

ON THE DIALOGICAL ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN THEOLOGY AND POPULAR CULTURE

*Claude Mangion**

“Theology must use the immense and profound material of the existential analysis in all cultural realms ... But theology cannot use it by simply accepting it. Theology must confront it with the answer implied in the Christian message.”¹

INTRODUCTION

In *Virtual Faith*, Tom Beaudoin describes the church as “laughably out of touch; [having] hopelessly droll music, antediluvian technology, retrograde social teaching, and hostile or indifferent attitudes toward popular culture.”² This is, unfortunately, the common (mis)perception of the church by many in the twenty-first century. Theological explanations seem to be too archaic to have any bearing in the lives of many and this dismissal is often attributed to the current postmodern culture we are said to live in.

In this paper, I will suggest some ways of why and how the idea that theology is irrelevant to the lives of persons can be countered.

* Claude Mangion is a senior lecturer with the department of philosophy at the University of Malta. His main interests are in the philosophy of communication and culture.

¹ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959) 49.

² Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith* (California: Jossey-Boss, 2000) 13.

One of the points of entry for theology would be that of reassessing the value of popular culture. The resources that are activated in the world of popular culture provide the material with which theology can show its continued relevance to many of the issues that people experience in their everyday lives. Ultimately, the relation between theology and popular culture should be one of bridge-building, so that 'lines of communication' are opened with the voice of theology listened to once again. The purpose of this paper is to locate a space for theology that is unashamed to forward its own contributions within a postmodern culture.

I am arguing that the relation between theology and popular culture can be described as one of dialogic engagement. Given the nature of contemporary pluralist postmodern society, the concept of engagement is appropriate, as it does not suggest an attitude of superiority whereby theology sits in judgement before popular culture. This is why I am reluctant to say 'critical' engagement, as the sense of critical is too closely tied up with the judgemental and this would only serve to turn people away from the Christian faith. I am employing the concept of engagement in the specific sense of dialogical engagement in which a conversation is held between theology and popular culture, where these two worlds do not try to change each other but listen to each other. In my view, given the declining interest in the Christian faith as a way of life, then the possibility of dialogue between the world of theology and the world of popular culture would indeed represent a positive first step.

RELIGION IN THE POSTMODERN WORLD

A lot of ink has been spilt on what constitutes the nature of contemporary postmodern society, and while there is a general consensus that for the past fifty or sixty years there has been a general transformation of society, the debate rages as to whether this transformation is enough to claim the formation of a new social reality or whether it is merely a modification of an earlier

Dialogical Engagement between Theology and Popular Culture

(modernist) one. Stuart Sim goes one step further by incorporating both descriptions, defining the postmodern as “a strict and logical continuation of modernist thought and its thoroughgoing revision or reversal.”³

One interesting way of reading the contemporary situation is offered by David Lyon, who in *Postmodernity*⁴ distinguishes between postmodernism and postmodernity. Postmodernism refers to “cultural and intellectual phenomena” and these include the rejection of foundationalism: i.e., the rejection that science is built upon observable facts, the collapse of “hierarchies of knowledge, taste and opinion” coupled with an interest in local rather than universal affairs, and the shift of emphasis away from the word to the image. Postmodernity, on the other hand, refers to the changing social conditions of society, conditions that highlight “The prominence of new information and communication technologies, facilitating further extensions such as globalization; and consumerism, perhaps eclipsing the conventional centrality of production.”⁵

Lyon uses this distinction in a more recent work to examine the relationship between religion and postmodernity. In *Jesus in Disneyland*,⁶ he argues persuasively against the secularisation thesis that considered the advances made by science during modernity as having displaced the value of religious belief. However, a reversal has taken place in the contemporary postmodern world since one of the key features of postmodernity is the loss of faith in the modernist grand narrative of scientific progress. In other words, the narrative which the Enlightenment had proposed as a counterweight to the loss of faith in traditional religion has itself been debunked. This does not mean that the postmodern harbours any longing for a return to the

³ Stuart Sim, *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 319.

⁴ David Lyon, *Postmodernity* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2004).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶ David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

medieval world of Christendom with institutional religions monopolising questions of religion and faith. And neither does it mean that religion as it had been traditionally conceptualised, i.e., institutionally, is undergoing a revival. Within postmodernity institutional religions are still under pressure and, although religious authority has been undermined, this does not imply that people are less religious, with empirical evidence suggesting that religion and spirituality are still in vogue and in demand.

Religion can be misunderstood as merely customary behaviour (like church going) or as cognitive activity (logical beliefs), whereas in fact it also – more profoundly – has to do with faith, identity, and non-cognitive aspects of life, such as emotion. It also informs – sometimes transforms – very practical, everyday life activities.⁷

The question, then, is what is the relation between postmodernity and religion? How do the twin features of postmodernity – communication and information technologies and consumerism – redefine what it means to be religious in the contemporary world?

Consumerism

The decline of institutions in the postmodern world has displaced the locus of meaningful life away from traditional authoritarian structures to the market place. The mindset of the market has replaced the medieval and modern idea of one's identity as defined by one's loyalty to family, state or religion. A vast array of goods is now available to satisfy, not only basic needs, but to provide the tools for the construction of identities with which a person's life is transformed into something meaningful. The search for a meaningful identity remains a dominant concern with contemporary society and it is through the goods promoted within the world of popular culture that identities are formed. Consumption and the implied set of associated choices constitute, in the postmodern world, one of the

⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

chief markers of identity. The schools, homes, restaurants, clothes or religion one chooses out of the array on offer serve to define the identity of the persons making those choices.

