A Theology of Popular Culture

By Timothy P. Muldoon, Ph.D.
(www.members.tripod.com/timmuldoon)

At the heart of Christian faith lies the mystery of the Incarnation, an act of divine solidarity with humanity. For Christians, Jesus represents God's willingness to share "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people" of every age. To follow Jesus, then, is to practice this ethic of solidarity— to seek to incarnate in every place and time God's invitation to love. This basic principle is the foundation of a theology of popular culture.

The Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church (1962-1965) gives us the quotation in the paragraph above. It comes from the beginning of the document Gaudium et Spes, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. The Church reflects there the belief that the followers of Jesus must always be ready to engage in the practice of solidarity, in imitation of Christ. The Council as a whole, and this document in particular, articulate the belief that to be a true follower of Jesus means to manifest God's love for human beings in the concrete, particular life situations in which people find themselves today. It means that there can be no element of contemporary life from which God is altogether absent. My thesis is this: theological reflection on popular culture is necessary, because pop culture is a manifestation of the need for human beings to connect to each other in the search for meaning. To engage the reality of pop culture is thus an imperative of incarnational theology, because it is the place from which millions of people, old and (especially) young, derive their assumptions about the human experience.

WHY POP CULTURE?

Let me be more explicit: pop culture has, for many people, become the locus of authority, replacing (for example) the influence of parents, community, and church. It is difficult to measure, or even define, the extent of this authority; but there are several observations which point to this fact. The first is about money: Americans spend billions of dollars every year on entertainment, recreation, and sports. If money is an indicator of priorities, then as a nation our highest priorities have to do with diversion. Second, local culture is quickly being replaced by consumer culture. Urban centers, especially, are remarkably alike: the ubiquitous McDonald's and Starbucks, malls and sports arenas, radio stations and billboards vary little from one place to the next. Third, communication patterns are converging: young people in various parts of the country are more likely to know the lyrics to pop songs than the Declaration of Independence (for example), and adults are likely to find common ground talking about the latest football scores or about the shows on prime-time TV.

These observations suggest something of the influence of pop culture in contemporary America. They also raise important questions about the way that Americans choose to spend their time, money, and energy. For while the influence is pervasive, it is certainly not always good. A theology of pop culture must engage and understand this influence, seeking to know why it attracts people's attention; it must also assess both the positive and negative elements of this influence.

The mistake that many Christians make is to dismiss elements of pop culture too easily before they understand it; this constitutes a failure to truly love the people who find it meaningful. At the opposite extreme, though, are those who embrace pop culture uncritically, who fail to ask whether certain elements of this culture may actually be more destructive to human dignity.

What I am arguing for is a critical engagement of pop culture, one that authentically seeks to understand how it speaks to people, and further seeks to use that understanding in conversation with the resources of Christian tradition. This position treats pop culture as a *culture*, which brings with it the responsibility of asking how the wisdom of Christian tradition might be *inculturated*. It asks a basic question: how is God speaking to people through the medium of pop culture?

An example will highlight the kind of position for which I am arguing. Consider the effects of the National Football League on the culture of the United States

Education for **JUSTICE**
www.educationforjustice.org

today. I suspect that the NFL will not be the primary subject of American history books centuries from now; it is certainly not the most important element in what many would call "American culture," particularly from an academic perspective. For anthropologists, the study of culture involves attention to the arts, politics, language, economic patterns, and other factors which address the way a community carves out its existence.

The term "culture" tends to have a connotation of that which is worth preserving—painting, sculpture, music, literature—these are regarded as the more lasting manifestations of "culture." But most people are not anthropologists, and most people are less concerned with history than with what they are doing next weekend. If the academic study of culture is "from above," i.e. seeking a unified perspective on a community in a certain historical period, then for most people culture is "from below," i.e. based in the ordinary ways that they look at the world and their own role in it.

