic foolishness of exchanging the worship of God for the worship of the creature. Idolatry, then, is a willful confusion over the significance of creation. In idolatry, we short-circuit creation's job of gesturing toward its Creator, and find instead something in creation itself that is worthy of service and worship. Note the bitter irony here: it is in creation that God's power and character are displayed, and that is why it serves as such choice source material for the sinful, twisted interpretation of idolatry.[24] The overall picture that Paul paints for us, then, is of false worship that springs from the context of a creation that is structured to be intensely meaningful (though sinful humans constantly, willfully misconstrue that meaning).[25]

It is here that Ricoeur's account of mimesis_1 as a life-context that provokes narrative and enables stories to be told resonates with Christian theology. Indeed, without these biblical presuppositions, Ricoeur's theory ultimately makes little sense. His theory insists that life is structured to be both intelligible and significant, but why should it be? Life is intelligible because God made the world as a backdrop of a meaningful story ready to unfold. Ricoeur emphasizes the way humans care about motivations and how to interpret each other's actions. Doesn't that point to God's lovingkindness towards his creatures and the communitarian character of the Trinity reflected in our lives? Ricoeur asserts that we all know, finally, that human lives are worthy of storytelling rather than silence. But he never says why. A Christian approach would point to the knowledge of our own dignity because we have been created in God's image.[26] Finally, Ricoeur claims that these pre-narrative structures provoke a response. But why should they? A biblical perspective provides an answer: they provoke a response just because they are revelation. Revelation always provokes a religious response—we are provoked either to covenant submission to or rebellion against God. This is the pattern that Paul describes in Romans 1:18-25: God reveals himself in various ways, and humans, apart from God's grace, respond religiously, that is, in idolatry.

Let us be more concrete: what do these "pre-narrative structures" that serve as general revelation look like? Doubtless, we need to keep a functional perspective and ask, "What can act as general revelation?" Any natural, cultural, social, or temporal structures could be used as general revelation, and therefore would provoke a religious response. The "living imbrication from which the told story emerges"[27] to which Ricoeur refers is potentially as broad as life itself: the beauty of nature, romantic love, a concern for social justice—anything. Even sinful structures, such as social oppression, can be provocative in just this way. The experience of oppression holds a mirror to our fallenness and God's wrath revealed from heaven—it spurs people to look beyond what is immediately given them to something more deeply meaningful within their experience.

Let me give an example of a pre-narrative/revelational context in action. In 1984, Janice Radway published her justly celebrated ethnographic study of a group of middle-aged women from a small city in the mid-western United States (a town she calls "Smithton") who all bought romance novels from the same bookstore during the 1980s.[28] Radway investigated the romance novel industry, the

way these books were used, why any given novel was liked or disliked, and the impact these books had upon the Smithton women. For these women, romance novel reading is a "world," a sort of quasi-religion (as we shall see later).

What was the pre-narrative context out of which this world arose? What was the general revelational context that provoked their particular religious response? Radway notes that these readers all shared a similar experience and background. All were female, most were married with children under the age of eighteen, and most did not work outside the home, or only worked in part-time jobs.[29] Further, all of them shared a need for "escape"—not from their families per se, but from the dull routine of housework and errands, of being emotionally and physically drained by the needs of children and husbands (who often showed little gratitude, assistance or affirmation).[30] In other words, their experience of patriarchal society as expecting much and giving little in return provided the provocation to which the romance novel served as a religious answer, the text-world that they would inhabit through the ritual of reading. The tensions these women experienced everyday is their "mimesis1." But how is this experience of patriarchy general revelation? From a biblical perspective, these women experience life on a fallen planet and alienation from God in terms of isolation and lack of appreciation and affirmation. Such women feel, through patriarchy, the "wrath of God that is being revealed" (Ro 1:18), the way the creation-order groans under the weight of futility after the Fall (Ro 8:20-22).[31]

In this way, popular culture (in this case, the act of reading romance novels) responds to the provocation of the pre-narrative, revelational context that surrounds us. Let us turn our attention from the pre-narrative context to the narrative response (for our purposes, the religious response), which Ricoeur calls mimesis$_2$.

Mimesis$_2$: Narrative Configuration as Religious World-building

In Ricoeur's narrative theory, mimesis1 prepares for and provokes narrative. In mimesis$_2$, or configuration, the focus shifts to the narrative response to that provocation. Here we reach emplotment proper, the creation of a "world of the text." Mimesis$_2$ for Ricoeur is Janus-faced, a moment of mediation or connection between the pre-narrative context (mimesis$_1$) and the effects of the narrative text-world in the reader's world (mimesis$_3$).

