Book Reception Speech for "Popologetics"

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Address for Research Colloquium: *Popologetics*

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Introduction: Two Dissatisfactions

It is probably true that every book is born of dissatisfaction, some inkling that the world is missing something, that something is out of place that perhaps a good book could help fix. This book was born of two profound dissatisfactions.

The first is a dissatisfaction with the narrowness and "tone-deafness" of academic cultural studies regarding spirituality and religion. The assumption for the vast majority of work on popular culture in the academy is that if it doesn't deal primarily with political or economic concerns, then it isn't truly "critical" (that is, we have inherited Marxist assumptions about what truly matters in cultural studies). But such an approach reduces the complexity of human cultural existence. Human life and culture is about so much more than simply economics or politics. To restrict our imaginative and heuristic horizons to just two areas of human existence, as if these were the only ones that merited investigation, is a drastic reductionism. My book is an attempt to be critical, but to engage popular culture from a very different perspective, one that sees spiritual realities as worth engaging: the

perspective of Christian theology.

The second dissatisfaction that motivated the writing of this book is even more profound, and that is with the Christian community's handling of popular culture. It is rarely done well, and often done clumsily, either dismissing popular culture as trivial, or condemning it wholesale, or pronouncing it blessed and a shiny new resource for theology. My book attempts to find a balance between these extremes by understanding popular culture's religious dynamics (which means, incidentally, drawing upon a wider definition of religion than is usual for Christians or secular audiences). The Christian community, as a whole, is very ill-equipped to deal with something as ubiquitous and penetrating as contemporary popular culture. My main purpose in writing the book was to meet that need.

So the book tries to meet a need for a method of understanding and critically engaging popular culture from a Christian perspective. One of the core concepts in the book to help construct such a method is a theological appropriation of language philosopher Paul Ricoeur's idea of le monde du texte (the world of the text). In his seminal work 3 volume work Time and Narrative, Ricoeur wrote that in order to understand a literary work, we don't need to understand the world "behind" the text (that is, the world of the author, which is irretrievable for dead authors in any case). Rather, we need to understand the world projected "in front of the text," that is, the fictive world projected by the text itself. According to Ricoeur, a novel projects an imaginative world that beckons us to inhabit it for a while. And we inhabit text-worlds through the act of reading the literary work. Our temporary habitation of these worlds leaves us subtly but inevitably transformed as we take on its perspective and make it ours.

I. The Core Concept: A Theological Appropriation of *le monde du texte* for Christian Theology

This is a fairly stunning insight from Ricoeur, first because it seems so obvious. Who hasn't read a novel and felt the pull as you fall into its world? Who hasn't felt changed a bit once the book is put down? But second, it is a stunning insight because it resonates so deeply with Christian theology. Let me expand on that for a moment.

A. Resonance with "image of God" in imaginative world-making.

God is the Creator, an "author," if you will, who created the world through his own imagination, a world ripe for habitation. Humans beings, Genesis 1 teaches, are made in God's image; that is, we reflect him in various ways. At least part of that reflected image has to do with human imaginative creativity: we too are, in a derivative sense, authors and world-makers. From a biblical perspective, this is exactly what culture is: imitating God by creating imaginative worlds for habitation. Each cultural work (and not just literary novels, but popular cultural works as well) projects a world of meaning that invites us to come in and inhabit it for a while. And we come away from our experience of these imaginative worlds subtly but inevitably transformed. Thus we make sense of the world around us. Thus we communicate with each other. Thus we express ourselves before God and man.

B. The religious weight of the imaginative worlds of popular culture.

But these imaginative worlds are by no means religiously neutral. Their narratives, songs and images express a vision of reality and human flourishing, a worldview. And each worldview has a warm, beating sacred heart, a core trust in something that delivers a form of salvation (if not explicitly, at least by implication). If this is true, then popular culture is anything but trivial. These popular cultural visions of what is truly sacred, of what is truly worth living for, have profound ramifications for the popular imagination and popular belief. In other words, popular cultural worlds have religious weight and deserve to be engaged seriously.

