THE BLACKWELL GUIDE TO THEOLOGY AND POPULAR CULTURE:

REVIEW ESSAY

Kelton Cobb is a professor of theology and ethics at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut. *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* is his first book. The book is divided into two major parts: (1) Theories of Popular Culture, and (2) A Theology of Popular Culture. In part one Cobb lays the foundation for his study by introducing various terms, theories, theologians, and categories that will enable his readers to better appreciate the theological analysis of popular culture in part two. To achieve this objective, he leads us through discussions of popular culture, cultural studies, theology and culture, and theological tools. The second part of his book is divided into chapters which address some of the major doctrinal areas typically covered in systematic theology. Thus, he examines what pop culture has to say about images of God, human nature, sin, salvation, and life everlasting.

Introduction

Cobb introduces the book by telling us that its purpose "is to undertake a *theological analysis* of ordinary cultural phenomena . . . that will bring to bear concepts and norms that have been honed within the disciplines of theology and religious studies" (4). The importance of this task becomes especially evident when one considers that, in our day, "a great number of people are finding solace in popular culture, solace they find lacking in organized religion" (6). For Christians who want to winsomely engage their culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ, it's important to be aware of some of the "legitimate" critiques of Christianity which can be found today in popular culture (6). How are Christians viewed in popular culture? Do we have a generally positive, or negative, image? How might we be failing to adequately communicate the truth, goodness, and beauty of Christ to our surrounding culture? And how might we do better?

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A theological analysis of popular culture can give us some help in answering these questions. As Cobb observes, when "properly interrogated," cultural artifacts can tell us "something about the ultimate yearnings of our culture" (8). And knowing what people are yearning for, and the ways in which these yearnings are expressed, can help us more effectively communicate the ways in which Christ alone can truly meet the deepest longings of the human heart.

To help us capture some of the "important nuances in the prevailing visions of the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century in America," Cobb references the work of H. Richard Niebuhr and William James, "two religious thinkers who have reflected on the phenomenology of faith" (13). From Niebuhr he draws three manifestations of what might be termed "broken faith": defiance, fear, and escape (14). From James, on the other hand, he takes two subcategories of faith: the "once-born" and the "twice-born" (15). Together, he claims, these five subcategories, or "scripts," offer "a useful template for sorting out different overarching visions of the world that are now playing in popular culture" (16).

Theories of Popular Culture

Popular Culture

We live in an exceptional age. For much of world history, only the privileged classes had ready access to art, but we inhabit a world that is "drenched with images" (29). The development of technologies which enabled works of art to be reproduced with ease also enabled a much larger percentage of the population to see and hear what was previously out of reach. For example, through artistic creations like *Fantasia*, "the 1941 masterpiece that blended classical music and animated shorts," Disney brought a measure of "high art" to the masses (33). Cobb writes, "This synthesis of lowbrow and highbrow cultural materials was so quintessentially Disney that any rendering of high culture into accessible forms of popular entertainment has come to be described as 'Disneyization'" (35).

According to Cobb, "The earliest concerted effort to theorize *popular* culture" can be found in the Frankfurt School, "which was founded in Germany in 1923" (45). Composed of

"neo-Marxist sociologists" who fled to the United States when the Nazis came to power, they criticized American pop culture for its "hypnotizing effect" on the masses, which effectively distracted them from their horrible living conditions and kept them from working toward "political and economic liberation" (46-47). As one member of the Frankfurt School, Leo Lowenthal, wrote in a 1950 article: "Wherever revolutionary tendencies show a timid head, they are mitigated and cut short by a false fulfillment of wish dreams, like wealth, adventure, passionate love, power, and sensationalism in general" (46). While today this might sound a bit paranoid, Cobb cites sociologist Michael Dawson as saying that U.S. businesses now spend *twice as much* on marketing their products as is spent each year on education. Such statistics, Cobb urges, might make one reconsider "the seriousness with which the Frankfurt School believed that the vested interests of the economically powerful dominate the public consciousness with messages that generate profit and valorize the capitalist system" (50).