So on the one hand, mimesis2 takes the raw material from the pre-narrative context and shapes it, combining the elements of a story (events, characters, circumstances, etc.) into a tensive whole, a "concordant discordance."[32] In this way, narrative configuration draws from its context to create a "world of the text," a sphere of meaning with its own peculiar sense of time. Time in a text-world is both linear (one event after another) and synoptic (a purpose-filled sense of the whole story throughout).[33]

On the other hand, mimesis2 also reaches forward in the dialectic and influences experience and perspective of the reader (mimesis3) by shaping the experience of reading itself. The world of the text generates schemata, rules that governing its own interpretation (that is, how the point of the story relates to the way the characters, episodes, and circumstances are portrayed).[34] These schemata in turn generate specific literary histories, what Ricoeur calls "traditionality." Each work has its own "traditionality," an existence that draws on the tension between "sedimentation" (solidifying the tradition) or "innovation" (breaking away from the tradition).[35]

I would argue that this creation of a text-world describes what happens in religion as well. Religions create (or, to use Ricoeur's term, "configure") a separate world of meaning, a world with its own sense of space and time. The great "religions of the book" (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) are quite obviously text-worlds, but a similar creative (or better, re-creative) dynamic is at work in all religions. They all create their own text-worlds, networks of symbols for habitation with their own sense of time and space. People collectively create these worlds in response to the wonders and/or tensions of lived experience (what I called earlier revelational provocation). Like narrative text-worlds, these religious text-worlds combine disparate elements (symbols, doctrines, stories) into a meaningful whole, a concordant dissonance. And like the narrative text-worlds of mimesis$_2$, religious text-worlds generate schemata, traditions for how they are to be understood.

Such text-worlds arise not only in the great world religions, but in popular culture as well. Every day, popular culture offers us various worlds for habitation, and I would argue that these worlds have a specifically religious significance—that is, they function as ways of groping towards transcendence through created structures. Let us consider again our example of the Smithton women. We saw their "revelational provocation": the experience of patriarchal oppression. We should then expect a religious response to that provocation, à la Romans 1. What, then, is their creative-religious response to that provocation? How do these women create or appropriate a religious text-world? This is the question posed by mimesis$_2$.

Obviously, the world of the romance novel constitutes their functional religious text-world. But not just any romance novel will do. These women have very particular expectations of what the ideal romance novel contains. Using survey and interview data, Radway sketched what the Smithton women expect out of an ideal romance—that is, how their religious text-world must be shaped.[36] The ideal romance must focus on a monogamous heterosexual relationship (no love triangles to confuse things).[37] The heroine must be beautiful, fiercely intelligent, and have a fiery disposition that rebels against the expectations of her parents and society—and all this without losing her tenderhearted femininity.[38] She must be sexually innocent (at the beginning of the book), but not for moral reasons, but only because she refuses to be used by men: she does not live for their wishes.[39] In other words, the heroine, as the site of reader identification, is a projection of the desire to be realized as a fully independent, interesting, and significant human subject (as opposed to being an object, whether as a domestic or sex-object).[40]

The ideal romantic hero must be masculine, a leader, at first seemingly harsh and uncaring, but with hints of compassion, and sexually experienced (because he has not yet found the right woman).[41] Further, there must be a variety of "foils," rivals that serve merely to highlight the ideal characteristics of the heroine and hero.[42] There must of course be villains who threaten the relationship (the sexually manipulative female, or the controlling, predatory male who wants only sex, not relationship).[43]

These stock characters inhabit a highly standardized narrative structure. The story always begins with an isolated, emotionally empty heroine, who develops relational conflict with the seemingly distant hero (though his distance and even cruelty are later revealed as the scars of a past hurt). The heroine, through her feminine will and tenderness, is able to start to bring out the hidden compassion in the hero. The two are separated by certain events, and later reunited, finally resulting in an open declaration of the hero's love for the heroine. The heroine responds with emotional and sexual passion, which leads to the "happy ending" and an implied future marriage, and perhaps children.[44]

Notice how exquisitely tailored this popular text-world is: it meets the specific pre-narrative provocation in a most elegant manner. The typical Smithton woman faces the emotionally unsatisfying existence of a housewife in a patriarchal society. She feels neither appreciated nor relationally nurtured.[45] This popular text-world responds with a salvation story of sorts. The heroine in these novels successfully transforms the harsh, uncaring male into a caring lover: the perfect combination of "fatherly protection, motherly care, and passionate adult love."[46] The heroine experiences both sexual passion and parental nurturing from the same individual.[47] Thus the structure of the narrative world works as a "utopian wish-fulfillment fantasy," a dream-world that offers substitute satisfactions and makes her feel worthy and alive.[48] Here is where the Smithton women encounter the sacred. The world of the romance novel serves as a functional religion.

But our analysis remains incomplete if we merely note the contours of the religious popular cultural text-world. We must also consider how such worlds are inhabited. So we turn to Ricoeur's account of mimesis$_3$, or "refiguration," where the world of the text and the world of the reader meet.

Mimesis$_3$: Narrative Refiguration as Religious Ritual

In Ricoeur's theory, mimesis$_3$ marks the completion of narrative representation in reading, "the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader."[49] Here the narrative traditions and patterns generated in mimesis$_2$ are made concrete, brought to life through reading. In reading, we enter and inhabit narrative worlds and bring them to life. In this sense, the reader

completes the story—the imaginative world generated by the story is actually a "joint work of the text and reader."[50]

Therefore, Ricoeur spends quite a bit of time laying out a phenomenology of reading, that is, how inhabiting the world of the text through reading actually transforms the reader.[51] Ricoeur draws upon the work of Wolfgang Iser. In Iser's understanding of reading, the reader processes the text gradually, organizing the information received from the text, selecting familiar patterns, rejecting unfamiliar ones.[52] But the unfamiliar soon overwhelms the familiar as the reader becomes entangled in alien patterns that resist the reader's patterning activity.[53] The result is an ever more complex, ever richer network of connections that solidifies an imaginative world. The reader becomes familiarized into the unfamiliar, awakened to a new perspective, as his or her old perspective sinks into the background.[54] The reader is compelled to see life through other eyes, through the eyes of the text, and this alien perspective becomes the reader's (a sort of "fusion of horizons," to borrow Anthony Thiselton's memorable phrase).[55] This negotiation between the familiar and the unfamiliar changes us. We are "refigured" by the world of the text, and we return to the everyday world with an altered perspective.