At this stage, I do not want to differentiate between the consumption of material goods and the consumption of religious symbols. This distinction hinges upon the idea that the consumption of material goods depends upon the skills of marketers, while the consumption of religious symbols is free of marketing. Kelton Cobb uses this distinction to argue that the reliance upon material goods as a source of identity formation can only be attributed to the marketing strategies that have responded to the search for meaning by replacing religious symbols and icons with brand names. But he adds that materialist consumption is also undergoing “a gathering disillusionment.” The success of non-brands or anti-brands such as *Doc Martens* lies in their not having had any promotional marketing; such goods, favoured by various subcultures represent a sign of disillusionment with the “omnipresent brandscaping of our culture.”⁸ While such sentiments create a space of hope that detracts from the widespread invasiveness of materialist consumption, in my view his claim undervalues the imagination of marketers who are also capable of marketing ‘dissent.’ Not too long ago, punk started out as a working-class rebellion against brand names and High Street merchandise. It was not long before the items that symbolised the punk rebellion were transformed into desirable and expensive products sold in the High Street stores. And, more crucially, it would be mistaken to think of the world divided so simply into a materially marketed one from a spiritual non-marketable one. Contemporary religion is also governed by the sway of the market, such that, for example, religious mementos are sold, tours to the Holy Land organised, or money raised for (noble) causes, from poverty to religious television shows. All of these are part and parcel of being a member of a religious community. It would be mistaken, therefore,

⁸ Kelton Cobb *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) 9-10.

to think of contemporary religion as free from the influence of the marketers. Even religion must sell itself. Consumption operates in the postmodern world not only at the level of material goods but also at the level of signification where choices are made so as to construct one's religious identity.

The negative side to the freedom of consumption and choice is that the formation of an identity has inbuilt within it the possibility of fragmentation. Postmodern writers frequently use the term 'bricolage' to highlight the formation of identities: while an identity might be the result of a 'pick and choose' mindset, the features chosen can in turn be replaced as new elements become attractive. This constant shuffling and re-shuffling reflects the postmodern notion of selfhood as an ongoing process and one in which the self, echoing Hegel, is never at home in the world. In the case of religious identity, a similar scenario is played out: consumption and choice belong to the process of religious identity formation, where the market offers a multitude of conventional and non-conventional systems of belief out of which the individual can choose, and even, in some instances "mix and match."⁹

The upshot is that while postmodernity itself contributes to the further distancing of individuals from institutionally structured religions, the search for transcendence goes on in different ways as individuals seek alternative forms of religious experience.

Media

In addition to and in tandem with the consumerist world of postmodern culture, one can never underestimate the pervasiveness of the communication and information technologies in today's world, with especial importance attributed to the media of television and the internet. There are two reasons for the prominence given to these

⁹ Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, 18-19.

media. First, the media are among the prime tools with which material goods are exposed to the public; here the media function merely as additional instruments with which one can make the public aware of the possibilities available. Second, and crucially, the media themselves have become a central feature of everyday life: whereas in the past, work was a crucial formative aspect of a person's identity, in today's world, this has been replaced by leisure or free time. And, in their free time, the majority turns to the media, whether to the television or the internet. This explains why the relationship between the media and its audience is dominated by the pleasure principle: in their free time, audiences must be entertained. While this is an understandable and important element with commercial programming, it is also a factor that must be taken into account in the production of 'serious' programming; the presentation of the news or social and political discussions must be such that the audience feels entertained. Hence media theorists have coined the term 'infotainment' to couple informational content with forms of entertainment.

The dominating influence of the media is such that it has established a new way of relating to reality unlike those of previous eras (speech, writing). Postmodern theorists, such as Jean Baudrillard, have vaunted the extent to which our perception of reality is now so thoroughly mediated that, whereas in the past social, political and religious institutions used the media to communicate their messages, these institutions are now themselves a product of the media. Our knowledge of them is produced by the media.

As Gianni Vattimo¹⁰ has pointed out, the pervasiveness of the media in the everyday lives of ordinary people has replaced traditional religious institutions as the organising motor that enables persons to give significance to their lives. An examination of the

¹⁰ Gianni Vattimo, *The Transparent Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

communication and reception of religious messages must take into account two features: one concerning the audience and the message, and the other concerning the media and the message.

As regards the audience and the message, from the vast array of material floated around by the media, the consumer acquires, however tentatively, a religious identity. But the relationship between the media and the audience is not a linear one, with the audience passively ingesting what the media communicate. Rather, the relationship is more dynamic, in that while the media produce the meanings, the audience combines and re-combines them in an attempt to satisfy their religiosity. Even programming that is explicitly religious succumbs to re-configuration by the audience. According to Lyon, religious programming "provides resources that are thus available for appropriation and recombination as 'new myths.'"¹¹

Cobb makes a further point arguing that such recombination takes place not only at the level of the audience, i.e., what the audience do with the content, but rather that the relationship between the medium and the expressed cultural content is not one where the media neutrally reproduce the cultural content. Rather, the "media remold what they mediate; they colonize and extract cultural materials that they have not produced."¹² In the postmodern world, it is perfectly legitimate for the media to 'plunder' any and all of the resources available from within any tradition. This is an important point, for if the kind of message that can be transmitted is intimately connected to the kind of medium that transmits it, then religious messages must be formed according to the medium that is delivering it. A religious message on the internet requires a different format from one being delivered on television.

¹¹ Lyon, *Postmodernity*, 58.