<center>*Cultural Studies*</center>

After the Frankfurt School, one of the most important academic influences in "theorizing about popular culture" has been "the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in Britain" (53). While scholars connected with the Centre have made many important contributions to the field, they have also been criticized for taking some of their insights too far. For example, through concepts like hegemony and style, the Centre rightly drew attention to the fact that the working class and other subcultures are not simply "passive dupes" of the culture industries (68). Instead, they have ways of making their voices heard and their wishes known—sometimes through various negotiating activities, sometimes through more active resistance. Nevertheless, proponents of cultural studies have also been criticized "for becoming so enamored" with these ideas that "they have lost the greatest insight of the Frankfurt School: that autocratic moneyed interests can masquerade in a multitude of ways to ensure that their power is maintained" (69). As is often the case in academia, the trick is to separate the "wheat" of the genuine insights gained through cultural studies, from the "chaff" of the overextension of their concepts.

Theology and Culture

As we've learned from Niebuhr and Carter the church has responded to the tension between Christianity and culture in a variety of ways throughout history. In this chapter, Cobb begins by comparing the ways in which Tertullian and Augustine responded to this tension. Tertullian viewed the public entertainment of his day as corrupt and demonic. In his mind it was sinful for Christians to participate in it (77). While he acknowledged that humans have a need of such things, he encouraged believers to satisfy this need through the songs, stories, and literature of the Bible (79). Augustine, on the other hand, while sharing some of Tertullian's concerns, believed that there were "aspects of pagan culture" that "ought to be preserved and put into the service of the church" (83). If aspects of pagan culture could be *used* as a means of helping Christians love and *enjoy* God, then this was acceptable (86).

Cobb next turns to consider Paul Tillich's theology of culture. Tillich initially believed that cultural productions could serve "as potential bearers of divine revelation" (91). However, when the Nazis came to power and made allies of the cultural forces in Germany, Tillich began to think that cultural productions were primarily revelations of "our fallenness" (94-5). Although Tillich, like the Frankfurt School, maintained a consistent "aversion to *popular* culture," Cobb believes that many of the concepts developed by Tillich for analyzing culture can be profitably applied to an analysis of *popular* culture (99-100).

Theological Tools

This chapter introduces "several key concepts from Paul Tillich's theology of culture" (101). Cobb analyzes and discusses Tillich's notions of *ultimate concern, the holy, ontological and moral faith, revelation and ecstasy, religious symbols, and myth.* He claims that these concepts, or "tools," combined with others discussed earlier in the book (e.g. faith, broken faith, hegemony, style, *bricolage*, etc.), can help shed light on "the theological longings and apprehensions struggling for expression in current popular culture" (132).

In addition, Cobb expands on a discussion that he began in the previous chapter about the different ways in which the term "religion" might be used in doing a theological analysis of

popular culture. He distinguishes between what he calls religion1, religion2, and religion3. Religion1 refers to "religion as the substance of culture" (92). Religion2 "refers to overt religion, with its scriptures, myths, symbols . . . places of worship, etc." (128). And religion3 "refers to the way that the ideas and values of a particular religion2 come to be absorbed—but not lost—by the culture in which that religion is or has been dominant" (128). It is the province of a "theology of the church" to develop "methods for reflecting on religion2," but a "theology of culture is intended to investigate the apprehensions of the sacred in religion1 and religion3" (131).

A Theology of Popular Culture

Images of God

In this chapter Cobb explores "what American popular culture . . . is telling itself about . . . God . . . and . . . providence" (137). In contemporary music, film, and books, a variety of thoughts and ideas about God are being offered to an interested public. For example, in her 1995 song, "One of Us," Joan Osborne asks, "What if God was one of us"? What if He were just a "slob" or "stranger" on a bus, instead of One who dwells in "unapproachable light" (138; see also 1 Tim. 6:16)? Then again, what if God were "a cowardly lion," as He's portrayed in the film, *The Big Kahuna*, hiding in a closet of a city scorched with fire, fearful and in need of our comfort and reassurance (139-40)? Worse still, what if we're "God's unwanted children," as the movie *Fight Club* suggests (137)? Or what if He's finally had enough of us, packed His bags, and moved elsewhere, as Franco Ferrucci suggests in his book, *The Life of God* (143-48)? Cobb comments on some of these recent portrayals of God in popular culture: "The traditional belief in the benevolent power of God over our lives seems to have run out, but for the most part, we find God likable . . . Our attitude seems to be . . . that God was overwhelmed by us, or simply got tired of us, and is moving on to other things" (142).