Obviously, this account of reading also applies to the way worshippers enter into the world of their sacred text through reading the Bible, the Koran, the Gita, etc. But couldn't we also see ritual as a kind of "reading" the world of the sacred? Through symbolic performances, worshippers enter into the world of religious meanings, combining performance with sacred stories to bring that world of meaning to life. Ritual makes the unfamiliar more familiar. It can profoundly refigure the participant, returning him or her to the everyday world with an altered perspective. In fact, ritual is more like reading (in Ricoeurean terms) than simple visual reading, since ritual is more enveloping, involving the body, and oftentimes community as well. Think of the Passover meal, the Lord's Supper, or of Hindu dances to Krishna.

But there are popular cultural rituals, too, such as the ritual of going to a dance club, or to the ballpark, or to a movie on a date. Are these somehow less religious? In God in the Details, a recent collection of essays on religion in American popular culture, the editors Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy single out four effects that emerge from various popular cultural rituals, and each of these resonates with Ricoeur's analysis of reading narrative:[56]

1. Ritual creates a sense of sacred time and space, just as reading allows us to inhabit a text-world with its own unique sense of time and place. We dwell in a text-world with its own sense of purpose-filled time.

2. Ritual transforms personal identity, often suspending ordinary social identities to create an intimate community of equals, or what Victor Turner calls *communitas*.[57] In Ricoeur's theory too, inhabiting a text-world "refigures" our identity—purpose-filled narrative time changes those who bathe in it.

3. Ritual exposes and resolves lived tensions and conflicts, very like the way Ricoeur sees narrative and reading as a tensive process, a "concordant discordance."

4. Finally, Mazur and McCarthy note that, unlike traditional rituals, popular rituals lack fixed, coherent meanings. They seem tradition-less. They lack what Ricoeur would call "traditionality" (the way the work lays out patterns for how the text fits into the received tradition of the reading community). But on closer inspection, there does indeed seem to be a looser form of traditionality in popular cultural communities. Witness the outrage on fan internet message boards when television producers mess with the tradition (by, for example, changing the appearance of Klingons in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*),[58] or the outrage of the Smithton women when romance writers take liberties with the genre.[59] There is still a "tradition-mindedness," even within popular culture.[60]

All of this is simply to emphasize that religious ritual is part and parcel of popular culture, especially if we view popular ritual from a Ricoeurean perspective. Not all of these effects emerge from every popular cultural ritual, but some certainly do. And the presence of such ritual effects implies that even in the realm of the popular, powerful symbolic and religious meanings emerge from everyday performances. Rituals in popular culture can serve as gateways into these popular cultural religious

text-worlds.

The way narrative refigures readers in mimesis$_3$ strongly suggests the way religion refigures its adherents. Religion never stops at the church, mosque or temple door. It always spills out onto the street, into everyday living.[61] Popular cultural texts and rituals similarly refigure their "readers" (or viewers, or listeners, etc.) through their cumulative impact upon human consciousness.[62] These popular rituals and narratives change people's worldviews and group ethos, their ethical motivations. They affect (or perhaps even effect) identity; that is, they decisively influence the individual's sense of relationship with others, with one's own specific place and time, and with oneself. In this way, mimesis$_3$ also describes the impact of popular text-worlds upon human life and identity in a way that could be described as religious.[63]

Let me illustrate this refiguring power of popular ritual by returning once again to the Smithton women. We saw their revelational provocation (mimesis$_1$), and the religious-creative response offered in the world of the romance novel (mimesis$_2$). What, then, is the Smithton women's ritual means of inhabiting this religious text-world (mimesis$_3$)? Obviously, one enters a romance novel through reading, but for these women, reading itself takes on ritualistic qualities.[64] Ritual creates a sacred space and time. In Radway's interviews, the Smithton women consistently spoke of their reading habits in terms of creating a special space or time for themselves, an opportunity to escape into another world and another time.[65] Reading romance novels became for them a ritual for creating sacred time and space that transcended the drudgery of the everyday.[66]

Ritual provides a sense of personal transformation (or "refiguration") by exposing and resolving the tensions of lived existence. It was no different for the Smithton women's experience of reading. The typical Smithton woman felt herself transformed in reading through her imaginative identification with the heroine and her tensions and experiences. Radway notes:

> [A]ll the women I spoke to . . . admitted that they want to identify with the heroine as she attempts to comprehend, anticipate, and deal with the ambiguous attentions of a man who inevitably cannot understand her feelings at all. The point of the experience is the sense of exquisite tension, anticipation, and excitement created within the reader as she imagines the possible resolutions and consequences for a woman of an encounter with a member of the opposite sex and then observes that once again the heroine in question has avoided the ever-present potential for disaster because the hero has fallen helplessly in love with her.[67]

The parallels between the romantic climax (where the hero expresses love for the heroine) and more traditional religious understandings of redemption are obvious: salvation and the promised "life to the full" comes after a pilgrimage from relational emptiness and tension to passionate and sensual release of tension, of being fully appreciated by her partner—heaven on earth. And the Smithton women take that journey with the heroine through the ritual act of reading. From a certain perspective, reading becomes a sacramental exercise, imbibing the experience of redemption over and over again.[68]