C. Humans are fallen, and so are their worlds...

Further, according to Christian theology, human beings are not only world creators, made in God's

image. We are also fallen, twisted in our innermost desires. And that effects the imaginative worlds we create, the sacredness we trust in, the salvations we believe in. That inner, religious twistedness redirects our desires away from God towards false salvations, false sacreds, or what the Bible calls "idols." An idol is not a gold statue, like the one Indiana Jones stole in Raiders of the Lost Ark. Perhaps in other cultures or at other times. But in the contemporary West, idols take on other forms. For the purposes of my book, an idol may be defined as any part of created existence that functions as a substitute for God, the thing that makes life worth living, gets us through the day, the thing we orbit around like a planet orbits around its sun. And it can be anything: sex, drugs, rock and roll, career, academic reputation, a romantic partner, your children, your self-development, whatever. Please note that none of these things is evil in and of themselves. They become bent to evil purposes when we use them as God-substitutes. So popular culture not only entertains, I argue, but it also proposes alternative modes of living and worship. Popologetics is, in large part, a critique of the idols that parade through these imaginative worlds.

D. These worlds bear "grace fragments."

But it would be an oversimplification to dismiss the imaginative worlds of popular culture as mere idolatry, for they also bear marks of God's grace. Christian theologians speak of "common grace," gifts that God has given to everyone on the planet, Christian or not. These gifts do not save, but they do make life beautiful, bring justice, speak truth. And these fragments of grace exist to point beyond themselves, back to God, their giver, as clues to his character, purpose and presence in the world. Each work of popular culture carries traces of this grace, and this is what makes the imaginative worlds they project so attractive, so popular. Often these grace fragments and the idol (the "sacred heart") of a work of popular culture are connected. The idol takes credit, as it were, for the fragments of grace within the popular cultural work. It proposes a certain vision of life, a certain mode of existence with itself at the center, and dangles the common grace as an enticement, as bait.

II. The Method Presented in *Popologetics*

The aim of Popologetics, then, is to give a reading of a popular cultural work that undermines the claims of the work's particular idol, restores the grace found in popular culture back to its native context (that is, connected with God's story, as pointing to God’s goodness), and shows how the desires stirred by the imaginative world of the popular cultural work find their deepest resonance with the Christian gospel (the story of God's intervention to save us from ourselves).
So all in all, the interpretation of popular culture from a Christian perspective is anything but simple, because popular cultural works are not simple. They are messy, tangled mixtures of grace and idolatry, truth and deception, beauty and distortion. That is the tangled mess that Popologetics seeks to provide help untangling.

The method for untangling this tangled mess is by proposing 5 heuristic questions for the interpreter to ask, each uncovering a different aspect of the significance of the imaginative world of popular culture. These comprise a Christian apologetical approach to popular culture, or as I call it, "Popologetics."

1. What’s the story?

The vast majority of popular culture is narrative in nature, because we humans are peculiarly responsive to stories. So this step simply explores what any good literary analysis would: plot points, character arc, etc. If there is no story (such as in much dance music), then look for the “mood.” By mood, I have in mind literary theorist Northrup Frye’s definition of mood as the “emotional landscape that lies back of a poem.” In either case, the analyst tries to produce a solid interpretation of the work.

2. Where am I?

This question explores the style of the work, as well as the moral and spiritual landscape it projects. To get at the style, the analyst needs to be familiar with the specific media and genre of the work. If it's a film, a rudimentary grasp of things like editing, camera angle, lighting, script conventions, and so forth. If it's a song, one would pay attention to the instrumentation, pace, chord changes, lyrics, and so forth. Each medium projects its own imaginative worlds differently, and the analyst must be sensitive that. Further, the analyst can gain a "feel" for his or her temporary "home" by asking questions that interrogate the spiritual and moral landscape of this particular imaginative world. "What counts as good? What counts as evil? Are relationships important? What makes them fail, or succeed? What counts as salvation, or damnation? What's the center of attention? What is ignored?" And so on. In this way, the interpreter builds up a "feel" for this imaginative world.

3. What's good and true and beautiful here?

This question explores what I called earlier common grace, or the grace fragments contained within this imaginative popular cultural world, things that our hearts are drawn towards, things that point to God's character, purposes and presence in the world. These need to be identified, and reconnected with God's narrative. That is to say, "Why, given what I know of God, is this aspect of this imaginative world good? In what way does it resonate with the Christian perspective?"

4. What is false, deceptive, ugly, and perverse here? And how can I subvert it?

This question explores the idolatry being portrayed in this piece of popular culture, the vision of life being implicitly or explicitly advocated. Where is the sacred heart of the worldview being promulgated through this imaginative popular cultural world? The questions we asked in question 2 should be helpful here. Further, how does this idol distort truth, twist the grace that we found in question 3? And how can we expose the idol as a false sacred, showing that it cannot deliver what it promises?