¹² Kelton Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 40-41.

Dialogical Engagement between Theology and Popular Culture

In this section, I have attempted to outline the situation in which religion finds itself within the postmodern scenario. It is fairly clear that the pluralism that is vaunted by some, and derided by others, is a by-product of both consumerism and the media. While religion has not been immune to these, neither has it been swept aside. A more thorough account would show how it has been undergoing a process of revision and re-configuration. Furthermore, although many associate postmodern culture with the rejection of transcendent goals, I am not sure this association is true of all versions of postmodernity. While it is certainly true that postmodern writers theorise the relation between language and reality in terms of mediation, with the result that language does not mirror or picture reality, but actively constructs it, this is not to say that the many linguistically-constructed realities provide an exhaustive account of reality. The postmodern emphasis on the pluralistic nature of reality does not belie the claim that there might be a transcendent reality, a reality 'behind' or 'beyond' these realities. This is the very point that Lyotard explicitly alludes to in *The Postmodern Condition*¹³ when he writes:

We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to 'make visible' this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate. Those are Ideas for which no presentation is possible. Therefore, they impart no knowledge about reality (experience).¹⁴

For Lyotard, there is something other beyond language and reality. Interestingly, within popular culture this transcendental element coincides with the revival of mythical narratives, and it is towards this that my analysis will proceed.

¹³ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Manchester Press, 1979).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 78.

MYTH

The study of myth has received renewed and sustained attention from a number of scholars, and it is safe to say that within postmodern culture the study of myth has been restored to its rightful place.

However, at first sight, it might be odd to hear talk about myth within the context of postmodernity. After all, modernity, with its valorisation of scientific rationality, had already positioned itself as a superior to both religion and mythology. Despite its alleged disavowal of mythology, the Enlightenment created its own myth or 'grand narrative.' This is the basis of Lyotard's critique of science and knowledge in *The Postmodern Condition*, where the discourse of science, as a discourse grounded in truth, is opposed to narrative as the expression of ignorance and superstition. From the specific analysis of the narratives of the Cashinahua, Lyotard concludes that: (a) the re-enactment of a narrative actualises a number of rules that establish who has the right to speak and to listen within a community; and (b) that the process of narration involves a suspension of time, rather than the view of time as unfolding. With narrative there is no need for an external authority to justify it, because it is the act of narration itself that legitimises the narrative: the narrators "define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do."¹⁵

It is this notion of legitimation through performance that Lyotard goes on to argue is what differentiates narrative from science. Whereas narrative reinforces the community, the discourse of science is dislocated from the pragmatic uses of everyday language, and therefore requiring other forms of authority to legitimise it. Legitimation within the discourse of science requires some form of external authorisation and, paradoxically, the discourse of science

¹⁵ Ibid., 23.

returns to narrative, for, in answer to the questions of why it is needed and why it should be supported at all, the narrative of progress is evoked. This narrative has both a political and philosophical dimension; it is political in that science can help in the attainment of freedom from oppression through the acquisition of knowledge, and it is philosophical in that the knowledge made available by science will enable humanity to progress from ignorance to pure self-consciousness. Unlike Golden Age theories that look backwards in the attempt to recover a past, these narratives are forward looking to a time when, with the aid of science, humanity will be situated in a superior position to the present.

Lyotard doesn't use the terminology of myth, but his description of the narrative of progress as a "metanarrative" has the hallmarks of a myth in that all other narratives can be explained by reference to the "metanarrative" of progress. These other narratives (of science or education) function to consolidate the metanarrative of progress. While this might have been the modernist/Enlightenment view of the world, the postmodern condition differs radically in that it expresses an explicit loss of confidence in the belief that such a progressive account is in fact attainable. In Lyotard's memorable quote, "I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives."¹⁶ As a result, the view of science as a crucial element in the journey towards the acquisition of absolute knowledge and freedom is replaced by a view of science that has increasingly come to realise its own boundaries and limitations. Given this loss of confidence, the discourse of science no longer resorts to an external authority for legitimation, but relies on its own performance. This, for Lyotard, is the interesting point, in that the discourse of science starts to resemble the type of legitimation found in narratives. The upshot is that the unity of science is now fragmented into a number of specialisations each with their own rules, their own "language game." Steven Connor describes this elegantly:

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xxiv.

... postmodern society encompasses a multitude of different language-games, each with its own untransferable principles of self-legitimation. We have seen, therefore, a shift from the muffled majority of grand narratives to the splintering autonomy of micronarratives.¹⁷

But while Lyotard's analysis is fruitful in that it debunks the alleged superiority of science, he leaves others to take on the task of re-conceptualising myth in contemporary postmodern society. In this respect, Vattimo's description of contemporary society as a "society of communication" can be construed as a working out of the consequences implicitly raised by Lyotard. In *The Transparent Society*, Vattimo argues that the end of the Enlightenment can be attributed to the end of colonialism and the rise of the communication and information technologies. The end of colonialism marks the end of the authority of western powers that justified its expansionism by adhering to a rational, linear and progressive view of history, a view that excluded those who did not belong to this movement. The result of this decline opened the space for the self-expression of those minorities that had been previously ignored, and coupled with the communication/informational technologies, these views proliferated. Vattimo aptly calls postmodernity the "society of communication," likening it to the multitude of voices in Babel.¹⁸

But Vattimo's analysis of the contemporary is particularly fruitful in that it opens the space for understanding what the return of myth in a postmodern society entails. He identifies three current influences

¹⁷ Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) 27-28.