Further, the specific way this redemption is configured points to the way ritual exposes and resolves the tensions of the reader's lived experience. The typical Smithton woman lives among the tensions of being wanted and needed, yet not appreciated, of constantly being drained and of being expected to sustain everyone around her. The ritual of romance reading imaginatively resolves those tensions by transporting the reader into a world where she is the center of attention, the object of affection of an intelligent, emotionally caring man. It is, in effect, a desire to be the center of the universe, a form of self-worship, "a ritual wish to be cared for, loved, and validated in a particular way."[69]

Looking at the overall picture of this type of popular cultural consumption, are the Smithton women really engaged in something religious? From the perspective I have been describing, the answer would have to be "Yes." There is a clear pre-narrative (and general revelational) context in the tensions of their everyday experience (the draining reality of patriarchy). There is a coherent text-world with its own salvific motifs built into the narrative (emotional and sensual validation by the hero). And there are clear ritualistic patterns used to enter this text-world (reading as an escape

into another world that transforms the reader). This popular cultural "world" functions as an alternative religion.

To sum up: I have argued that Ricoeur's theory of threefold narrative mimesis can be interpreted as a perspective from which to understand religion in general, and the functional religious impact of popular cultural text-worlds in particular. In Ricoeur's theory, pre-narrative lived structures ($mimesis_1$) provoke the configuration of a narrative text-world ($mimesis_2$) that is inhabited by reading, and the effects spill out into the everyday world, having a decisive impact upon the identity and perspective of the reader ($mimesis_3$). In my biblical appropriation of Ricoeur's theory, this three-fold pattern can also describe a religious arc that is grounded in the structures, tensions and wonders of lived experience that function as general revelation ($mimesis_1$). These provoke a religious response, provoking the creation of a religious "text-world" ($mimesis_2$). These worlds are inhabited through various ritual behaviors, and this habitation in turn impacts and alters the worldview, ethics, and identity of its inhabitants ($mimesis_3$).[70] Where we find this pattern, this arc comprised of revelational provocation → world-creating response → ritual habitation, I would argue we find a functional religion. It is religious not simply because of this distinctive pattern, but because from a biblical perspective, God ought to be at the center of this world-making/world-interpreting activity. When he is not, when some created thing or person is substituted for him, even if it is good (and the Bible affirms that creation *is* good), then it must be called idolatry. And idolatry is, by definition, a religious act. The creative interpretation of reality via the threefold mimesis is God's territory, and any usurpation of it by something other than God is necessarily a rival form of worship, a form of idolatry.[71] The next question is, then, can this model of the threefold mimesis contribute to a Christian understanding of popular cultural "worlds" as alternative religions, and what sorts of insights can it illumine?

Notes...

[13] Please note that I am not working from Ricoeur's theological works; these have been set aside. Rather, I want to make the case simply from his language philosophy from the 1980s and early 90s.
[14] Paul Ricoeur, "Mimesis and Representation," in Mario J. Valdés, ed., *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 137-38.
[15] By "suffering," Ricoeur does not mean events that are necessarily painful. Rather, he uses the word to indicate the opposite of action, that is, being acted upon.
[16] Ricoeur, "Mimesis and Representation,"138.
[17] Ricoeur, "Mimesis and Representation,"139.
[18] See for example Peter Berger's definition of religion as "the establishment, through human activity, of an all-embracing sacred order, that is, of a sacred cosmos that will be capable of maintaining itself in the ever-present face of chaos [i.e. human suffering]," in *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 51.
[19] For a detailed description of Ricoeur's theory of narrative as a three-fold Mimesis, see Ricoeur, "Time and Narrative: Threefold Mimesis," chap. in Time and Narrative, volume 1, translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 52-87. For Ricoeur, time is the most basic of human experiences, and he wrote his famous three volume work as an attempt to untangle our experience of time.
[20] Ricoeur, "Time and Narrative," 54-64.
[21] Ricoeur, "Time and Narrative," 75-76.
[22] Ricoeur, "Time and Narrative," 75.
[23] This is how I understand the force of the present participles in verse 18, Ἀποκαλύπτεται ("is being revealed") and κατεχόνων ("who are suppressing the truth"). It is an ever-present dynamic, more akin to a river current against which we fight than simply static information about God. The unbeliever is continually trying to canoe upstream, and idols serve as convenient paddles.
[24] For more on the dynamic of general revelation and idolatry, see Theodore Turnau, "Reflecting Theologically on Popular Culture as Meaningful: The Role of Sin, Grace, and General Revelation," *Calvin Theological Journal* 37, no. 2 (Nov. 2002): 270-96, especially 286-94.
[25] There are other passages concerning general revelation, such as Ps 19, Isa 28:23-29, and Acts 14:17, but we do not have the space to consider them here. Taken together, however, it is clear that general revelation concerns more than simply revealing God's wrath. God's goodness, power, generosity and mercy are also on display through creation. This is why Paul targets ingratitude and failure to worship as being at the center of the sinful response to the knowledge of God in Ro 1:21.
[26] By "knowledge" here I mean the suppressed knowledge of God referred to in Ro 1:18-20, something akin to what Calvin calls the "awareness of divinity" and the "seed of religion". Such

