I. Popular Culture as Revelation and Religion

The Quandary of Christian Engagement with Popular Culture

The subject of popular culture is certainly not new to Christians. There has been a lot of ink spilled over how to evaluate it, its dangers, and its insights.[5] Many concerned Evangelicals tend to reject much popular culture out of hand, seeing it as a source of moral or aesthetic decadence. For them, popular culture is either offensive to their moral standards or simply a cheap imitation of what culture was meant to be (namely, high culture).[6] Such Christians believe that popular culture "represents a full scale revolt against cultural maturity."[7] Popular culture is simply bad for you, so it is best to stay away and pursue high culture. Abandon the Rolling Stones and turn to Rachmaninoff.

At the other extreme, many Christians simply consume popular culture without thoughtful criticism. In fact, this is probably much more typical of Christians than a posture of rejection.[8] This attitude fits the postmodern tenor of the age, an age that prizes plurality and conversation without conclusion, without tiresome claims to Truth. One theologically sophisticated example of this is Bernard Brandon Scott's book Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories.[9] In laying out his methodology for a biblical engagement with several popular American movies from the late 1980s and early 1990s, he takes his cue from postmodern theologian David Tracy's understanding of "conversation." The conversation envisaged is one of complete mutuality and openness, and this has definite consequences for the way we define biblical authority.

> Because we are engaging in a conversation, we can learn both to hear and to speak in different ways. Thus, as part of the rules of conversation, we outlaw the Bible's standing in judgment on postmodern culture or our culture's standing in judgment on the Bible.[10]

In other words, the Bible is forbidden authority lest the conversation be prematurely ended. While I am all for an open dialogue, God's Word should never abdicate its position of authority on human lives and motives. To be fair, Scott does not carry
out this methodology consistently. Oftentimes the Bible does indeed have the last word (and a critical word against popular Hollywood mythologies at that). But at other points, his applications show a very different understanding of biblical authority than that to which Evangelicals usually subscribe. In Scott's model, it seems that if one wants to listen to popular culture, one must first erode one's
commitment to biblical authority.

Honestly, neither of these approaches to popular culture seems satisfactory. One rejects popular culture too quickly, citing biblical principles while failing to listen to what popular culture might have to say. Conversely, the other view is open to listening to popular culture, but at the price of denigrating biblical authority. In the remainder of this section, I will show how understanding popular culture in its revelational and religious context opens up a third way for engaging popular culture as a Christian, one that is specifically apologetical.

The Role of Revelation and Religion

The first concept to get clear is this: creation, according to the Bible, is absolutely soaked in revelation. God's creation reveals God's character and purposes in the world (Rom 1:18–21; Ps

19:1–4; Acts 14:17; 17:24–28). This revelation is not enough to understand God's saving purposes in Christ, but it is enough to render all humans "without excuse." They even know God, in a certain sense (Rom 1:20–21). Revelation is like the air we breathe and the water in which we are constantly swimming. In this sense, we really do "live and move and have our being" in God (Acts 17:28), that is, surrounded by creation-structures that serve as an in-built sound system broadcasting messages about the goodness and power of God, and his ownership of us all. That is what I mean by general revelation, or creation-revelation.

Religion, then, is the heart-response to that creation-revelation in worship and service. Thus Adam and Eve's activity in the garden (i.e., doing culture) was, at its root, religious. Culture is precisely a human appropriation and development of the structures of God's creation-revelation, a "fleshing out" of what God has given to us. As originally conceived, it was to be done to God's glory and in loving service to fellow creatures. Culture is therefore a fundamentally religious endeavor.

More than that, culture is also revelational. God announces that he will create human beings in his image, and immediately thereafter gives the "cultural mandate," that they should fill and subdue the earth (Gn 1:26–28). Clearly, there is some connection between image and culture. I believe that it has to do with the way we, as culture-formers, image God. In our cultural creativity, we take our environment and make something beautiful and useful with it. So we mirror God's creativity, the way he took his environment—the void, the chaos waters(tohu wabohu) of Genesis 1:2—and created something beautiful and useful with it. Cultural creativity images God's original creativity in a creaturely mode. In this sense, our cultural activity itself is revelational: it images God. Furthermore, God speaks through our cultural activity, especially when we do culture according to the norms he has set out for us in creation and in his word.[11] He can use culture to reveal aspects of his own nature and purposes. Human culture is therefore both a religious response to revelation (originally intended for worship and service to God) and an ongoing medium of general revelation itself (a source of knowledge about God's character and purposes).

Fall-out

This arrangement would have remained relatively straightforward had it not been for the Fall. It would have formed a fairly neat cyclical pattern: the revelation of God in creation encourages a worshipful and loving (religious) response, which is in turn revelational, which spurs others on to more love and good deeds, and so on. A virtuous circle, if you will.

But the disobedience of Adam and Eve brought a rupture into the cycle, a disconnect between revelation and the religious response. That religious response is now distorted, diverted towards idolatry rather than God. People now spend time worshipping and serving false gods: animistic fetishes, the almighty dollar, power, sex, reputation, family, or simply a "comfortable lifestyle." Romans 1:21–23 explains the genesis of the rupture: faced with the overwhelming revelation of God in creation, rather than facing God's wrath at disobedience, people suppress the knowledge of God and turn away. But they always turn to something, namely, a religious substitute for God. So in a sense, the original intent of culture endures: worship and service. To paraphrase the Bob Dylan quote at the outset of this essay, art (and culture) is always going somewhere, serving somebody. But worship is now misdirected toward an idol, and loving service more often than not is focused on self-service and self-love. The cultural consequences of this misdirection can be seen in the ugliness, brutality, triviality, and manipulation expressed in popular culture. Nevertheless, the religious nature of culture remains; it survives the Fall, albeit in a distorted form.