¹⁸ Lyon (*Jesus in Disneyland*, 64-65) agrees with the general trend of Vattimo's argument, but points out that he might have underplayed the negative features of the media technologies, in that the cultural pluralism that the media celebrates further augments the relativising or fragmentation of society. In relation to religion, it is the content of the media that has "corrosive effects."

Dialogical Engagement between Theology and Popular Culture

upon the concept of myth: its archaic quality, cultural relativism and the theory of limited rationality.

First, myth as archaic is the view that rejects western technological and scientific development and longs for an authentic relation between humans and nature. It expresses the desire to return to the origins, since the origins are not contaminated by capitalism and technology. The problem with this view, according to Vattimo, is that it replaces the myth of progress with that of origins, without taking into consideration the view that it is from the origins that the current dissatisfaction with life has emerged. As a result, a return to the origins would seem to be inconsistent.

Second, cultural relativism is the view that each culture is a self-enclosed world. According to this view, the foundational principles of a culture cannot be rationally proved but are more a question of belief; and since it is a question of belief, with different cultures having different systems of belief, then it is no longer possible to claim that there is some form of universal or 'univocal' reason at the basis of all cultures. Rather, each culture has a different rationality. As a result, the inability to prove the rational foundation of culture has promoted the view that a mythical account might better explain the evolution of culture. This is evident in the analysis of western culture as a progression from myth to scientific rationality. In addition, the cultural relativist claims that myth and science are both founded upon a system of beliefs and therefore not opposed to each other.

The problem with cultural relativism is twofold: it ignores the context within which the notion of cultural relativism emerged, i.e., that cultural relativism is itself relative to a context; and, contrary to what cultural relativism thinks, the different cultural worlds are not self-enclosed such that no dialogue between them can take place. Since it is a fact that dialogue does take place, the implication is that there is a common ground between different cultural worlds.

Third, the theory of limited rationality conceptualises myth in opposition to science by virtue of its narrative structure. According to this view, some areas of human experience can only be understood using narrative forms, while other areas of knowledge remain within the domain of science. Some of these narrative structures are used in psychoanalysis, historiography or the mass media. The problem with this theory is that the separation of knowledge into specific domains is itself the product of the distinction between the natural and the social sciences, a distinction that has been challenged on the grounds that the natural sciences are themselves a form of 'social enterprise' i.e., a collaborative process.

Vattimo goes on to argue that the Enlightenment process of demythologisation failed and that the very belief in the process of demythologisation is in effect, a myth. But while the landscape of postmodernity allows for the restoration of myth, Vattimo qualifies the way this restoration should be conceptualised: it is not a simple return to pre-Enlightenment mythical thinking, for the very awareness of the attempt at demythologisation is also part and parcel to the restoration of myth. In this respect, the history of myth parallels that of religion, where despite secularisation's attempt to eradicate religion, the presence of religion remained within society "as traces, as hidden and distorted models that are nonetheless profoundly present."¹⁹ In the case of myth, even when attempts were made to repress it, it continued to survive, perhaps "underground," with the result that demythologisation is itself exposed as another myth. Vattimo can therefore claim that "myth regains legitimacy, but only with the frame of a generally 'weakened' experience of truth."²⁰ Kearney explains what is meant by this "weakened" experience of truth: "By not taking itself too seriously (that is, literally), myth can be taken seriously once again.... Its disclaimer to absolute truth is its

¹⁹ Vattimo, *The Transparent Society*, 40.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

claim to partial truth – the only kind we, as finite historical interpreters, can ever presume to possess.”²¹

At this stage, I would supplement the Vattimo/Kearney position with that of Hans-Georg Gadamer.²² Perhaps a better way of understanding Vattimo’s and Kearney’s position on myth is by introducing the Gadamerian formulation of truth as revelation or disclosure. As opposed to the modernist ‘strong version’ of truth that seeks to identify a self-evident foundation which guarantees the certainty of knowledge, the narratives of myth are framed within an account of truth that offers insight into human existence. What this insight entails is nothing other than the recuperation of ‘otherness’ in mythical narratives. Lawrence Coupe²³ summarises this recuperation as (a) the projection of an “other” world; (b) the reminder that there is always something more, “something ‘other’” to be said or imagined; and (c) the reaching out to those who have been excluded. He writes:

Thus we might come to understand myth, ‘fragile’ as it is, as a disclosure rather than a dogma: as a narrative whose potential always evades the given order, with its illusion of truth... Myth might then be appreciated as that narrative mode of understanding which involves a continuing dialectic of same and other, of memory and desire, of ideology and utopia, of hierarchy and horizon, and of sacred and profane.²⁴

Given the disclosive nature of mythical narratives, how can a bridge between the world of theology and the world of popular culture be constructed. In the twentieth century, Mircea Eliade²⁵ is probably the best-known exponent of mythology, arguing that myths

²¹ Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Imagining* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998) 192.

²² Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 2003) 81-101.

²³ Lawrence Coupe, *Myth* (London: Routledge, 1997).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 197.

²⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (Illinois: Waveland Press, 1963).

were and continue to remain an indispensable feature of human life. What makes them indispensable is that they provide models with which human activities can be undertaken. He writes: "The foremost function of myth is to reveal the exemplary models for all human rites and all significant human activities – diet or marriage, work or education, art or wisdom."²⁶

Eliade justifies the claim of the ongoing indispensability of myth by equating myth with origins. His argument is that the primary purpose of myth is to narrate the origin or beginning of a "sacred history," so that subsequent activities have significance by being connected to that beginning.²⁷ For Eliade, in fact, it is the myths of creation that constitute the archetypal myth, and the power of these myths is derived from the idea that since a certain procedure was followed at the beginning, then, by re-iterating this procedure, one is repeating the success of that original moment of creativity. In addition, the mythical narrative establishes a process of continuity that bridges the original moment to the present, allowing the latter to be re-vitalised. While Eliade is aware that with modernity, the centrality of myth as an organising and directing force had been discounted, he is of the opinion that myths have retained a continuing presence, no longer operating at a manifest level, but unconsciously within the psyche of the person. Myths have been displaced from the cultural reservoir that was explicitly shared by a community to the individual sphere, where they continue to inform the lives of persons.

However, it is my contention that mythical narratives still continue to operate in the domain of popular culture. Many of the characters, actions and symbols that were once part of the traditional

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 8. Eliade insists on the relevance of myth to the contemporary world: "To understand the structure and function of myths in these traditional societies no only serves to clarify a stage in the history of human thought but also helps us understand a category of our contemporaries." (*Ibid.*, 2).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5, 38.

account of myth are now being replayed in different formats within the domain of the popular, and with the centrality of the media in the postmodern world, it is no surprise that these narratives are contributing to the formation of identity. This contention is supported by Eliade, who despite not using the terminology of 'popular culture,' makes explicit reference to some features of the contemporary that clearly belong to the domain of popular culture. In *Myth and Reality*,²⁸ under the rubric of "Myths and Mass Media," Eliade writes that "[r]ecent studies have brought out the mythical structures of the images and behaviour imposed on collectivities by mass media."²⁹ Such mythical structures are evidenced in comics, where, for example, the figure of Superman re-enacts a mythological hero; for the contemporary mind, the Superman comics express the longing to transform an otherwise ordinary life to an extraordinary one. Furthermore, the conflict between good and evil is played out in detective novels, where the detective is the hero/good and the villain the demon/evil. For Eliade, by identifying with the detective, the reader is him/herself taking part in the conflict between good and evil, between hero and villains. So, too, the mass media play an important role in the glorification of certain individuals by transforming them into figures that are larger than life, whether for good or for evil.

Other forms of mythical behaviour are those generated by the "success" model of life and by the objects of "veneration." Eliade argues that the attainment of success is one of the obsessions of modern life and that this can be seen in the desire to live, for example, in suburbia "in which we can detect the nostalgia for 'primordial perfection.'"³⁰ Eliade also describes the way some objects, for example, cars, are heavily invested with an "emotional intensity," such that they are venerated with what is tantamount to religious fervour.

²⁸ Ibid., 184-187.

²⁹ Ibid., 184.

³⁰ Ibid., 186.

In the section entitled "Myths of the Elite,"³¹ Eliade writes that the experience of transcendence is manifested in contemporary society through narrative literature: "the modern passion for the novel expresses the desire to hear the greatest possible number of 'mythological stories' desecralised or simply camouflaged under 'profane' forms."³² The experience of reading novels is an experience in which one is transported outside ordinary time to a transcendental time by breaking the bonds of routine that characterise modern life. It is an experience similar to that of the person living in a traditional society and experiencing mythical time, but whereas within a traditional society mythical time was the norm, embracing the whole way of life of the person, in modern society, it could only be experienced in this 'hidden' form and temporarily.

Although the presence of myth in contemporary society had, for a long time, been neglected, the writings of Eliade, among others, reveal that this neglect has been mistaken. A more recent re-iteration of this point is made by Cobb who lists the continuing presence of myths in popular culture:

All have their adherents, and all have their heroic figures and rituals through which the forces they reveal re-enacted, displayed, resisted, and placated. These grand plots function as myths – indeed they are often re-warmed archaic myths, as has been frequently pointed out in the case biblical millennialism and Marx's dialectical materialism, or as might be argued in the case of Eden and the decline of civilisation, Odysseus and the Big Bang, Dionysius and the will-to-power, or Narcissus and the triumph of the therapeutic.³³

³¹ *Ibid.*, 187-193.

³² *Ibid.*, 191.

³³ Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 124.

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND POPULAR CULTURE

The analysis of the relationship between theology and popular culture requires as a precondition an understanding of the concept of culture in its most generalised form. In this respect, I am adhering to the anthropological definition of culture as a 'way of life.' This definition is broad enough to include not only the language, customs, social practices, beliefs and values of a community, but also its artistic productions. With Herder³⁴ it would be true enough to claim that a culture expresses the unique 'genius' of a people in whatever way this is expressed, and this concept of culture fits in well with the pluralist conception articulated by postmodernism.

As with concepts that attempt to map out the area they are proposing to investigate, the question of what actually constitutes the domain of popular culture has been subjected to much debate. For some time, the concepts of mass culture and popular culture had been considered synonymous, an equation due, in part, to the Frankfurt School's view that both were characterised by a passivity on the part of the audience which gullibly consumes whatever is handed down to them, in particular, by the media. On this ideologically framed account, audiences are duped by the capitalist system into 'enjoying' or participating in their own enslavement.

This account has been challenged by several theorists of the popular, but one account that is especially pertinent to establishing a conceptual distinction between mass and popular culture is that of Michel de Certeau,³⁵ who differentiates between what is produced by the capitalist system and what is done with these products. While the public may have no control over the commodities and entertainments that are available, how these are used and the significance that is attributed to them is dependent upon the audience. Theorists, such as

³⁴ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man* (New York: Bergmann Publishers, 1966).

³⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

John Fiske³⁶ and Stuart Hall³⁷ who are sympathetic to this approach, re-configure the discourse of the popular in political terms such that the popular is transformed into a site of resistance to the dominant forces within society. However, this view has also been superseded on the grounds that it is too simplistic to think society in terms of dominating and dominated classes.

This still leaves us with the question of popular culture and what constitutes its object of study. Gordon Lynch³⁸ proposes a very broad view of popular culture by associating the popular with the everyday: in this respect, he adopts the model proposed by Raymond Williams who distinguished between the documentary and the culturalist approaches to the study of culture. The documentary approach is restrictive in its object of study, focussing narrowly on the texts – literary, visual or musical – that are produced within a culture. The culturalist approach defines culture broadly as a ‘way of life,’ so that this would include a vast range of activities from cooking to going to work to looking after the children.³⁹ Thus, while Lynch acknowledges the centrality of texts to everyday life, he argues that these texts need to be subsumed within the “wider structures, patterns and meanings of everyday life.”⁴⁰ Cobb highlights the breadth of popular culture:

Television, movies, a multitude of genres of music, amusement parks, fast food franchises, action heroes, Dr. Seuss, Disney, Dreamworks, comic books, advertising, sound tracks, mail order catalogues,

³⁶ John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

³⁷ Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner (eds.), *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) 166-176.

³⁸ Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

videogames, contemporary fiction, sports celebrities, journalism, wall art and science fiction ...⁴¹

Given that we have formulated a view of what the domain of popular culture entails, there still remains the question of the relation between popular culture and theology and how this relation is to be specified. On the relation between theology and popular culture, Cobb⁴² points out that many issues that were previously the domain of theology are now finding expression within popular culture, which, while suggestive, does not offer ways of responding to these issues; as I am arguing in this paper, the issues raised within the domain of popular might be better examined from a theological perspective. In addition, as Richard Mouw⁴³ and Lynch argue, theology has for too long detached itself from the mundane concerns of everyday life (financial, psychological) with the result that persons have turned away from institutional religions to alternative 'spiritualities.'

What is required is a theology that actively engages with popular culture so as to serve as a platform capable of offering guidance at an experiential level. It is in this respect that theologians must be capable of providing informed readings of what is being communicated through the various texts of popular culture, because it is through these texts that a bridge can be established that re-connects theology with the concerns of ordinary persons. As the accumulated repository of wisdom concerning an ultimate reality, Christian theology is grounded in the need to answer those questions raised by humankind in their existential situations. This is why theology can provide, as Cobb argues, "a valuable resource for

⁴¹ Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 7.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Richard Mouw, *Consulting the Faithful: What Christian Intellectuals Can Learn from Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

interpreting our cultural life as it is unfolding, and offering commentary and guidance, dissent and endorsement.”⁴⁴

To what extent is the relationship between theology and popular culture mutual and reciprocal? It has been argued that the interaction between theology and popular culture involves, adopting Gadamer’s expression, a “fusion of horizons.” According to this view, theology has as much to learn from popular culture in the same way as popular culture can learn from theology. However, the appeal of this argument is limited to academic theology, rather than to the theology of everyday life. So while I do not dismiss the value of a theological hermeneutic of popular culture, this is second to the concerns of persons in their everyday lives. In this respect, the role of theology in its relation to popular culture is to offer guidance and direction to those existential issues that concern the lives of persons.

With regards to the existential element of popular culture, Lynch writes that “popular culture can be seen as providing a range of resources that shape the way in which people make sense of an experience their lives.”⁴⁵ This is an important way of understanding popular culture in that it is a resource that offers alternative ways of living to its audiences, stimulating them to think about their lives and maybe change them. It does seem, however, that while Lynch does justice to the importance of popular culture within the lives of ordinary people, his account seems to downplay the contribution of Christian theology in promoting its own way of life.

The world of popular culture is therefore a space that provides possibilities for existential reflection and action. It can also engage more directly with theological reflecting as a resource for transcendence. As I have argued in the earlier section, the return of myth within the postmodern is indicative of an ultimate other.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁵ Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 31.

Dialogical Engagement between Theology and Popular Culture

One productive way of theorising the relationship between popular culture and theology can be conducted through the writings of Paul Tillich. I am not entering into the merits of his views on whether cultural phenomena serve as positive disclosures of the divine, or whether the cultural expresses the alienation of humanity from the divine and therefore only indirectly points to the divine. While these views offer interesting insights into the theology of Tillich, they are not central to an examination of the way theology can respond to the issues raised within the domain of popular culture.

In *Systematic Theology*,⁴⁶ Tillich shows what makes a theological analysis of culture possible:

Pictures, poems, and music can become objects of theology, not from the point of view of their aesthetic form, but from the point of view of their power of expressing some aspects of that which concerns us ultimately, in and through their aesthetic form. Physical or historical or psychological insights can become objects of theology, not from the point of view of their cognitive form, but from the point of view of their power of revealing some aspects of that which concerns us ultimately in and through their cognitive form. Social ideas and actions, legal projects and procedures, political programs and decisions, can become objects of theology, not from the point of view of their social, legal, and political form, but from the point of their power of actualizing some aspects of that which concerns us ultimately in and through social, legal and political forms....⁴⁷

Clearly various cultural forms are susceptible to a theological analysis. But, as the quote above makes evident, the starting point for such an analysis is the concept of ultimate concern. On Tillich's view of religion, there is, in each and every person, a fundamental religious drive; by this he means that the search for meaning in life is a religious search. The things that give meaning to a person's life are an issue of concern for them. These can be relative or finite, but it is