knowledge is essential to the way the structure of life itself provokes a narrative/religious response. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 43-4 (I.3.3).
[27] Ricoeur, "Time and Narrative," 75-6.
[29] *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991). For a description of the Smithton women, see Radway, ch. 2.
[29] Radway, 56-57.
[30] Radway, 91-96.
[31] Please note that this does not mean that a biblical worldview somehow supports patriarchy, or oppression of any kind. Christians ought to do what they can to alleviate oppression where they find it, and the Bible is clear about that. The point is, rather, that oppression, where and when it occurs, takes on a revelational weight. The oppression that we sometimes experience here on earth is, in a sense, a small taste the alienation that will be fully realized in hell—a preview of coming attractions for those alienated from God.
[32] Ricoeur, "Time and Narrative," 66.
[33] Ricoeur, "Time and Narrative," 66-68.
[34] Ricoeur, "Time and Narrative," 68.
[35] Ricoeur, "Time and Narrative," 68-70.
[36] For a more detailed description and analysis of the "ideal romance," see Radway, chapter 4.
[37] Radway, 122-3. In fact, in a survey where Radway asked what the Smithton women found offensive in romance novels, "bed-hopping" topped the list, edging out even rape. See ibid, p. 74, table 2.3.
[38] Radway, 123-4.
[39] Radway, 124.
[40] Radway, 124-5.
[41] Radway, 128-30.
[42] Radway, 131-2,
[43] Radway, 131-3.
[44] Radway's analysis isolates thirteen narrative functions, and the narrative structure itself is chiastic. See table 4.2 in Radway, 150.
[45] See Radway, 151.
[46] Radway, 149.
[47] Radway goes so far as to call the relationship "regressive," since it leads to a passive, child-like identity for the heroine. See Radway, 145-6.
[48] Radway, 151.
[49] Ricoeur, "Time and Narrative," 71.
[50] Ricoeur, "Time and Narrative," 76.
[51] For more a more detailed account, see Ricoeur, "The World of the Text and the World of the Reader," chap. in *Time and Narrative* vol. 3, translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
[52] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 108-111.
[53] Ricoeur, "The World of the Text," 169.
[54] Iser, 127, 131-32, 140, 148, 155-56.
[55] Iser, 157-59.
[56] On the functions of popular ritual, see Mazur and McCarthy, eds., *God in the Details*, 103-107.
[57] On communitas, see Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), and Mazur and McCarthy, 105.
[58] See, for instance, Henry Jenkins' descriptions of online debates amongst Star Trek fans in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 98-107.
[59] See Radway, chapter 5 on the "failed romance."
[60] Note that these four effects of ritual are not simply registered individually, but also communally as ritual draws members into community.
[61] Or if it does not, then one must question whether this is a person's real religion, or if there isn't a substitute religion behind the official religion (for example, the way consumerism supplants Christianity as the real religion of many Americans).
[62] Some media and cultural analysts call this "intertextuality," the way cultural texts reinforce each other's messages. See Graeme Burton, *More than Meets the Eye: An Introduction to Media Studies*, 3rd ed., (London: Arnold, 2002), 126-27, 141.
[63] We could further explore the parallels implicit in Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity (his application of the threefold mimesis to characters as well as narrative plots), but I am afraid that would lengthen this paper too much for our present purposes.
[64] Radway, chapter 3, "The Act of Reading the Romance: Escape and Instruction."
[65] Radway, 91-2.
[66] Recall the quote by Corduan in the introduction of this paper. He insisted that a key marker of a genuine religion is that it "directs us beyond the mundane routine of everyday existence" toward "transcendence," (see Corduan, 21). According to this marker, reading romance novels, at least for these women, is clearly a *religious* ritual.
[67] Radway, 64-5.
[68] Further, many of the Smithton women reported that they felt a real transformation in terms of

identity and outlook. Some became more assertive, like the heroines in romance novels. See Radway, 101-2.
[69] Radway, 83. Recall again Paul's description of idolatry in Romans 1.
[70] Of course, the arc is really a circle (or better, a spiral), since the altered worldview, ethics and identity that emerge from mimesis3 spill into everyday life, affecting the way general revelation is perceived, which affects the next generation of religious text-worlds and ritual, and so on.
[71] Throwing around terms like "idolatry" when talking about popular culture could lead to a misunderstanding. I do not believe that the best way to engage popular culture is simply to reject it as idolatry. That fails to understand the attraction that popular cultural religion holds for many. Another key term that merits discussion in this context is popular culture as common grace. Popular culture can and should also be seen as a collection of texts that reflect God's generosity and lovingkindness (see Acts 14:17). Unfortunately, such a discussion would make this article too long. For those who care to pursue the subject, please see Theodore A. Turnau III, "Reflecting Theologically on Popular Culture as Meaningful: The Role of Sin, Grace, and General Revelation," *Calvin Theological Journal* 37, no 2 (Nov. 2002):270-96, especially 278-81.

Another Example from Popular Culture

Another Example from Popular Culture

We have already applied this perspective to Radway's Smithton women. Indeed, that was an obvious example: in their case, the narrative text-worlds were literally narratives, romance novels. But what about other forms of popular culture that are not so dependent on stories? Perhaps another example may prove helpful. We shall explore the potent mix of mind-altering drugs and dance music popular in London during the late 80s. This example may prove more challenging, since narrative plays so little a part in dance music. Perhaps we shall find that there are such things as non-narrative or "quasi-narrative" text-worlds that function like narrative text-worlds. In this way, we shall see how it too functions as a popular religion.