For example, take a typical Hollywood romantic comedy. The idol most often promoted there is: Find the right guy or girl, and life's meaning falls into place, or what I call the "ideology of romance." Upon closer inspection, the ideology of romance is wholly misleading, and can destroy relationships. Why? Because romance cannot save, cannot give your life ultimate meaning. Romantic love is a wonderful gift of God, but it doesn't work so well as a god. And if you insist that it does, if you put that kind of pressure on a relationship, if you insist that your lover in essence become Jesus for you, you will destroy your relationship; because your lover is only another screwed up human being, just like you. He or she cannot play Jesus. Only Jesus can play Jesus. Which leads to our last question...

5. How does the gospel apply here?

Finally, the analyst needs to inquire about what difference the Christian gospel makes here. "Gospel" means, literally, "good news." Generally, it is taken for granted by Christians (especially Evangelicals) that the gospel centers on the personal forgiveness of sins by God made available to believers by the sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth more than 2000 years ago. And so it does: that is the center of the gospel. But the gospel has much wider implications. The Apostle Paul, in writing to the church in Corinth, maintained that what Jesus did opens up a whole new mode of existence in which the believer becomes part of what Paul called the "new creation." In other words, being united to Christ by faith gives us entree into a different order, a perspective on reality so radically different that it can be called a "new creation."

In this way, the gospel can give healing answers to the twisted desires of our hearts. It can truly deliver the things in popular culture that cause our hearts to resonate and yearn for something better. The gospel so understood speaks to a whole host of issues, it offers a new perspective on family, death, work, play, love, sex, art, music, politics, money, anything and everything that popular cultural works address.

So that's the heart of my book, Popologetics, a Christian apologetical approach to the imaginative

worlds projected by popular culture.

I was told to prepare for 15 minutes, and so I don't want to abuse my privilege and go longer. Perhaps, if there is interest, I could walk us through an example or two during the question and answer time.

Concerning the Fireworks that Followed...

This was a speech I prepared for a research colloquium at one of the universities I teach at, Anglo-American University. I shared the evening with three other authors, all from the International Relations department. I talked last. The evening was very cordial and congenial, people asking content questions, nothing too challenging. Until after my talk, that is. Then there was a change of pace, and sparks flew during Q&A, and then we ran out of time, which was kind of frustrating.

I wanted to reflect some on that intense Q&A time that I got from one lecturer in particular, a teacher in social theory, especially while it is fresh in my mind. There's stuff to learn from her response, in all sorts of ways.

First, she appreciated my passion and the way I was trying to assert a perspective that departs from the false neutrality and objectivity that modern social sciences assumed. In other words, she was coming from a postmodern perspective (sort of).

However, she took great exception to my assertion that academic cultural studies inherited assumptions from Marxism. She claimed there was a lot going on in cultural studies that didn't derive from Marxism, that didn't reduce to politics and economics. For all I know, she may be right. I need to investigate stuff coming out of the University of Chicago on cultural studies. But it is my suspicion that a lot of what she called "appreciative work on popular culture as social process" might just turn out to be rooted in identity politics, that is, struggle over symbolic resources for defining one's group. If that's the case, I'd stick by my point. But it clearly demands further research. My course on popular cultural theory stops with Foucault, and plenty has gone on since then that I need to catch up with.

She also challenged my use of Ricoeur, saying that for Ricoeur, no mention of a deity is ever made. Rather, all interpretation is grounded in social practice, which I ignored (the reasons why I ignored it will become clear later). I responded that just because I was theologically appropriating a structure from Ricoeur did not mean that I agreed with his assumptions. I did not agree that all interpretation can be traced back to social practice (or what Wittgenstein would call "forms of life"). Rather, I believed that our social practice is itself in dialogue with divine discourse, namely, general revelation. (By the way, this is a compressed account of our exchange in which I'm expressing myself with more precision than I did last night, by the way. But I'm trying to pin down what I was struggling to express in terms that she could relate to. It was much more fragmented and heated and "in-the-moment" that what comes across here). The way I expressed it is that culture is always dialogical rather than monological. She agreed, but I think I confused her in the way I was using the word dialogical. For her, social practice itself is dialogical since humans build up meanings in dialogue with one another. What I meant (and should have made clearer, not that it would've helped) was that humans as culture-makers are also in dialogue with God through creation; that on top of the dialogue within human culture, there is a dialogue between human culture and general revelation. That's a concept she just couldn't buy. For her, all meaning is channeled through human language which is rooted in social practice. Asserting anything beyond that is mere speculation, wholly non-scientific.