⁴⁶ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1951).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

only a question of time, according to Tillich, that the faith in these concerns, mistakenly re-configured as ultimate concerns, will disappoint. The faith that has served to give a direction and identity to a person's life is shaken and the consequences of this failure will produce anxiety, self-doubt, bitterness and a host of other existential ailments. The person will seek other ultimate concerns that can either be more relative concerns or a concern with the grounding of all other concerns, the ultimate concern. "*Our ultimate concern is that which determines our being or not-being. Only those statements are theological which deal with their object in so far as it can become a matter of being or not-being for us.*"⁴⁸

Given the centrality of ultimate concerns in human existence, it is evident that the texts of popular culture as expressions of an ultimate concern provide the materials that make a theological analysis of such texts not only possible but desirable. However, it has been pointed out that Tillich's theological analysis of culture was committed to the cultural productions of the avant-garde.⁴⁹ Like the theorists of the Frankfurt School, he equated mass culture with popular culture, both on account of the susceptibility of audiences to the media and on account of its levelling processes in an attempt to reach a maximum audience. On his account, popular culture was the vehicle with which the capitalist ideology extended its sphere by intruding into the world of entertainment, creating both a false consciousness and offering nothing that was of value religiously.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁹ Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 98-99. In an earlier paper, Cobb also maintained that Tillich's dismissal of popular culture was grounded in his view of culture as "high" culture. This elitist or "mandarin" view only considers cultural artefacts as the "erudite and highly refined arts and letters." See Kelton Cobb, "Reconsidering the Status of Popular Culture in Tillich's Theology of Culture," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63/1 (Spring 1995) 53-84, esp. 53-58.

Dialogical Engagement between Theology and Popular Culture

However, although Tillich restricted himself to the analysis of high culture, for the purposes of a theology of popular culture, this is a limitation that should now be superseded given the research that has been conducted into the transformation of texts by audiences. With a more generous outlook on the texts of popular culture, how should such texts be approached? The answer is given to us by Tillich himself whose approach to the theological understanding of culture can also be applied to popular culture:

The key to the theological understanding of a cultural creation is its style. Style is a term derived from the realm of the arts, but it can be applied to all realms of culture. The style of a period expresses itself in its cultural forms, in its choice of objects, in the attitudes of its creative personalities, in its institutions and customs. It is an art as much as a science to “read styles,” and it requires religious intuition, on the basis of an ultimate concern, to look into the depth of a style, to penetrate to the level where an ultimate concern exercises its driving power.⁵⁰

If a culture is defined in terms of the particular style that characterises its productions, then the theological analysis of popular culture will be an analysis of the style that identifies the texts – novels, fast-food outlets, comics, MTV, global travel, fashion – of a particular culture. Cobb supplements Tillich’s lack of attention toward the popular by suggesting some examples of the way in which theology could be fruitful: a theological analysis of tourism, for example, tells us something about “human longing[s]” while a theological analysis of “National Parks” can “disclose tremendous stirrings of the divine Yes and No.”⁵¹

Such a theological analysis would do well to keep in mind Tillich’s concept of the holy, in which he distinguishes between the abyss and the ground as the experience of the holy. The abyss is the negative experience of the holy in those moments of existential realisation “which grasps the mind when it encounters the threat of

⁵⁰ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 40.

⁵¹ Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 53-58.

nonbeing.”⁵² The ground is experienced as a positive awareness of the transcendent in phenomena that can be natural or cultural: “It appears as the power of being, conquering nonbeing. It appears as our ultimate concern. And it expresses itself in symbols and myths which point to the depth of reason and its mystery.”⁵³ As aspects of the holy, both ground and the abyss can serve in a theological analysis of popular culture. Questions are raised within the domain of popular culture that call for a theological response. Such questions range from the traditional ones in their concern with finitude, evil and redemption, as well as the more mundane ones concerning unemployment, sickness, old age. In this way, theology re-positions itself as relevant to the everyday lives of many.

In order to explain the relation between theology and culture, Tillich proposed the method of correlation. Its usage can be broadened to account for the way theology can engage with popular culture such that theology provides answers to the issues raised within popular culture. Of this method Tillich writes that it “correlates questions and answers, situation and message, human existence and divine manifestation”⁵⁴ and that it “explains the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence.”⁵⁵

Apart from the method of correlation just described, Lynch outlines another three models that can be used to describe the relationship between theology and popular culture.⁵⁶ These are the applicationist, revised correlational and praxis models.

⁵² Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 110.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁵⁶ Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 101-105.

The Applicationist Model

This model defends the core truths of a religious tradition, in so doing setting the standard from which to evaluate the productions of popular culture. This model assumes that the function of theology is to judge popular culture in the light of the theological beliefs and values of a religious tradition; this view denies that popular culture has anything of value to say. As Lynch rightly points out, in today's contemporary pluralist society, this is the position that is least likely to promote any form of conversation between theology and popular culture, in so far as it is unlikely that anyone from a non-religious context would accept the truths that are taken for granted within the religious tradition. The applicationist model is more likely like to promote the isolation of theology from culture.

The Revised Correlational Model

While it is clear for Tillich that the answers to the questions raised within the domain of culture are those provided by the Christian tradition, he also appreciated the fact that there existed what he called the "latent church," whereby those without any formal institutional allegiance could also offer insights into the human existential situation.⁵⁷ This willingness to grant that truth can also be found within the domain of culture, and not be necessarily the preserve of the Christian tradition, has led some to a modify the correlational model into what Lynch describes as the "revised correlational" model.⁵⁸ According to this model, there is an interactive relationship between theology and culture, whereby theology not only provides answers to the question raised within cultural domains, but that cultural domains are also receptive to the questions raised by the religious tradition.