"Shoom": The Chosen Few of the 80s London Acid-House Scene

Popular cultural religion manifests itself in amazing diversity. One could not get much further from mid-western American housewives than Shoom, one of the most exclusive of the Acid-House clubs in London during the closing years of the 1980s. But there are parallel religious motifs nonetheless.

Mireille Silcott chronicles the history of rave music in America (and to a lesser extent, Britain), mostly through personal interviews, in *Rave America: New School Dancescapes*.[72] House music grew out of disco, and it highlights the role of DJ-as-creator, not just playing records, but adding his own elements into the mix to create a signature sound, even creating his own songs over what he was playing.[73] "Acid House" music (that is, House music with psychedelic synthesizer effects added) had been imported to England from the U.S. (particularly Chicago and Detroit) in 1986-87 by way of the dance clubs at the Spanish resort island of Ibiza. In Ibiza it was mixed with the drug ecstasy (commonly known as "E").[74] This was the historical root of the mass-raves of the infamous British "Summer of Love" of 1988. A popular cultural phenomenon to be sure, but a religious one? Let us explore it, focusing on one club in particular, using the biblical appropriation of Ricoeur's narrative theory that I delineated above.

1. What is the pre-narrative context out of which this popular cultural text-world emerges? For the London youth of the late 80s, it was a feeling of isolation, marginalization and political disaffection bordering on despair. A music magazine editor, nicknamed "Push," covered the dance club scene for a couple of British music weeklies in the late 80s. Commenting on the explosion of Acid House in London, Push remarked,

> We were going on ten years of Thatcherism and a government who didn't give a [explicative deleted] about this country's youth. Everybody I knew grew up with this total hatred of Thatcherism but at the same time felt completely unable to do anything about it—there was just this feeling of no hope. England's youth needed release and escape.[75]

The tensions of everyday life provoked a religious response from the Smithton women. Analogous tensions had the same effect on the London youth of that period. And just as the Smithton women's tensions had a revelational significance, I would argue that the same is true in this case. The powerlessness and despair, even if only temporary or caused by a specific political regime, still points past itself toward the "wrath of God" mentioned in Romans 1. From a Christian theological perspective, this disaffection with Thatcherism and experience of exclusion from society was an experience of hell writ small, where they will experience exclusion eternally (unless repentance breaks this pattern of alienation). The hellishness of experience functions as a revelation of hell (God's wrath eternalized) itself.[76]

2. So what was the religious text-world, the religious response to this revelational provocation that emerged? Unlike the preceding example, we have no clearly narrative text-world like a popular romance book. But we do have "texts" in a looser sense. The music itself, while not narrative, was a text of sorts designed to guide the dance-experience, as was the drug that was taken during dancing, as was the décor of the clubs in which all of this took place, and the clothing styles worn by the DJs and dancers. Though the music lacks rich lyrical content (the lyrics are usually simple phrases repeated over and over), and even significant musical development (the music is repetitive, using a heavy synthesized bass line and insistent beat), it does build a simple musical architecture that dancers can inhabit, an enclosed sonic environment. The music creates its own "world" for habitation.

The drug ecstasy (MDMA)[77] played a significant role in this "enclosed world." First used by New Agey American psychotherapists in the 70s for marriage counseling and for patients suffering from anxiety or depression, it soon became popular for recreational use. Ecstasy releases the neurotransmitter serotonin which floods the synapses, leading to heightened sensory awareness (things look, feel, sound, and taste better and more intense), along with a sense of well-being, of empathy and closeness with others, even of euphoric connection.[78] Ecstasy spread into the general population as a mellow "bonding drug" (it was legal to purchase in the U.S. until 1985), and was first used as a dance drug in Dallas clubs.[79] It came to London via Ibiza, where it was popular with the hippie/psychedelic crowd in the late 80s. Several London DJs were summering in Ibiza and were completely inspired by the combination of open-air disco, drug-induced euphoria, dance music, and emotional openness. They came back to London in the fall of 1987 and sought to recreate their summer experience by founding several exclusive dance clubs.[80]

The most revered of these clubs was Shoom, founded by DJ Danny Rampling in December of 1987.[81] Shoom tried to recreate the psychedelic Ibiza experience even in what its patrons wore. Loose, summery clothing, wire-rimmed glasses, unisex ponytails, hand-painted T-shirts, and smiley-faces were everywhere.[82] The attitude was one of unbounded optimism: like the hippies of the 60s, Shoomers loved everyone, and they were going to change the world. The ubiquitous feeling was one of childish innocence: the dancers often brought toys into Shoom, and Rampling and his wife would often serve popsicles. The club was filled with a strawberry-flavored smoke, which added to the dreamlike atmosphere, the feeling of togetherness in a world apart.[83]

The music, the ecstasy, and the club all became elements to create something very like a fantastic text-world, and one with religious implications, ready for ritual inhabitation. So even though there was no narrative text-world, there was something very much like a narrative text-world forming. What Shoom lacked in specific plot, it made up for with its own sense of timelessness, its own unique sense of space, its own mood.[84]

