

THE CRESSSET

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Looking for the Baby Jesus under the Trash

*An Advent Meditation on the Theological
Importance of Pop Culture*

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U2's POPMART TOUR, in support of its 1997 album *Pop*, was announced in a New York City Kmart on Ash Wednesday. The blue light was flashing overhead. When the juxtaposition of their announcement of the garish PopMart tour in Kmart on Ash Wednesday was pointed out to the band, their lead singer Bono replied, "Ash Wednesday and Kmart—that about wraps us up." The third song on the album, titled "Mofo," has a line that puts it similarly: "looking for the baby Jesus under the trash." Millions have lined up to see this band over their thirty-year ride on top of the pop charts. Nearly half their fans say they've had a spiritual experience or been drawn deeper into faith in God through their engagement with this pop band.

In order to make sense of this, apparently, we'd best not ask theologians. Writing in the most recent *Christian Century*, theologian Charles Mathewes laments that "by and large, the interests of academic theologians such as myself are determined by the fleeting fashions of our field more than by any vivid concern with the lived lives of churches, so we float ever further into abstractions and esoterica." I would think theologians would be in the lead here. What's going on? This seems similar to what happens when someone who loves organ and choral music at church looks down their nose at "entertainment" style worship led by guitar, bass, and drums. Assumptions rule and drive judgments and commitments.

For the sake of the life of spiritually engaged people today, many of whom are not active in a congregation of any faith tradition, theologians might want to reconsider following U2 in looking for "the baby Jesus under the trash." He was, after all, born amidst manure and straw. One would imagine that today Christ might be found elsewhere than our nice, clean, and utterly upbeat churches. Our coiffed choirs and soaring organs seem altogether too established for this rebel Lord who kept breaking open the circle demarcating insiders and outsiders. In this brief reflection, I offer some orienting comments about culture and pop culture, as well as an apology for more focused theological attention to what people love, listen to, and are moved by for the sake of ministry in the world God loves, listens to, and is moved by.

Without getting too bogged down in comparing various academic definitions, let me suggest some common definitions of culture. When asked, people might say such things as "what we make, versus what is, naturally" or "the stuff of our lives, including language and making meaning of that stuff." That's a good start. To build on it, let me introduce a helpful perspective drawn from the sociologist Ann Swidler, who teaches at the University of California, Berkeley. Rather than speaking of culture as "out there," as a "thing," she tries to shift to thinking about the use of culture. She speaks of culture as a "tool kit" by which we do the things we do. We live through and by culture, so to speak. Here is her definition: "Culture is 'a 'tool-kit' of symbols, stories, rituals, and worldviews, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems.'" Drawing from the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, Swidler notes how often culture shapes us, how it forms the assumptions we make, the way we see the world, and therefore the actions we imagine are possible and reasonable. Try this exercise meant to elicit some of our cultural assumptions. Write down (or make a mental note of) your response to the picture on the next page. Take a minute to really look at it and let your responses come to some clarity.

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Mrs. Ostermeyer, Woodbury County, Iowa, 1936.
Photo by Russell Lee, Farm Security Administration.

What came to mind as you looked at this picture? When Pierre Bourdieu did this experiment, he found that those from a higher socio-economic class (and who were likely also more urbanized) were interested in the photo as a beautiful if painful metaphor for age or life's difficulty. Those with closer proximity to the hard labor of the working class feel visceral horror at the deformity of these hands, and commented about the actual difficulty of a life of hard labor.

The point is that who we are, how we were raised, the sorts of families, schools, and so on that formed us shape our cultural sensibilities and frame how we live—the assumptions we make, the actions we see as possible and appropriate, and so on. Culture consists of more than objects out there; it consists of material life of which we are part and parcel. This is important later on, so we'll return to this point. Now, to distinguish what we mean by popular culture.

My focus is not simply culture as a whole (which I believe has pretty limited usefulness anyway, since what really exist are cultures, subcultures, and so on, rather than the generic concept of culture). Rather, I'm interested in the category of popular culture, and so we need to specify what we mean with that distinction. Again, as with culture generally, there are many definitional debates here that I don't want to get bogged down in. For our purposes, I simply demarcate the lines between pop culture, high culture, and folk culture.

High culture is distinguished in part by its limited audience. However, its audience is limited on purpose by virtue of the fact that it is addressed to people with very particular training or knowledge (usually connected to socio-economic and educational level). For example, I recently chaperoned an elementary school trip (including my children) to the American Ballet Theatre production of *Romeo and Juliet* at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. We all had been reading Shakespeare for children, getting the kids up to speed on this classic tale. We went on a Wednesday afternoon and sat in the highest section, called appropriately the "Family Circle." While I thought the kids behaved well, a crabby usher scolded us during intermission for clapping at the wrong times, saying that "we upset the dancers." Take home message: go away until you can learn to behave properly.

A limited audience also distinguishes folk culture. However, this is not an intentional limit but more of a functional one. I think of the children's choir at a local church as an example. The point here is that their song is intended to praise

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God and uplift the congregation gathered for that specific service. Mark Chaves, a sociologist from the University of Arizona, has done the most extensive survey of congregations in American. He says they are the single largest producers and sponsors of the arts, but it is folk art, mostly, created by and for those gathered in a particular place. Bono, U2's lead singer, has said this is one of his favorite aspects of church and always has been. He calls congregational singing a "community art."

Popular culture, then, means that something has, whether by intention or by accident, gained a widespread audience. Take Jazzman Louis Armstrong as an example here. His signature song, "What a Wonderful World," was not a hit in the US and had an initial print run of 1,000. But it was a number one hit in Europe where Armstrong was a major star, and over time, largely because of its use on television and in movies, the song has become a classic on par with Frank Sinatra's version of "New York, New York." While I am not delving into the issue in any depth here, obviously media corporations have enormous power in shaping popular culture. Every summer, the Disney marketing juggernaut transforms thousands of fast food restaurants and cereal boxes into billboards for the kids' blockbuster of the season. An example from a recent season success is the film *Ratatouille* about a French rat who has extraordinary culinary gifts and wants to be a chef. In other words, many times popular artists are backed by powerful media companies and have access to major distribution networks that contribute to their popularity. Still, many artists have this backing and fail, while others without it nonetheless make their way into the popular culture.

Given the media's influence in creating pop culture, why pay serious attention to popular culture? Why not dismiss it as so much fluff, entertainment created for the masses and not worthy of serious attention? Let me share a brief testimony on this point. I used to think "pop-schmop," why should I pay attention to what everybody's doing? I took it as a badge of honor that I didn't even have a television, let alone watch one. I smiled knowingly at the mention of the name Michel Foucault while enjoying being clueless about the zip code for Beverly Hills (that would be 90210, and it was a hit show on Fox). While on internship, parishioners would ask me if I'd seen some show or caught a news clip, and I'd say, "No, I don't have a TV." Kindly, they didn't imagine I was being condescending; they just assumed I was too poor to afford one. So as a going away present at the end of the year, they gave me a TV and VCR.

Their point was, you can't relate to your congregation very well if you don't know what they're watching. Fair enough. I now have a TV and DVD player, and credit that congregation—Bethlehem, Oakland, if you know it—for poking a hole in my self-righteousness and helping me see that if I wanted to do ministry, I'd need to pay closer attention to what people actually do day-to-day and not just read books on cultural critique. The incarnation—God enfleshed—raises the question of just where we think we'd find God working to reconcile the world to himself if not "under the trash" of our contemporary culture. Let's get digging. †

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