Traces of Grace

Were that the end of the story, we would have to say that those who reject popular culture are right, and those who enjoy popular culture are wrong. But that is not the end of the story; grace abides in the ruins. Theologians call it "common grace,"
the fact that God has not abandoned the world to suffer all of the consequences of its rebellion. Within human culture, there are signs of justice, goodness, and beauty, not because humans are inherently good, but because God actively preserves justice, goodness, and beauty on the earth. The

image of God in humans is warped, but not destroyed. And by God's grace, the cultural mandate was not destroyed. Glimpses of our cultural task restored to its original purpose and glory can be seen even in the works of those who rebel against God. These are traces of grace, and they point to God. Acts 14:17 calls these gifts from God "testimony" of his character, power, and purposes in the world.

God's general revelation persists even within fallen culture, even in popular culture. There is much in popular culture that is trite, ugly, evil, and sub-standard. But there are also moments of joy, peace, goodness, depth, and breathtaking beauty. Such "fragments of grace" are part of the reason that popular culture is popular. The popularity of popular culture is not merely due to advertising or manipulation. (If it were, movie making would not be such a risky business, and every venture would succeed. The *"Waterworlds"* of Hollywood would be an unknown commodity.) Rather, popular culture is popular because people perceive and hunger for the traces of grace within it, the grace that connects with desire and imagination. When a blues singer truly connects with human suffering, or when a basketball player moves towards the basket with a display of strength and dexterity that simply shines, or when the television detective catches the "perp" and saves the little girl so that, at least today and in this place, justice and safety reign—all of these are hints of grace in the popular cultural mode. They all point to something more profound. For example, in James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), wounded war veteran Jake Scully discovers the wonders of nature and spirituality and ends up fighting for justice for a native people on another planet. The moon Pandora is depicted as alive with a Gaia-like divine consciousness called Eywa. Many Christians have rightly objected to the movie's neopagan nature worship. But its visual effects create a fascinating, multi-color environment filled with sublime beauty and fragile interconnection. The film serves to heighten the audience's sensitivity to the beauty and fragility of our own planet's environment at a time when such sensitivity is sorely needed.

Avatar also explores identity as Scully loses touch with his old life, where he served commercial and military interests, and begins to find a home among the natives, fighting for them as for family. For an audience whose culture often leaves them feeling homeless, rootless, disconnected from nature, anxious about climate change and oil spills, these traces of grace go straight to their heart's desire. In Avatar, popular culture points to what is true: the awesome beauty of nature and of the possibility of finding a home when you feel rootless. Dismissing the movie because it contains offensive elements or idolatry overlooks the streams of light that also flow there.[12] Because of the reality of common grace, popular culture will always be a mixture of light and dark, grace and idolatry. It is, like all idolatrous religion, a mixture of truth and lies.

The Messy Relationship Between Grace and Idolatry

Furthermore, there is an interesting dynamic in popular culture between common grace and idolatry: dependence. Idolatry depends upon common grace. Why? Because Satan is no Creator, but rather a distorter of creation. As Augustine said, creation is primarily good, and evil is a privatio boni (an absence of the good).[13] Idolatry has no appeal in and of itself except as it draws it from something good in creation and uses that to entrap the "worshipper" the way honey traps flies. Idolatry uses the good from creation by abstracting it, removing it from the context wherein it has its real meaning: a gift given by a loving God to be used as he prescribes. Instead, idolatry lies about the meaning of the gift and uses it as bait to trap and destroy.

Take Playboy magazine, an obvious snare for idolatry. But note how it ensnares men: it uses God-given gifts (physical beauty and sexual pleasure) and decontextualizes them, lies about where they come from and how they are to be used. It says, "These are not real women created in God's likeness, not human beings, but mere images, objects for your pleasure, because pleasure is your right, and it is available all the time for you." Thus idolatry twists and distorts common grace. Without these hijacked elements of common grace, these gifts from God, idolatry would be utterly unappealing. Idolatry is a religious response to God's common grace, a parasite on God's good gifts.

To put it in terms of revelation, popular culture is a fascinating mix of revelation and counter-revelation, an ongoing struggle between God's voice in creation and other voices and static trying to drown it out.[14] Interpreting popular culture from a Christian perspective is like trying to listen to a radio that has been tuned between two stations (with the second station deliberately

using the good stuff from the first station to drown the first station out).[15] The goal of both common grace and its parasite is the same: to reach desire, to capture the heart and imagination. This is the heart of popular cultural religion. It calls for an apologetical response, some way to untangle the messy mixture of grace and idolatry.

Putting the "Pop" in Popular

Up until now, we have been exploring dynamics that could apply to any cultural work, high or low. What makes popular culture different? It has to do with its context of reception and its roots. Popular culture has always been around in one form or another as culture meant to appeal to the people, to speak especially to (and for) them; hence the name popular. This would have included all sorts of folk cultural works, as opposed to the cultural works of the elites. Popular culture lived in pubs and bawdy music halls rather than the court or symphony hall. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution and late-nineteenth-century immigration, traditional communities and hierarchies were rearranged as many of the poor migrated to cities in search of employment. It was in these cities during the Victorian era that popular culture as we know it today (as mass entertainment) was born.[16] Popular culture has always sought to maintain this tie to the common people, if for no other reason than the profit motive. It has been forced to pursue a wide appeal (or a wide plurality of niche markets and fandoms) rather than the restricted appeal of elite "high" culture. In the past few decades, with the emergence of postmodernism as a cultural force, popular culture has become more self-conscious about eroding even these barriers between "high" and "low" culture, refusing to acquiesce to the customary boundaries set by cultural elites (thereby widening its appeal further).