3. How was this world entered, and how is that habitation religious? Can dance and dress and drug-taking function as religious ritual? The terms in which early patrons and DJs described the Shoom experience certainly have religious and ritualistic connotations. DJ Mark Moore says, "When dancing at Shoom, all you could do was fall into your own trance,"[85] conveying something very close

to the way religious ritual creates a sense of sacred space and time, of transcending the everyday. Further, the early patrons protected Shoom as if it were a holy shrine. Many knew about Shoom, but only a select few were chosen to join. The address was kept a secret so that only those in the know could find it. Nick Spiers, one of the Shoom "elect," said, "There was a feeling among the people at Shoom that if too many found out about it, it would ruin things. Shoom was so special and optimistic, we really felt like we had discovered the secret of the ages."[86] Shoom ritualistically built its own sense of community (communitas), and its own sense of personal transformation. People were transformed from despairing disaffected youths to a warm loving family (at least while the dancing lasted). Spiers relates:

> People would just come up to you and hug you, smiling like mad, asking if you were enjoying your night. Shoomers brought toys and silly things like whistles into the club—it seems stupid now, but then it was all about this huggyness, this childlike aspect of taking E for the first time and being reborn. It was amazing. In England, people did not usually hug strangers and things like that.[87]

People were transformed by this world (or refigured, to use Ricoeur's terminology), if only for a little while. And the terms with which they described the transformation are unmistakably religious ("secret of the ages," "being reborn"). It is not too much of an overstatement to say that this religious text-world, the world of Shoom, became a church of sorts, and members gained entrance into the brotherhood through the sacrament of E and the participatory ritual of dancing to Acid House music.

Notice how carefully tailored this text-world and ritual participation corresponds to the revelational provocation. London youths felt like outsiders in their own society. Shoom gave a select few a place to come inside. They felt hopeless and alone. The Shoom experience gave them euphoric hope and a community. It is an almost perfectly contextualized religious experience. According to the theoretical framework of the threefold mimesis, Shoom (and, by extension, the whole Acid House scene of the late 80s) had a pre-narrative, general revelational provocation and structure of youth disaffection (mimesis1), a coherent, religious text-world comprising music, drugs, and a general aesthetic (mimesis2), and a ritual means of habitation, through dancing and drug-taking (mimesis3). Shoom, like romance reading for the Smithton women, counts as an alternative religion.

Notes...

[72] Mireille Silcott, "Musical Roots and Reinvention: From the Disco to Storm Rave," chap. in *Rave America: New School Dancescapes* (Toronto, ON: ECW Press, 1999), 17-46.
[73] For a more detailed description of Acid House, see the technoguide website (accessed 13 September 2005), [1].
[74] Actually, ecstasy had been used as a dance drug earlier in Dallas nightclubs, but the style of the mix of dance and the drug was completely Ibiza. See ibid., 27, 30-31.
[75] Silcott, 33.
[76] It is important to note that the pre-narrative context (general revelation) need not always be negative, despite the examples I have chosen (the patriarchal oppression of the Smithton women, the political disaffection of the Shoomers). General revelational provocation to popular cultural religion can also be positive. Think of, for example, the way natural beauty can inspire New Age type nature worship; or how parental love and concern can lead to an idolization of the family; how a concern for social justice can lead to projecting onto the state god-like powers; how a concern for fair-play can lead to an idolization of the free-market; how the experience of romantic love can lead to a modern day worship of Eros, and so on. Any created structure can lead to idolatry. See above, footnote 25.
[77] MDMA stands for Ecstasy's chemical composition, 3,4 methylenedioxymethylamphetamine. See Silcott, 29.
[78] Silcott, 30.
[79] Silcott, 29-30.
[80] Silcott, 30-1.
[81] Silcott, 31.
[82] Silcott, 32.
[83] Silcott, 32.
[84] By "mood," I mean to invoke Northrup Frye's use of the term as an emotional unity that emerges

from the imaginative landscape of a poem. See Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 74, 80-1.
[85] Silcott, 32.
[86] Silcott, 33.
[87] Silcott, 32.

Objections and Conclusions

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To sum up: I began with the definitional debate within religious studies between substantivism and functionalism. I then focused the debate on the issue of popular culture as religion, that is, how popular culture functions as religion. I sketched Ricoeur's theory of narrative representation as a threefold mimesis, and used that theoretical model to understand religion (and popular culture as religion) as a similar threefold mimesis. Further, I noted the resonances such a model has with certain biblical concepts, namely, general revelation and idolatry as a response to general revelation. Using this adapted theory, I explored two very dissimilar instances of popular cultural phenomena, finding evidence of functional religion. It is my argument that this perspective could be useful in gaining insight into the religious function of much of popular culture.

Many objections could be raised to such a model. It may be objected that my focus has been almost exclusively receiver-oriented, on how popular culture impacts the viewer, listener, reader, dancer, and so on, and has ignored or underemphasized the role of the producer. The net effect of such a focus has been to shift attention away from how popular cultural producers manipulate desires for monetary or political ends, that is, popular culture as a capitalist tool of the political, economic and media elite. While I am not averse to such producer-oriented analyses, I feel that too often they cynically ignore the depth of meaning that many find in popular culture. These analyses try so hard to demystify popular culture that in the end they flatten it, making it hard to see how anyone could find meaning and life there. Yet many do—the Smithton women and Shoomers, for starters. The model presented here is an attempt to redress that balance that gives too much weight to the producer.