From this perspective, the NFL is a significant element in American culture—it is that to which millions of American men, especially, look forward every week during the autumn and winter months. Indeed, football provides the story and mythology which old and young, rich and poor, black and white, northern and southern, can share. I remember the recent example of traveling to the airport in Lafayette, Louisiana, conversing at great length with the driver about the upcoming New Orleans Saints game. I, a young, white, professor from Pennsylvania, and he, an older, black taxi driver from Louisiana shared the delightful experience of talking about football. I doubt that my offering to talk about theology with him might have met with similar enthusiasm.

ENGAGING POPULAR CULTURE

If popular culture enables people to communicate, there is good in it. I am troubled by the attitudes of parents, for example, who too quickly dismiss their children's musical preferences because they dislike the way it sounds. I am similarly troubled by leaders in the Christian community who dismiss TV shows, bands, movies, fashion statements, or other elements of youth pop culture before they understand why kids are attracted to it. Even in a culture of image, what is immediately perceived is not always the reality. I learned this point

once in an introductory theology class, when I asked my students to bring in CD's that they thought had spiritual meaning. I played the CD's in class, and was thereby forced to listen to music outside my normal repertoire; I paid attention to the reasons they gave for why they found the music spiritual.

What I learned that day was that attention to these elements of pop culture helped me understand the students in new ways—it helped me to answer the question, "what are they looking for in their spiritual lives?" It thus helped me to consider another question: "what in the Christian tradition speaks to this?" My point is that dismissing something that a person finds valuable is an implicit statement: you are not important to me. It is the antithesis of incarnational theology. If, on the other hand, I try to understand what a person finds valuable, I say the opposite: I want to know you because I value you. Attention to popular culture makes this implicit statement to anyone who finds elements in it attractive.

A theology of popular culture is simply the attempt to value human beings by seeking to understand that which they find important. What will emerge from this endeavor is a critical voice, one which can more profoundly speak to the desires of the human heart by attending to the ways many people fulfill their desires. In a world marred by the effects of sin, not all human desires are good. But attention to people's desires is always important, because this attention is part of understanding people. The psychologist must first listen to everything a client says before she can properly assess his state of mind; only then can she responsibly help the client toward greater health.

The theologian of popular culture must similarly listen to both the sources of that culture and to those who are consumers of it, before he can understand the ways that the Holy Spirit is whispering through it. A theology of popular culture will draw from Christian tradition those resources which lend perspective to the ephemera of daily life. It arises out of the conviction that it is ultimately God in whom we live and move and have our being, but also the sober recognition that our culture is one in which that reality can be obscured by the many

Education for **JUSTICE**
www.educationforjustice.org

diversions available to our senses every moment of every day. It seeks to offer people a way of seeing in the temporary hints of the eternal: those moments in which God's grandeur breaks through the ordinary. Popular culture is transitory, disposable, fleeting; as such it can represent the antithesis of divinity. Yet the paradox is that the mystery of the Incarnation has shattered this dualism. In Jesus eternity is manifested in the temporary, and the changeable becomes the vehicle for the unchangeable. Popular culture is, to say the least, changeable—but as such it is still the place where we might look to find traces of the divine.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What elements of popular culture do you find disturbing? Consider TV, radio, film, sports, fashion, or others. Why do you find them disturbing?

2. What are some elements of pop culture that you find hopeful?

3. Where, in pop culture, do you see evidence of a kind of spirituality manifesting itself? In other words, do you see either implicit or explicit examples of religious themes showing up in pop culture?

4. Consider multi-billion dollar entertainment industry: why are people so drawn to it? Do you see this attraction as having a religious dimension?

5. Consider the relationships between the Church and pop culture. Can you identify examples or make suggestions about when the Church should
    a. criticize elements in pop culture
    b. highlight examples of pop culture
    c. imitate examples in pop culture

6. What is your understanding of the term "incarnational theology"? What does it mean for the Church today?

7. How is the mission of the Church the same today as it has always been? How is it different? Does it face unique challenges today?

8. Can a spiritually mature Christian participate in popular culture? If so, how?

Education for **JUSTICE**
www.educationforjustice.org