So when I talk about this messy mix of grace and idolatry, it must be understood to be a mess in the popular mode, in the *vox populi*. This can be both good and bad, for sometimes the mixture lacks depth as it strives for broad appeal. But when
one does find depth in popular culture, it is important to take note, for there the deep desires of the many coalesce. When one sees idolatry in popular culture, one catches a view of a society's widespread affliction and affection, of the tempting and terrible effects of the Fall played out culture-wide. When one sees grace, one catches a glimpse—if only for a brief moment—of that culture healed and

cleansed, of God speaking his truth to the people, of popular culture the way it was meant to be. That is why I believe it important to listen to popular culture. In popular culture, we see popular desire laid bare. And it needs a Christian response.

How to Deal with a Big Mess

If I have given an accurate picture of the dynamics of popular culture in a fallen world, then the two most common Christian options for dealing with popular culture that I mentioned are both equally flawed.[17] On the one hand, it is irresponsible to simply reject popular culture out of hand, because with it we reject that which God has also made beautiful and preserved by his grace. And we fail to understand the real power of popular culture's influence on the human heart. On the other hand, it is equally irresponsible simply to open ourselves up for dialogue, to abdicate a biblically grounded judgment, because then we overlook the pervasive deception of idolatry at work within popular culture.

Let me give a brief illustration. In 1984, Janice Radway released her landmark study of romance novels and their readers.[18] Through questionnaires and in-depth interviews, she studied a group of middle-aged women who all bought romance novels at a certain bookstore in a city in the Midwestern United States. These women were often deeply dissatisfied with their lives, felt emotionally drained by the demands of children and husbands (husbands who often failed to return any emotional support or nurture). They saw the books as an escape. Through identifying with the heroine of the story, these women found themselves drawn into a world of adventure and romance, moving toward a climax of undying love and respect in the arms of a worthy hero. Vicariously, they were being affirmed and nurtured by these stories. Condemning these women's "trashy novels" completely misses the point and the power of this form of popular culture. Conversely, simply and

uncritically enjoying these novels is just as wrongheaded. Both approaches miss the complexity and depth, the subtle interweaving of common grace and idolatry, the power of romance novels as a kind of religious experience wherein these women find an imaginary "salvation." By identifying with the heroine, they vicariously find the adventure of relationship, the keen tension and jeopardy that in the end blossoms into a trusting love where they are appreciated as unique and worthy human beings, their brokenness mended in a passionate embrace and lifelong commitment. Is this not both a grace bestowed and an idolatrous reflection of what Jesus gives us in relationship to him, "Jesus, lover of my soul,"[19] who heals our brokenness?

What is needed is neither condemnation nor uncritical openness. We need somehow to combine what is good in both approaches: a biblically grounded critique that also listens and a persuasive but respectful engagement in dialogue. This is the heart of apologetics: a dialogue in which the apologist endeavors "with gentleness and respect" (1 Pt 3:15) to persuade his or her partner of the Truth and the beauty of the Truth, to show how the Truth relates to the desires of the heart. So, purely from an exploration of the dynamics of popular culture as a mixture of revelation and religion, a messy mixture of grace and idolatry in desire, we have arrived at the need for apologetics. For Christians, if we truly want to engage popular culture, we must engage it apologetically.

The next area to explore, then, is apologetics and how it interacts with desire.

Notes

5. Some representative titles spanning a range of Evangelical opinion would include Robert G. DeMoss, Jr., *Learn to Discern* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997); Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003); Brian Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment,* 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009); T. M. Moore, *Redeeming Popular Culture: A Kingdom Approach* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003); Kenneth A. Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1989); William D. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture,* rev. and exp. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007); and Turner, *Hungry for Heaven.*

6. For a fuller treatment of Evangelical attitudes toward popular culture, see Turnau, *Popologetics,* chs. 5–9.

7. Douglas Wilson, "Got to be Good Looking Cause He's so Hard to See," *Credenda Agenda* 12, no. 3:5.

8. So argues Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open,* 38–40.

9. Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press,1994).

10. Scott, Hollywood Dreams, 14. Similar problems regarding biblical authority plague Detweiler and Taylor's *A Matrix of Meanings*.

11. On doing culture according to God's norms, see Calvin Seerveld, "Obedient Aesthetic Life," in *Rainbows for the Fallen World* (Toronto, ON: Toronto Tuppence Press, 1980), 42–77.

12. That is not to say that all movies are appropriate for all ages. We must exercise wisdom in what to show our children (and ourselves!).

13. See Augustine, *Enchiridion: Being Addressed to Laurentius; Being a Treatise on Faith, Hope and Love* (London: Unwin Brothers, n.d.), sec. XI, p. 22; [1] (accessed April 24, 2010).

14. For a more detailed discussion of general revelation and counter-revelation in popular culture, see Turnau, "Reflecting Theologically on Popular Culture," *Calvin Theological Journal* 37 (2002):

290–295.

15. Counter-revelation never completely drowns out the voice of revelation. If it did, Paul could not claim that unbelievers know God in Rom 1:21.

16. For a more detailed history of the emergence of modern popular culture in America, see William D. Romanowski, *Pop Culture Wars: Religion and the Role of Entertainment in American Life* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

17. See the sub-section above, "The Quandary of Christian Engagement with Popular Culture."

18. Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991). For a more sustained theological analysis of romance reading, see Theodore Turnau, "Popular Cultural 'Worlds' as Alternative Religions," *Christian Scholar's Review* 37 (2008): 326–338.

