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.

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