However, one might also object that according to this hermeneutic, just about any occurrence of popular culture can be seen as religious. After all, what is a text-world but an ordered representation of reality? And that happens all the time. After all, what is ritual, but ordered, repeated behaviors? And that happens all the time, too. According to this theory, religion could be found anywhere in popular culture. To which I would respond, "Bull's-eye." Very close to the heart of post-reformation evangelical Christian theology lies an awareness of the pervasiveness of idolatry and false religion. Should anyone be surprised, then, that from this perspective, popular culture should channel religion? Just about any form of popular culture, given sufficient pre-narrative/revelational provocation, a robust text-world, and ritual means of habitation, holds the potential of becoming a functional religion.

The proper approach to popular culture from a Christian theological perspective, then, is essentially hermeneutical and apologetical: engaging popular culture as a set of alternative religions, rather than engaging popular culture as examples of bad taste, or as marketing manipulation, or as political propaganda, or as a threat to the family, or whatever. It may be all of these, but it is first and foremost religious. That is where its attraction and power lie, and that is where it should be understood and met. It is my hope that models such as the one presented here could serve to pave the way for a deeper engagement between Christians and popular culture, as well as providing terrain for continuing the on-going discussion between Christian theology, religious studies, and popular cultural studies.

Postscript: Toward a Deeper Engagement with Popular

Culture

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with Popular Culture

The whole purpose of this essay has been to construct a theoretical perspective that might enable Christians to see popular culture differently (namely, as religion) so that they might engage popular culture more deeply. But what does that mean concretely? What paths would such an engagement take? The possibilities, while not endless, are surely wide-ranging. Allow me to sketch three such paths of engagement between Christians and popular culture: the theoretical/academic, the practical/apologetic, and the positive/creative.

The theoretical/academic path would include Christian academics involved in the fields of cultural or religious studies who would begin to see their disciplinary boundaries as more fluid than in the past. Specifically, I would hope that they would be able to interpret popular cultural texts as religion, granting them all the significance and depth usually accorded to more traditional religions. In other words, my desire is that Christian academics would see that it is just here that humans make (or, more accurately, re-make) meaning. As a corollary movement, I would hope such academics would have specific contributions to make to the on-going debate over secularization, namely, that secularization is not so much a disappearance of religion as a displacement of religion.[88] Obviously, this paper is aimed primarily at academics who could have this sort of an influence.

The second path of engagement, the practical/apologetical, would include Christians of every walk of life who find themselves in the position of consumers of popular culture. These folks are worried about the impact of popular culture on themselves, on their children, and on their society as a whole. Or alternatively, they blithely imbibe these circulating popular cultural worlds without a second thought. Until relatively recently, those seemed the only two options: anxiety or insouciance. It is my hope that a deeper, more nuanced perspective on popular culture would give these Christians practical tools for interpreting popular culture in terms of familiar biblical and theological categories such as grace, idolatry, and revelation, rather than simply rejecting or blindly consuming popular culture. Further, once Christians become adept at interpreting popular cultural worlds as religion and responding to them apologetically, then all sorts of practical avenues of ministry open up – ministry to friends and neighbors, to students, and to family members.[89] For example, for the last eight and a half years, my wife and I have hosted a bi-weekly movie discussion night for students and friends in our home. We have found that popular cinema has provided endless openings for talking about deeply human issues, issues which find their ground and resolution in the gospel. Even watching television with your own children could become a potential avenue of ministry, sensitizing them to the meanings inherent in the dialogue, plot, generic conventions, etc., and what they mean in terms of religion and worldview

Finally, the positive/creative path would include Christians directly involved in the arts and in the entertainment industry. Since the 19th century, Christian contributions to popular culture in America tended towards simple proclamation, resulting in a certain aesthetical thinness which, at times, descended into outright kitsch. I believe that trend is due directly to an overly pragmatic approach to culture. Cultural texts are much more than placards for advertising our slogans. They are, rather, worlds of meaning that are supple, complex, messy, and, in a sense, sacred. When we traffic in popular cultural worlds, we are dealing with religion. Christians who deal most directly in creating and sustaining the popular cultural worlds currently in circulation ought to take account of that, so they might be challenged to create worlds of depth and significance. The challenge for Christian artists and cultural workers of the current day is not so much how to communicate the Christian message, but how to communicate it in a way that comprehends the messy, meaningful complexity of the media worlds through which we communicate—in a word, how to communicate a deeply Christian vision authentically.

When spelled out in detail, the model presented in this paper may seem burdensome and complex. In fact, it is quite simple: God uses created structures and experiences to show something of himself, we respond by creating religious worlds, and we inhabit these worlds through ritual. These are the

functional essentials, in my view, of religion. This three-fold perspective is offered in the hope that it could help Christians slow down and consider the religious significance of the popular cultural text-worlds that surround them, and how best to engage them (academically, practically, or artistically) for the glory of our Lord and the shalom of the cultures in which we dwell.

Notes...

[88] For an example of an attempt at a theoretical/academic contribution, see Theodore Turnau, “Jack Be Evil, Jack Be Quick: Reflections on the Necessary Evils of 24,” in Minding Evil: Explorations of Human Iniquity, ed. Margaret Sönser Breen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005).

[89] For more guidance concerning the practical/apologetical path, see Theodore Turnau, “Equipping Students to Engage Popular Culture,” in The Word of God for the Academy in Contemporary Culture(s), ed. John B. Hulst (Budapest: Károli Gáspár Reformed University, Faculty of Theology Press, 2003).

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