II. Apologetics as Appetizer

Part I followed a path from the nature of popular culture through desire that ended at apologetics. In Part II, I hope to trace a different but intersecting path that leads from the nature of apologetics through desire to popular culture. Apologetics is much more than neutral, rational argumentation alone. Rather, it has to do with translating our hope, making it relevant to the discourse of desire (i.e., "appetizing"). If we want to know the current landscape of desire, we need to know popular culture.

What is apologetics? There are as many opinions on that as there are apologists. However, all agree that 1 Peter 3:15 is a key text: "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." The verse contains the Greek word from which we derive apologetics (apologia), which the NIV translates as "give an answer." It also contains the famous (and famously difficult) word logos, from which we get the English word "logic" (which the NIV translates as "reason"). What does it all mean for the nature of apologetics?

Not By Reason Alone

A sizeable group of apologists who trace their roots to the apologetics of Thomas Aquinas take *logos* here to mean that apologetics means giving a neutral, rational justification for the Christian faith. Acclaimed apologist J. P. Moreland, in his encyclopedic apologetics manual, *Scaling the Secular City*, never really defines apologetics, but his assumption about the nature of apologetics as neutral, rational justification is stated up front. "This volume is a work in Christian apologetics which attempts to state and defend some of the arguments that support the rationality of the Christian faith."[20] This rational justification is typically construed in two ways: empirical evidences that support facts that the Bible asserts (e.g., "Jesus Christ rose from the dead") or argumentation that asserts the logical consistency of Christian truth claims (e.g., the belief in a loving and yet all-powerful God in a world full of evil).

One of the reasons these apologists insist on the primarily (exclusively?) rational nature of apologetics is that they feel that neutral reason is the only publicly verifiable currency at their disposal. Secular men and women will find neutral and rational evidences persuasive, whereas other non-neutral testimonies (e.g., of the beauty of the gospel in people's lives) can be too easily dismissed as subjective, private opinions and imagination.

This type of apologetic has had a powerful influence in many lives, particularly among those who have an empiricist bent, or who have been schooled in Anglo-American logico-linguistic philosophy. It has also been helpful for those raised in Christian homes who are faced with the daily pressures of the "cognitive dissonance" of secular and relativistic college life. But there are problems as well.

First, by assuming that rationality is the sole public currency of persuasion in play, these apologists tacitly assume a Kantian fact/value distinction, even if they themselves may have no sympathy for Kant's philosophy. When Kant sought to ground the certainty of science as neutral knowledge, he

dug a chasm between the public facts of history and science and private valuations and meaning.[21] This dichotomy is typified in the attitude of television detective Jack Webb and his “Just the facts, ma’am” approach. Anything else is simply your own personal spin on the facts. Imagination, desire, emotions, and aesthetics are now considered to be part of an inner world with no public significance, but this diminishes the biblical view of what counts as “public” truth. The “glory of God” (that is, his beauty and power) is as public as can be—after all, the heavens themselves declare it (see Ps 19)! The world, according to the Bible, is alive with beauty and significance, all of which points to God. The telic beauty, power, and significance of creation are woven into the fabric of existence. That immense spectrum of significance-bearing creation cannot be adequately apprehended by neutral, rational justifications alone. But this revelation is no less objective and public for all that.

The second problem with this approach to apologetics is that the focus on neutral, rational justification alone can have an aesthetically devastating effect on the unbeliever’s understanding of the Christian story. In striving to make things black and white, the apologist can actually drain the color from the Christian worldview, leaving it bereft of mystery, meaning, and passion. Johann Georg Hamann, the grandfather of German Romanticism (and a Christian) insisted on apprehending things as a unity through the sensibility (i.e., as a whole person) rather than breaking things down analytically (as was the Enlightenment ideal). That mode of analysis was a type of murder, a way of destroying the uniqueness of things—a sort of metaphysical vivisection committed against life itself.[22] This is not to recommend schewing rationality in favor of a more mystical, anti-apologetical approach (the route Hamann himself took). However, a one-sided, rationalistic approach runs the risk of death-by-abstraction.

Apologetics in that case becomes literally in-credible to the very people it strives to persuade. We may succeed at defending a few isolated threads, but in the process cause the whole tapestry to fade and appear less inviting and real.

A third problem: a one-dimensional insistence on rationality as the sole justification of the Christian faith prematurely forecloses other avenues of persuasion. There are multiple public currencies of persuasion, many different grounds for belief besides rationality alone. By focusing on rationality, apologetics might render itself irrelevant by isolating itself from the discourse of desire.

Translating Hope

Let us return for a moment to 1 Peter 3:15 (giving a reason [logos] for the hope within us) and the thorny issue of logos as apologia. Part of the problem is that modern readers jump to the conclusion that giving a “reason” (a logos) only means giving a neutral, rational justification. But logos can mean a great many things, including word, story, matter at hand, verbal or written account, assertion, speech, revelation, even the settlement of a financial account.[23] Its specific sense depends upon the context in which it is used.

Here, the context has to do with making the Christian hope understandable and persuasive to those who ask. Presumably the questioners would be, if not openly hostile, then at least adversarial. After all, the church Peter was addressing was under persecution. In the previous verse they were told not to fear, to set Christ apart in their hearts as Lord, and to give an apologia, a legal term meaning “getting oneself off a charge.”[24] Additionally, the church was told to do this with “gentleness and respect,” that is, to guard against the temptation of verbally lashing back, which would only worsen an already tense situation (cf. Prv 15:1).

