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Culture

Augustine on Popular Culture: Ancient Take on a Modern Problem

Written by Michael Gleghorn

In his recent book, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*^{1}, theologian Kelton Cobb observes that in our day, "a great number of people are finding solace in popular culture, solace they find lacking in organized religion."^{2} This is just one important reason why Christians must give careful thought and analysis (discernment) to the issue of popular culture. As members of the body of Christ, who desire to see others brought into loving fellowship with Him, it behooves us to understand why it is that many people claim to find greater consolation in popular culture than they do in the church of Jesus Christ.

But there's another reason why today's Christians must give some attention to popular culture, namely, for better or worse, we are all swimming in it. As Cobb reminds us, "whole generations in the West have had their basic conceptions of the world formed by popular culture."^{3} Just think for a moment about how much we are daily influenced by various artifacts of popular culture—things like television, movies, music, magazines, comic books, video games, sports, and advertising (just to name a few). How should the believer relate to popular culture? Should he shun it, embrace it, seek to transform it? Or should he rather do all of the above, depending on what particular item of popular culture is in view? As one can see, these are difficult questions. Not surprisingly, therefore, thoughtful Christians have answered these questions rather differently. But instead of trying to review all their answers here,^{4} I will briefly discuss just one view which, I believe, still merits our careful consideration.

Augustine is considered by many to be the greatest theologian of the early church. Born on November 13, 354 A.D., to a pagan father and a Christian mother, he pursued his studies for a time in Carthage, the North African capital. According to Cobb, "Carthage was an epicenter of popular entertainment in the [Roman] empire, famous for its circus, amphitheater and gladiatorial shows—a fourth-century Las Vegas."^{5} Cast into this environment as a passionate young pagan, Augustine indulged both his appetite for sex and his love for the theater. These early experiences led the later, Christian Augustine, to a unique appreciation for the almost irresistible draw that the artifacts of popular culture can have on us. In spite of this, however, he did not conclude (as the earlier church father Tertullian had largely done) that there is nothing of redeeming value in popular culture. Indeed even the pagan theater, which by his own admission had been partly responsible for stirring up his youthful lusts, is not entirely consigned to the garbage bin of useless "worldly" entertainment. Instead, Augustine took the intriguing position "that aspects of pagan culture ought to be preserved and put into the service of the church."^{6}

In his monumental work, the *City of God*, Augustine postulated the existence of two cities—the city of man and the city of God. Although these two cities will eventually be separated at the last judgment, for the moment they are "mingled together" in the world, with the result that the inhabitants of both cities participate in many of the same social and cultural activities. So what differentiates the inhabitants of one city from those of another? According to Augustine it is the "quality of their love," along with the nature of their attachment to the things of this world. Cobb comments on Augustine's view as follows: "We are citizens of the earthly city to the extent that we love the earthly city as an end in itself; we are citizens of the heavenly city to the extent that we make use of the earthly city—including its astonishing arts and cultural attainments—as a way of loving God."^{7}

In other words, Augustine is suggesting the following principle for evaluating various cultural activities from a

Christian perspective: Does the activity (in some form or fashion) inspire a greater love of God or one's neighbor? If so, then there is something of genuine value to be had from participating in that activity. On the other hand, if the activity leads one to think *less* of God or one's neighbor, then it's probably suspect from a Christian perspective. "Thus," writes Cobb, "Augustine offers a strategy for the appropriation of pagan religious symbols and all varieties of popular art. They may be appropriated if they can be pressed into the service of charity, into the journey of the soul to God, as a *means* of devotion rather than as *objects* of devotion" [\[8\]](#)

Of course, Augustine was aware that there are other principles which can (and should) be used in evaluating whether or not to participate in some cultural activity. For example, he taught that "Wherever we may find truth, it is the Lord's." [\[9\]](#) And truth is intrinsically valuable and good. So if a particular cultural activity helps you toward a greater understanding and appreciation of God, or the things which God has made—and if it's not contrary to some moral precept in the Bible—then this, too, is probably something valuable and appropriate for Christian participation.

As one considers Augustine's principles, one can't help but be impressed by their wisdom. Not only are these principles extremely practical, they are also thoroughly biblical. Indeed, they remind one of the way in which Paul interacted with the cultural artifacts of *his* day. You can scarcely study the life of this great missionary/theologian without being impressed by the way he took pains to genuinely understand something of the Gentile culture to which he had been called to minister. Thus, in Acts 17 we not only see him conversing with some of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers (v. 18), but we also learn that he had taken time to familiarize himself with the religious beliefs of Athens (vv. 22-23). Moreover, when he describes the nature of God and man to the members of the Areopagus he cites, *with approval*, the statements of two pagan poets (vv. 28-29). Finally, as we study his letters we also see repeated references and allusions to the athletic games of his day (e.g. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Philippians. 3:14; 2 Timothy 2:5; etc.). Clearly Paul was attuned to the cultural concerns and activities of the people he sought to reach for Christ.

In light of all this, Paul's words to the Philippians are especially significant, particularly as we reflect on the ever-persistent question of how *we*, as believers, should relate to our *own* culture: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." (Philippians 4:8-9).

Notes

1. I am particularly indebted to the discussion of Augustine and popular culture found in Kelton Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Pub., 2005), 80-86.
2. Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide*, 6.
3. *Ibid.*, 7.
4. The interested reader can find more information in texts like Cobb's (mentioned above) and H. Richard Niebuhr's classic, *Christ and Culture*.
5. Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide*, 80.
6. *Ibid.*, 83.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, 86.
9. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), II/18; cited in Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide*, 84.

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About the Author



[Michael Gleghorn](#) is a research associate with Probe Ministries. He earned a B.A. in psychology from Baylor University and a Th.M. in systematic theology from Dallas Theological Seminary. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in theology from Dallas Theological Seminary. Before coming on staff with Probe, Michael taught history and theology at Christway Academy in Duncanville, Texas.



Michael and his wife Hannah have a daughter.

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Probe Ministries
1900 Firman Drive, Suite 100
Richardson, TX 75081
(972) 480-0240 FAX (972) 644-9664
info@probe.org
www.probe.org

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