Postscript: Toward a Deeper Engagement with Popular Culture

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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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