So, the translation of logos as reason is not altogether wrong, depending on how one understands the English word. “Reason” includes rationalistic justifications, but it also has a much broader application. Think of a boy asking a girl to the prom. She might respond by saying, “Give me one good reason why I should go to the prom with you.” The reasons the boy gives might include a putatively neutral empirical justification: "If you quantify the fun to time-ratio of spending time with

me, I think you'll agree that it compares favorably with similar ratios of spending time with any boy in school. Here, allow me to adduce historical evidence to support my claim." But his reasons might well include other types of answers as well: "I asked first," or, "I can get this really cool limo, and afterwards, some friends and I rented out one of the screens at the multiplex, and we could go see [insert appropriate cool movie title here]," or, "The other guys just want to use you—but I want to know you," or even, "I've never told anyone this, but I've been in love with you since the fifth grade, and I can think of nothing I'd rather do than just be with you for a while," and so on. In fact, the possible responses could be anything that the girl would find persuasive. Hopefully, the responses would be truthful as well. Otherwise persuasion devolves into manipulation (especially that line about being in love with her since the fifth grade!). In short, the range of "reasons" is almost limitless—whatever persuasively connects with the desires of her heart.

"Reason" in 1 Peter 3:15 should likewise be construed in this loose sort of way. The church wasn't trying to get a date to the prom, but it was trying to give all sorts of reasons for the hope within it (and why others should make it their hope as well). The key term here is "hope." The word used here (elpis) is much stronger than the meaning we typically give the word in English, that is, a wish ("Gee, I hope I get that date to the prom!"). Rather, hope in the New Testament refers not to some vague wish but to an eschatological reality grounded in the sure promises of God for his people. You see this in Romans 5:2, 5: "And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. . . And hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." This hope—that the future belongs to God—causes Christians to live differently, provoking questions from non-believers concerning the reason for this hope. The apologetical task at hand, then, is one of translation: to render this hope in terms that make sense to the one who asks.

Apologetics therefore has a dual focus: first, to keep an eye on the hope and remain true to it, and second, to keep an eye on what resonates with your listener, what connects with him or her at the level of desire (without manipulation). The job of apologetics is to complete the circuit between hope and the desires of the non-Christian. This will include rational justification, but the possible range of "reasons"
could include arguments about the beauty, goodness, justice, mercy, vitality, or peacefulness of the hope within us that comes from God. These qualities are not simply private opinion (as Kant would have it) but part of a public reality woven into the fabric of creation itself. In this way, Christianity is put "out there" in the marketplace of ideas and worldviews as good news for truth-starved people.[25] It must appeal not only to the brain but to the heart and imagination as well—that is, to desire.

That is why there have always been voices in the history of apologetics that refuse to limit their apologetics to neutral reason alone. Two that come to mind are Augustine and Blaise Pascal. You are probably familiar with Pascal's famous dictum: "The heart has its reasons, which the reason does not know."[26] That is, reason is not omnicompetent—there are whole realms of heart-motivations that reason alone cannot fathom. Likewise, Augustine argues that trust is that which liberates and makes us truly happy (because it answers the desires of our heart). Note the analogies he uses:

> As you may remember, I had promised to show you that there is something higher than our mind or our reason. Well, this is it—truth itself! If you are able, embrace it and enjoy it!... Men with passionate desires claim that they are happy when they embrace the sensual bodies of their wives (or even of harlots). Can we doubt that we are happy when we embrace the truth itself? Men with parched throats claim to be happy when they find an abundant supply of pure water, or when hungry discover a big dinner or a sumptuous supper. Shall we deny that we are happy when we quench our thirst and feed on truth?[27]

He goes on to deploy images of lying in a flowery field, music, gold, even the nature of light, in fact, anything that he thinks will connect with his readers in their heart's desire. His point is that the Truth is more overwhelming than these, that each of these desires and pleasures points to the ultimate dénouement of desire in the Truth (that is, in Christian hope).

Even further back in the history of apologetics, Paul's address to the Athenians in Acts 17

(considered by some a model of apologetics) shows Paul trying to connect with his hearers' desires, their religious longing to know their "Unknown God" (v. 23). Paul knew his hearers longed for something that transcended their own superstitious worship (v. 24). They longed for the principle of all life (v.25), for a God with whom they could be close (v. 28, quoting the poet Epimenedes of Crete), and for a Father/Creator (v. 28, again quoting their own poets, this time Aratus). For Paul as well, desire was the chief currency of apologetics. Apologetics acts as a kind of appetizer, whetting the appetite of the unbeliever for something better, more real than whatever his or her idols can provide.

If apologetics deals in desire and imagination at least as much as rationality, then we must understand the configuration of the desires of those around us. In terms of 1 Peter 3:15, if our hope is going to make sense, we need to map the terrain of our listeners' desire-laden sensibilities. We must take note of the ears of desire through which they hear about our hope, the way that God has specifically set eternity in their hearts (Eccl 3:10). To do that in our specific cultural context, we must understand popular culture, which has become the weather vane for desire for many cultures in the West. Popular culture is the majority expression of a culture's heart-desires, that messy interplay between revelation and warped, idolatrous religion. If a movie or singer or television show or video game becomes extremely popular (what could be called "of cultural moment"), then the apologist ought to look into it, disentangling the strands of grace and idolatry.[28] In this way, the apologist slowly becomes educated about the landscape of desire, the inner terrain of friends with whom he or she seeks to share the true answer to desire. A relevant apologetics must take into account popular culture, lest apologetics
isolate itself from the ongoing discourse of desire.

So far, we have explored how a Christian reading of the dynamics of popular culture, because of popular culture's nature as a desire-laden mix of grace and idolatry, leads naturally to apologetical engagement. We then explored how apologetics by its very nature leads one naturally back to popular culture as the expression of the discourse of desire. Finally, we must take a closer look at the meaning of the common term, whose path we have been crisscrossing throughout this article: desire.