Incidentally, this exchange has caused me to do some questioning about how I understand general revelation. I know for sure that all meaning cannot be boiled down to language rooted in human social practice, or what I call mankind speaking meaning out over the void. Rather, our cultural practices are always already engaged with the meanings inherent in creation. So culture is not simply creative, but responsive and re-creative (that is, it riffs off of the meanings and messages

that are presented through creation). But her intense line of questioning has made me realize that I've not done enough reflecting on what exactly general revelation is. I suspect that it might be impossible to define too tightly, but some concepts that suggest themselves (reading passages like Ps. 19:1-4 and Ro. 1:18-25) would be "impression" and "pressure." That is, general revelation may be a pre-linguistic announcement of God's character, purposes and presence in the world. It is, at the very least, a pre-human announcement of him. How in the world are we to understand that? Not sure. But it's surely worth thinking it through in more detail. (My friend Tom Johnson is writing a book on general revelation – I'll pose the question to him and ask him to do the heavy lifting. Heh heh heh.).

At this point, my questioner, seeing the incompatibility of our approaches, went deeper. She asserted that because I started from a dogmatic belief in God, she couldn't consider it scientific, or even academic. Unless I restricted myself to discourse rooted in social practice, my work couldn't really be considered serious. She didn't say it, but the feeling was, "Why are we celebrating a work like this in a serious academic setting?" I responded that the book wasn't written for her, but for Christians. But I was troubled by the implications of her attitude. This attitude was made explicit by a historian at the gathering who chimed in that (I'm paraphrasing): "It's OK to believe in God, but you can't let that intrude on your scholarly work. You can believe what you want, but you've got to follow these rules and leave your beliefs behind in academic work."

At this point, the Chairman of the Religious Studies department chimed in, "So you would say that theology couldn't be scientific or academic." The woman shrugged as if to say, "Well, if the shoe fits..." She elaborated: "I doubt. That is foundational to all critical reflection. You cannot doubt, so you cannot be critical." Then she asked what she thought must've been the clincher: "Are you able to doubt the existence of God?"

I responded, "Any Christian who has never doubted the existence of God isn't being honest. Yes, I've doubted. And I struggled through my doubt. But I have come to the settled conviction that God exists."

"For you," chimed in the historian.

"No, that he exists!" I replied. I continued, answering the first questioner, "So what you're telling me is that Peter Berger's methodological atheism is OK, that assumption is allowed. But if I come from a Christian perspective, all of a sudden I cannot be critical? Or I'm not critical enough? Sorry."

And then time was up and we had to leave. That was frustrating. If I'd had more time, I would have wanted to explore whether she really was as free from belief as she claimed. There is such a thing as a dogmatic agnosticism, and certainly there is such a thing as dogmatic atheism. It's one of the great lies of the dogmatically secular academia that agnosticism or atheism alone allows one to really ask questions. This is patently untrue. And, ironically, my questioner proved my point: when it comes to cultural studies, the university tends to be stupifyingly tone-deaf regarding religious perspectives.

At least part of the "sparks-flying" atmosphere was my fault. It was a very direct, forthright, YOLO type of speech to be giving at a colloquium of one's peers at a secular academic institution. But I really don't know how to be otherwise. In these cases, I'm more likely to side with Han Solo's sentiment from Episode 4: "*Bring 'em on, I'd prefer a straight fight to all this sneaking around." But that's just me. Lord have mercy.*

The head of the Religious Studies department asked me, "Can you imagine doing a sequel to this book in a more dialogical rather than apologetical manner?" It may show gaps in my training that I didn't know what he meant. I think, upon reflection, he meant something like: "Can you write a book like this where you have the same content, but didn't get all up in people's faces like you did tonight." If that's what he meant, I'm not sure. I really don't know whether I can be clear without being at least a little confrontational. He and I are going to talk further on this.

I'd give the wrong impression if you believed it was nasty. It was intense, but not vindictive. After it was over, one of the head administrators of the university (also a presenter, and a very kind woman)

said, "Wow, that was a great debate! We should have started with this instead of ending with it!" So all in all, I'm a little frustrated at the attitude, a little encouraged that we could have such a debate at all (I know some institutions in the U.S. wouldn't even tolerate this kind of discourse). So all in all, I'm glad to be at AAU. It's a great place to teach, and they hold receptions even for their weirdest.

Links:
[1] http://www.turnau.cz/sites/default/files/images/NewYearsFireworksPrague.jpg