If this accurately represents the human predicament, then we can thank God (or rather, ourselves) for the salvation we are offered in modern technology! Indeed, Alan Cohen suggests that "Google, combined with Wi-Fi, is a little bit like God." He continues, "God is

wireless, God is everywhere and God sees and knows everything. Throughout history, people connected to God without wires. Now, for many questions in the world, you ask Google, and increasingly, you can do it without wires, too" (166-67). Reflecting on statements like this, Cobb humorously observes that "Googling' is a way some of the faithful . . . seem to satisfy their needs for enlightenment and prayer" (175).

While the depiction of God in popular culture may strike some Christians as annoying, depressing, or even humorous, there is also room for encouragement. Although God is often portrayed in rather unorthodox (and even uncharitable) ways, there is still an interest in God—and sometimes even a desire to connect with Him. These depictions thus offer us points of contact for further discussion about God with those in our surrounding culture.

Human Nature

What sort of creatures are we? And for what purpose (if any) do we exist? Contemporary popular culture has offered a variety of answers to these questions. Some celebrate the ordinary man, living an ordinary life devoted to work, marriage and family (181). The celebration of the ordinary is especially evident in country-western music (182). But it can also be seen in stores like Wal-Mart, tourist attractions like Niagara Falls, Yellowstone, and Disneyland, institutions like public schools, and even Labor Day, "a holiday dedicated to the working stiff" (183-84). Cobb observes, "The role of such core theological dogmas as original sin, the priesthood of all believers, and Peter's instruction that 'God is no respecter of persons' (Acts 10.34) have survived to do their work in this religion[3] track of the exaltation of the ordinary" (184).

Side-by-side with the celebration of the ordinary, however, is another take on what it means to be human. According to this perspective, you are what you own. A person's identity is intimately intertwined with "the brand-named commodities they cocoon themselves within" (184). As Jack, in the hit movie *Fight Club*, tells the police investigator after his apartment is destroyed, "That condo was my life. I loved every stick of furniture in that place. That is not just a bunch of stuff that got destroyed, it was me!" (184).

A third influential perspective, which reaches back to Augustine, claims that it is only "in the exercise of the memory that one emerges as a self" (196). Popular films like *Memento*, *Solaris, The English Patient,* and *Dark City* appear to confirm this. Moreover, these films insist, the "memories must be real." As *Solaris*, in particular, makes clear, "A person cannot be sustained on simulacra alone" (196).

But what if we eventually create the technology which allows us to download our memories into computers—or even robots (201)? Would we still be a self if we were primarily composed of silicon, instead of carbon? Or is such a question even relevant to a discussion of what it means to be human? Cobb notes, "A circle of artificial intelligence visionaries, preparing for the downloading of human souls into machines, have concluded that what matters about human beings is the consciousness that can finally transcend its carbon fetters" (205). While movies like *Blade Runner, Total Recall, Robocop,* and *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, have explored the merging of man and machine, their conclusions, though tending "toward the dystopian," have nonetheless "a good deal of empathy for the hybrid creatures that straddle the boundary of human and machine" (205). As one can see, popular culture contains a variety of conceptions about what it means to be human.

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Sin

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Almost everyone seems to recognize that there is something tragically wrong with the human race, at least in its present state. Interestingly, many cultures and traditions throughout the world trace the origin of humanity's woes to some sort of sin or offense against God (or the gods) at some point in the past (213). How does popular culture explain human moral evil? How does it account for man's loss of paradise?