Notes

19. Charles Wesley's famous hymn.

20. J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987), 11.

21. Kant alone is not to blame for this split; it extends back to René Descartes' distinction between objective and subjective qualities of Cartesian physics. Kant sharpened this distinction and embedded it into his metaphysics.

22. See Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 41–42, and James C. O'Flaherty, Hamman's "Socratic Memorabilia": A Translation and Commentary (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), 167.

23. See Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 477–479.

24. See Edgar, *Reasons of the Heart*, 15.

25. Thus apologetics is like evangelism, but not identical with it. Apologetics emphasizes dialogue and persuasion more than simple gospel proclamation.

26. Blaise Pascal, *Selections from the Thoughts*, ed. and trans. Arthur H. Beattie (Northbrook, IL: AHM Publishing, 1965), 96.

27. Augustine, *Concerning the Freedom of the Will* (De Libero Arbitrio) Book 2, trans. and ed. L. Russ Bush, in *Classical Readings in Christian Apologetics: A.D. 100-1800,* ed. L. Russ Bush (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 210 (II 13.35).

28. This is not to say that every culturally salient text is appropriate for every apologist. We need to be mindful of where we are apt to stumble. Apologetics should never become a rationalization for stumbling into sin.

III. Desire as Reflection

Since the Enlightenment, intellectuals have viewed desire with suspicion."Passions" are the enemy of human reason and judgment. Since Rene Descartes' dictum "I think, therefore I am" took hold, cool detachment has been considered the path to truth. Desire plays the seductress, the enemy of truth. Secular post-Enlightenment thinkers have sought to discredit desire by explaining it away in terms of something else, be it an instinct to increase the spread of one's genes (Darwin), a dealing with economic and political exploitation (Marx), or a coming to terms with one's latently sexualized relationship with one's parents (Freud).

Desire is also a term that Christians (particularly Evangelicals) view with suspicion. "Desire" conjures up images of sexual temptation, drug addiction, consumerism, and marketing manipulation—things that draw Christians away from a faithful walk with the Lord. Some culturally aware Christians have criticized the way that the gospel itself, in true American fashion, has been remade into a means for fulfilling desires and psychological needs. Is it not the case that talking about the gospel in terms of desire simply distorts the gospel into a consumer-service program?[29] I will argue that, for all the misgivings, desire has a deeper, religious significance, one that is already embedded within Christian theology. The task, then, will be to find a way of understanding desire that does not fall prey to these weaknesses.

Desire, Hope, and the End of the World

Desire has sometimes even played a significant role in the history of Christian thought. We have already mentioned Augustine above.[30] Likewise, John Calvin reserves a place in his theology for desire. Although Calvin often equates the term with lusts that draw us away from God's will, there are other places where the concept emerges positively.[31] Contrary to the popular caricature, Calvin did not see the Christian life as merely duty bound obedience, but one of chasing the true desire of our hearts: "Even on this earthly pilgrimage we know the sole and perfect happiness [of union with God]; but this happiness kindles our hearts more and more each day to desire it, until the full fruition of it [at the resurrection] shall satisfy us."[32] For Calvin, the Christian life is in large part a life of longing in the midst of suffering. More applicable to apologetics is Calvin's understanding of "common grace." According to Calvin, even non-Christians display God's excellentgifts, for which we should be grateful "unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God [as the fountain of all truth]."[33] Dutch Calvinism especially has pursued this idea that God has left splinters of light in a dark world.[34] Is it so unthinkable then that God could use those splinters of light to draw men and women to himself through desire, through reflections of grace in the things of this world?

According to C. S. Lewis, the universe is filled with desires that always seem to disappoint. Why? Because they point beyond themselves. It is worth quoting him at length here:

> The Christian says, "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never

> meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that other country and to help others do the same.[35]

For Lewis, desire is a pointer, eloquent evidence of the Creator, much like the circular ripples in a pond are evidence that a pebble has been thrown in. The ever-present danger is mistaking the ripples for the pebble. The ripples are immediate—the pebble seems more inaccessible.

This is what I mean by desire—a reflection of a distant shore where fulfillment is complete. You could call it “eschatological desire,” the revelational reverberations of the consummation played out through history and creation. God has created time (and the way we pass through time) in such a way that it carries a story about the end of the world (the eschaton) back through time. As part of general revelation, the end of the story does indeed ripple back into the present and is very much engaged with the desires of our hearts in the present. This is why we long so for consummations and redemptions of all sorts, and why popular culture keeps generating stories with consummatory and redemptive themes. This is why so many things around us persistently push us along in our lives toward, we hope, something better, miniature happy endings: the new car, the wedding, the baby, the new Bond movie, the newest Apple product, and so on. Conversely, there are plenty of warnings of final judgment written in the everyday as well, minute and varied expressions of the “wrath of God from heaven”: the way things get old and break, the way we get old and sick, the receding hairline that reminds us of approaching death. All of these are reflections of the consummation, the final redemption that will set us free, or from which we will be forever barred, depending on whether or not we have Christ as our ally.

For the Christian, such reflections are experienced as hope, that is, desire kept alive even when it seems far away, like the rays of a distant sun on a chilly autumn afternoon.[36] For the non-Christian, it is experienced as the (often confusing) mixture of desire and idolatry. But the roots remain the same: these earthly goods that stir desire are but pale reflections of the ultimate healing and glory in store at the end of time.