⁵⁷ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959) 51.

⁵⁸ Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 103-104.

While the revised correlational model fits in well with the liberal view of western society as a space within which all are allowed their say, this model is, in my view, counterproductive to the way theology can relate to popular culture. I have no problem with the idea that truth does not belong exclusively to the religious tradition, such that it is possible to encounter truth within the domain of the cultural. But, if we ask the question as to whom the application of theology is meant to benefit, then it is clear that the revised correlational model is appropriate for an academic audience, rather than for the everyday lives of ordinary people. And it is to the latter category of people that I think theology has a profound contribution to make.

The Praxis Model

This model highlights the idea that the interaction between theology and popular culture should lead to action, to a change of lifestyle. Unlike the other approaches, the praxis model examines both the religious tradition and popular culture from the perspective of "the kind of lives and practices that both make possible."⁵⁹ This model has the benefit of showing how theology is connected to the everyday lives of persons, not at an abstract speculative level but as a way of life. While this is certainly true, I find this model redundant, in that the correlational model as proposed by Tillich already incorporates the idea of action. The correlation model has the function of highlighting the answers proposed by theology and in so doing guiding persons in the choices available to them. Theology guides through the answers it provides with the hope that these are translated into actions, into different modes of living.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 104.

Dialogical Engagement between Theology and Popular Culture

This analysis is similar to what Paul Ricoeur writes in relation to narratives as “new ways of being-in-the-world.”⁶⁰ The narratives are communicated through popular culture, and the position of the viewer immersed within popular culture, is one in which existential issues need to be addressed. The narratives of popular culture engage the viewer’s moral imagination, asking him/her to transform their life. It is at this point that a bridge can be established between the world of theology and the world of popular culture, as it intervenes by offering guidance to those seeking answers to their life situations.

CONCLUSION

If the insight captured by the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church (1962-1965) to read “the signs of the times and [to interpret] them in the light of the gospel”⁶¹ is to be actualised, then the relation between theology and popular culture as one of dialogic engagement should contribute towards a better understanding of the times within which we live. Whereas, until recently, popular culture has been dismissed out of hand, on the grounds that nothing good can come out of it, this view no longer holds the centre stage in theology and, at least for some, popular culture is a sphere within which the relevance of theology to the everyday lives of people can be made apparent.

The thrust of this paper has been to develop further this line of thinking. I am concerned to show that contrary to widespread belief, the postmodern world is one that can provide a fertile terrain for a dialogical engagement between theology and popular culture. The pluralism that characterises contemporary society is not the catastrophic situation that is sometimes portrayed, but one which

⁶⁰ Cited in Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*, 143.

⁶¹ W. A. Abbott (ed.), *Documents of Vatican II* (New York: America Press, 1966) 201-202.

offers the possibility for theology to demonstrate its values and its value. To this end, in the first section of the paper I have offered a description of postmodernity so as to show that, given the postmodern way of life, even theology has its own legitimate space. Following this, I have argued in the second section of the paper that, first, there is a revival concerning the value of mythology; and, second, that these myths are not merely concerned with the past but are re-configured within the domain of the popular; the third section of this paper examines the way that theology can interact with popular culture by providing answers to the questions raised there.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beaudoin, Tom *Virtual Faith*. California: Jossey-Bass, 2000.
- Cobb, Kelton. "Reconsidering the Status of Popular Culture in Tillich's Theology of Culture." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63/1 (Spring 1995) 53-84.
- _____. *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.
- Connor, Steven. *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.
- Coupe, Lawrence. *Myth*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- Douglas, Allen. *Myth and Religion in Mircea Eliade*. London: Taylor and Francis, 1998.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Myth and Reality*. Illinois: Waveland Press, 1963.
- Fiske, John. *Understanding Popular Culture*. London: Unwin Hyman, 1989.

Hall, Stuart. "Encoding/Decoding." In Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas Kellner (eds.), *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, 166-176.

Hammond, Guyton B. "An Examination of Tillich's Method of Correlation." *Journal of Bible and Religion* 32/3 (July 1964) 248-251.

Hartt, Julian. "Theology of Culture." *The Review of Metaphysics* 6/3 (March 1953) 501-509.

Herder, Johann Gottfried. *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*. New York: Bergmann Publishers, 1966.

Kearney, Richard. *Poetics of Imagining*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998.

Loomer Bernard M, "Tillich's Theology of Correlation." *The Journal of Religion* 36/3 (July 1956) 150-156.

Lynch, Gordon. *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.

Lyon, David. *Jesus in Disneyland*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.

_____. *Postmodernity*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 2004.

Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition*. Minneapolis: University of Manchester Press, 1979.

Marsh, Clive, and Gayle Ortiz. *Explorations in Theology and Film*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997.

McGrath, Alistair E. *Christian Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997.

Morgan, John. "Religion and Culture as Meaning Systems: A Dialogue between Geertz and Tillich." *The Journal of Religion* 57/4 (October 1977) 363-375.

Mouw, Richard. *Consulting the Faithful: What Christian Intellectuals Can Learn from Popular Religion*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994.

Sim, Stuart. *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

Tillich, Paul. *The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002.

_____. *Theology of Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959.

_____. *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.

_____. *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957.

_____. *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.

Vattimo, Gianni. *The Transparent Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992.

Ward, Graham (ed.). *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005.