Cobb writes, "Two lost paradise scripts have been pressed into service . . . to help Americans catalog their sins, and the evils that have been thrust upon them" (214). He refers to these "scripts" as the covenant/jeremiad and the Gothic.

The covenant/jeremiad script takes its name from two sources: God's covenant with Israel (which the people repeatedly violated) and the ministry of Jeremiah the prophet (who

repeatedly called God's people to repentance) (214-15). In popular culture, this script can be found in movies like *Road Warrior* and *Waterworld*, and in novels like Huxley's *Brave New World* (218). The script basically teaches that goodness will be blessed and evil punished. However, as it gets worked out in popular culture, the script offers "different alternatives for what . . . constitutes corruption, and what it is within us that persists in causing it" (220).

The Gothic script derives its name from "the Gothic literary tradition" which "emerged in the late eighteenth century from a Romantic wing of the Enlightenment" (221). Its classic presentation can be found in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, but it can also be seen in films like *The Exorcist* and *Seven* (222-23). Unlike the covenant script "in which the moral order is overseen by a benevolent power . . . the Gothic is one in which we are buffeted by powers whose intentions are . . . probably capricious" (225). It offers a dark view of man and his place in the cosmos, but many people find it compelling (226).

Salvation

According to popular culture, what must we do to be saved? Many people believe that salvation is accompanied by some sort of ecstatic experience: "encountering the duality of the holy leaves one feeling *both* judged and healed" (231). Thus, some people claim that salvation lies in owning the right stuff. Advertising is particularly adept at convincing us that we have a terrible problem that can only be solved by purchasing a particular product (232). Also, for many people, ecstatic experiences can be had through the medium of music. In a tradition going back to the biblical *Song of Songs*, "some love songs recognize the beloved as a symbol of divine love" (238).

Another common idea in American popular culture is that salvation can be had through therapeutic confession (245). According to Cobb, this model essentially tells us to "do what feels right" and be true to ourselves (252). Its chief values are "self-esteem, self-fulfillment, self-realization, and self-expression" (253). Its message has been preached through Disney films like *The Lion King* and *Finding Nemo* (254). But its perfect expression can be found in daytime talk shows like Oprah Winfrey and Jerry Springer (255). The problem, according to scholars like

Richard Mouw and Charles Taylor, is not so much with values like self-esteem and self-realization. It's rather with the shallowness of the view that makes "the self and its desires" one's ultimate concern (259). But a therapeutic model that "probes the layers of human feeling . . . for the purpose of training the self . . . to value itself and all things . . . in light of their relation to God" could actually play a positive role in the lives of sinful men and women (259).

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Life Everlasting

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Popular culture is full of reflections about divine judgment, the end of the world, and what lies beyond. While secular apocalyptic can be characterized by a sense of hopelessness and doom (265), it can also follow a more biblical model in which good triumphs decisively over evil, as in movies like *Independence Day* and *Lord of the Rings* (266-67).

Cobb sees some of the scenery in the *Lord of the Rings* as not merely beautiful, but utopian. "This suggests," he says, "that the visual tableau itself is pertinent to theological analysis" (268). He notes that for many people, the "translucent landscapes" of Thomas Kinkade are a ministry to the human soul (271). He writes, "Kinkade's rustic iconography may aid the viewers of his prints in picturing a place where they hope their souls might finally find rest, and that picture lightens their anxieties in the present" (277).

Of course, popular culture abounds in speculations about the afterlife. This is evident in hit movies like *Ghost, Flatliners,* and *The Sixth Sense* (278), bestselling novels like *The Lovely Bones* (280), and the HBO Series *Six Feet Under* (281). As Cobb observes, "The afterlife has become a favored site for *bricoleurs* picking through the eschatological rags of traditional religions and fashioning new garments" (283).

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Conclusion

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In his conclusion Cobb briefly rehearses the ground his book has covered. Contrary to the claims of many scholars within cultural studies, Cobb believes that popular culture evinces "a yearning for reality beyond all simulations" (292). He concludes that "our cultural expressions *can* testify to a reality that transcends them" (294). And it is this reality that a theology of popular culture seeks to discern.