How to Lose (or Kill) Time, and How to find it Again

If this is true, then we can begin to see how it is that popular culture and apologetics operate on the same playing field: the discourse of desire. Popular cultural idolatry uses common grace to stimulate desire and, as it were, to “de-eschatologize” it. Popular culture deals in the now or the immediate future. It promises the romance, the car, the girl, instant salvation (available for cash, credit, or debit card). In so doing, it does not lead us into a “world without windows” (to borrow Peter Berger’s memorable phrase), a world stripped of larger values and goals. Rather, popular cultural idolatry leads us into a world of false windows, of “easy transcendence,” where material goods become gates into spiritual satisfactions (true love, relationship, significance, and so on.).[37] An alternative mode of popular cultural transcendence in our culture is some version of New Age religion, where magical/spiritual powers and healing are at our beck and call twenty-four–seven; we need only master the correct technique.[38] But in neither case does it lead us to a genuine hope. Rather, it replaces hope (with its delays and its anticipations) with immediate fulfillment. In this way, popular culture actually withdraws what it promises while seeming to deliver, obscuring the avenue to real hope. Idolatry has always done this.

Apologetics, then, can be seen as a lens for refocusing desire, removing distortions that, in essence, suppress the story of time (and time’s end). In short, apologetics “re-eschatologizes” desire. How? In two ways: in a negative motion and a positive one. Negatively, apologetics works from a biblically-informed perspective to critique the false hopes that popular culture attempts to build upon the moments of grace embedded within it. Apologetics uses a worldview critique to reveal contradictions and tensions, to show the cracks in the base of the idol. We want to shake people’s faith in their popular “religion.” And then, positively, apologetics shows the faith’s reasonableness, its beauty, its

goodness, and the hope bound up in its story. But all of these different apologetical paths converge on one point: the gospel as worthy of our hope and desire, even if that means putting off the instant gratifications offered by popular culture. We want to persuade others that the gospel is trustworthy enough to trade in old desires for new ones (though in fact these new desires are the originals from which the others were copied).Apologetics' job is to bring back the proper focus of hope, to reintroduce time: the grand sweeping drama of God's dealings with us humans. Apologetics exists to let time stir desire, to lead us back to "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring."[39]

29. See for instance G. A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services: Evaluating a New Way of Doing Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), ch. 18.

30. Pritchard argues that Augustine's emphases on happiness and desire characterized his early writings, and that it fades as he matured and realized that perfect happiness is unavailable in this life.
See ibid., 252–253. Pritchard may be correct, but it does not follow that Augustine's earlier writings were misguided. Desire tasted and longed for still may be a valid part of Christian life (on earth) even after one realizes that it cannot be fulfilled perfectly in this life. Further, one could argue that the neo-Platonism in Augustine's later writings distort biblical Christianity by disdaining the body and distancing self from desire, opting instead for an ethic of duty.

31. See, for example, John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed.John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 840–841 (III.xix.9).

32. Ibid., 988–989 (III.xxv.2).

33. Ibid., 273 (II.ii.14).

34. For a helpful survey of the discussion, see Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

35. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan, 1952), 120 (book 3, chapter 10).

36. This is the major difference between my use of hope and desire, and the "fulfillment gospel" that Pritchard rightly criticizes. Our experience of the gospel is not necessarily one of fulfillment (at least not all the time). But it is (or should be) an experience of fulfillment to come, coupled with the assurance of Christ's finished work and his presence with us now in our day-to-day living. This is the basis of our hope and joy, but does not always translate into a satisfying, rich experience. Christian hope is a tensive reality, an already/not yet experience, a proximity within distance. C. S. Lewis says that he himself was led out of his atheism into the Christian worldview through a deep, insistent longing for joy. See C. S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1956).

37. This is similar to Detweiler and Taylor's understanding of the spirituality inherent in consumerism, though they seem to ignore the possibility of false spirituality here. See Matrix of Meanings, 64 ff.

38. See Mark Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadomasochism, and the Culture of Gothic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). Edmundson argues that gothic motifs in American culture (the dark inevitability of doom) cause an opposite reflex that he calls "easy transcendence" (New Age, the Angel craze, etc.). Unfortunately, he classifies Evangelical Christianity as a type of easy transcendence. Though it can be, this is a gross misreading of historical Christianity.

39. Johann Sebastian Bach, Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben, BWV 147, 10th movement.
The English lyrics were written by English poet laureate Robert Bridges in 1899. It is not a translation of Bach's lyrics, but rather inspired by Martin Jahn's 1661 hymn, which also inspired Bach.

Conclusion

Popular culture and apologetics, then, are no strangers. They work the same field, the discourse of human desire, and there they converge. If that is true, two conclusions follow.

First, Christians who truly want to understand popular culture must engage it apologetically. Popular culture may be fun to discuss, and it might open issues worthy of discussion, but its fundamental landscape of desire cannot go unchallenged. Otherwise, popular culture will succeed in "de-eschatologizing," delivering us into a world where the now is all that there is, and where the Christian hope sounds foreign and intrusive. A Christian analysis of popular culture must have an apologetical edge.

Second, any apologetics that seeks to connect at the level of desire would be wise to connect with the popular cultural context. For better or for worse, popular culture has become our school of desire. We as apologists need to be well schooled indeed if we are to present a counter-discourse of desire, revealing the gaps, deceit, and inevitable despair (i.e., a lack of real hope) that the messages of popular culture bring. But beyond polemics (the negative movement of apologetics), our apologetical counter-discourse can also reveal the hope of a Christ-centered, Spirit empowered alternative, where creation can be enjoyed without being worshipped, where there is a promise of desire fulfilled, even in suffering.

Allow me to close this essay with an example. I am a college lecturer, and every other week my wife and I invite students to our home to watch and discuss a current popular movie. Recently, we watched Lone Scherfig's An Education (Nick Hornsby wrote the script adaptation of Lynn Barber's autobiographical novel). At this point, the reader would be well advised to go see the movie before reading further, as my plot summary will contain spoilers. The plot concerns Jenny, a bright, Oxford-bound sixteen-year-old schoolgirl living in London in 1961. She meets and is gradually seduced by David, a charmer who lies with breathtaking skill, a man nearly twice her age. Jenny's father, Jack, an anxious social climber, is utterly taken in by David and provides no protection or guidance. His only concern is that Jenny succeed in life, and David presents himself as someone with important social connections. In fact, no adult provides any significant guidance to Jenny, even when Jenny begs Mrs. Walters, the school's headmistress, to tell her why she should persevere through the tedium only to end up in a boring job instead of dropping out to marry David.

> Studying is hard and boring. Teaching is hard and boring. So you're telling me to be bored, and then bored, and then finally bored again, this time for the rest of my life. This whole stupid country is bored. There's no life in it, or colour in it, or fun in it. It's probably just as well that the Russians are going to drop a nuclear bomb on us any day now. So my choice is either to do something hard and boring, OR to marry my... my Jew, and go to Paris and Rome and listen to jazz and read and eat good food in nice restaurants and have fun. It's not enough to educate us any more, Mrs Walters. You've got to tell us why you're doing it.[40]

Mrs. Walters mumbles something stupefyingly irrelevant. It is clear that she has no answer, and Jenny departs. Only her English teacher, Miss Stubbs, sees Jenny's potential and pleads with her not to give up on Oxford, no matter what. But David dangles before Jenny a life filled with excitement and aesthetic discovery. When he proposes, Jenny decides to give up on Oxford and marry him, only to find that he is already married and has a young child. Having been found to be a fraud, David abandons Jenny and disappears. Jenny is devastated. Jack, Jenny's father, apologizes to Jenny for his lack of guidance, for his being guided by fear and desire for success. But the fact is that Jenny was complicit, deceiving her parents along with David. Humbled, she goes back to her schoolmistress to request that she be allowed to repeat another year. The headmistress refuses, saying that a second chance would be wasted on her. But Miss Stubbs agrees to help Jenny prepare for exams. Jenny studies hard and succeeds at entering Oxford. The final lines of the film are telling. Jenny narrates:

> I probably looked as wide-eyed, fresh, and artless as any other student. But I wasn't. One of

> the boys I went out with—and they really were boys, once asked me to go to Paris with him. And I told him I'd love to, I was dying to see Paris. As if I'd never been.[41]

The discussion that followed the film was fascinating because it was so penetrating. We discussed the nature of evil, how it does not have to be chainsaw-wielding murderous hatred. There is a softer, weaker sort of evil, a duplicity, the refusal to act with integrity that David embodies. We talked about how Jenny, the wideeyed innocent, through her own foolish choices, is corrupted by just that sort of duplicity and learns to be duplicitous herself. At Oxford, she learns to play the part again of the wide-eyed innocent, even though she is not. We talked about Jenny's frustration at not finding any point to it at all, that no one could tell her what it all means. At this point, one of my students, a young French woman, burst out, "Perhaps Jenny's actions were justified because there is no point. Perhaps there's no meaning to life!" Here, the conversation turned to even deeper matters as we talked about the meaning woven throughout every aspect of human existence. We talked about the difference between love and being in love, sexual ethics, gay rights, whether desire and pleasure itself is sinful. We talked about the lack of grace shown by the headmistress to Jenny and about second chances. We talked about the grace shown by Jack's repentance. We talked about whether we could know God, and if so, how; whether God owns us; and what we owe him. We talked about a variety of other topics of deep human concern. One thing that I found deeply encouraging (and a sign that the Spirit was at work through our conversation) was the way the basis of the conversation shifted from cynical skepticism to an openness toward meaning and even toward God. Even my French student began phrasing her objections differently, saying, "Okay, suppose that God does exist. Does that mean…?" And we continued talking along this vein late into the night.

The moral of the story, the punch line if you will, is that this movie served as a screen for the projection of human desire, yearning, frustration, disappointment, and fulfillment (as good movies tend to do); and in so doing, that configuration of desire pointed beyond itself toward God and so provided an excellent arena for a stimulating apologetical discussion about the things that really matter to us humans.[42] This is what popular culture at its best always does.

In this way, apologetics and popular culture can combine to connect with desire in ways that lead gently toward God. The opportunity offered by all sorts of popular culture is that it acts as a sounding board for our friends' inner world of desire—a sonar map of the seascape of desire. Apologetics' role is to analyze and critique the answers to desire that popular culture provides and to show what real hope looks like. In this way, popular culture and apologetics come together in dialogue, with desire acting as a common language. And at that moment when the hopes, dreams, desires, and imagination of unbelievers are touched by the reality of the Kingdom and God's plans for the world, lives can be changed and hearts can be opened to grace. And that is what the apologist lives for.

40. Nick Hornsby, "An Education," draft dated April 4, 2007 (London: Wildgate Films and Finola Dwyer Productions, 2007), 88; [1] (accessed May 7, 2010).

41. Nick Hornsby, "An Education," dialogue transcript, "Drew's Script-o-rama"; [1] (accessed May 7, 2010). I consulted a dialogue transcript done by a fan because the end of the film was changed significantly from the draft script of 2007.

42. I also ought to mention that praying beforehand for the conversations played a huge role. Not all of our movie discussions go this beautifully. After more than a decade of talking with students, I am convinced that there is no simple formula for success. But prayer is vital if anything of significance is to be explored.

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