The Bloomsbury Reader in the Study of Religion and Popular Culture

Edited by
Lisle W. Dalton, Eric Michael Mazur,
and Richard J. Callahan, Jr.

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

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Unit I The Study of Religion and Popular Culture

Introduction to Unit I

A significant number of authors writing about the intersection of religion and popular culture argue that the study is beset by various distinct—if not always acknowledged—definitional dilemmas. One of these definitional dilemmas has its roots in the older study of religion generally: What is meant by the word "religion"? Scholars of religion (and other disciplines) have debated long and hard over the word's definition, and many have come to agree with the position offered by Jonathan Z. Smith that

> while there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious—*there is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. (1982: xi; emphasis in the original)

This is not (the argument goes) to suggest that there is no evidence of people doing things that they (or others) might identify as "Catholic," or agreeing with ideas that they (or others) might identify as "Hindu." Rather, it is an assertion that there is no such thing specifically identifiable as "religion" that inheres in Catholicism or Hinduism—or that connects them to each other—that one can point to and say, "That is 'religion.'" It is an assertion that the concept of "religion" has been constructed entirely for purposes separate from those central to Catholicism or Hinduism and has been done so after-the-fact. In other words (according to this line of argumentation), Catholics may or may not do Catholic things, but only those of us interested in, say, thinking about them as elements that are part of a broader category of human expression, or comparing them with Hindu things, would call them "religious" things, ostensibly so that we can establish a baseline for comparison. Catholics have, over centuries, determined what is and what is not properly considered Catholicism; however, only scholars of religion (and related disciplines) have debated what is and what is not "religious," possibly involving Catholicism or Hinduism but also involving things seemingly unimportant (or unrecognizable) to Catholics or Hindus.

While cognizant of this line of argumentation and its importance both in the study of religion and in the study of things "religious" (whatever they might be), other scholars have found that it may be more of a "mental exercise"—useful to debate in the classroom or at conferences, but not entirely useful in the "real-time" study of religion "on the ground," where actual people live their actual lives. Part of the reason is that, regardless of who may have created the concept of religion, it is not, as Smith argues, "created for the scholar's analytic

purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization," and it does have an "independent existence apart from the academy" (1982: xi). It is a popular (which is to say, fairly common) term. One would be hard pressed to find a resident of the Western world—including scholars of religion—who did not use it with some degree of frequency, and usually without giving it too much thought. It is, regardless of the academic debates over its meaning, origin, or status in the academic world, a term perfectly acceptable to most people in the "real" world. It means something to the people who use it as well as the people who hear it. Indeed, most of those who use the word frequently would likely find Smith's assertion amusing, confusing, or annoying. It is, like so much in any society, a term of greater use and frequency than it is a term of investigation. "Religion" is—in this regard only—very much like many terms we use in common conversation. In a case involving whether or not the State of Ohio could prohibit the sale of things it considered pornographic, US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart wrote in 1964 that he would not "attempt further to define the kinds of materials" he understood "to be embraced within that shorthand description" and admitted that he might "never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But," he asserted with some confidence, "I know it when I see it" (*Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. 184, 1964, at 197). In that sense, while scholars may debate over the definition of the word "religion," and even assert that it is a concept that they themselves created, most people live their lives happy to have a sense that, while they might "never succeed in intelligibly" defining religion, they are confident that they will know it when they see it.

In reality, it is a term accorded significant power, regardless of who created it or for what purpose. For example, the terms "religion" and "religious" both appear in the US Constitution—the former in the First Amendment, the latter in Article VI—but the word "Christian" is entirely absent from the founding document. Most historians would argue that this imbalance was the result of the authors—unanimously Christian (and nearly unanimously Protestant)—presuming that the terms "religion" and "Christian" were synonymous. But among most legal and historical scholars, they cannot be so understood today; the past century is a testament to the expansion of how that term (as it is used in the First Amendment protection against laws either "prohibiting the free exercise of religion" or "respecting an establishment of religion") has broadened beyond simply "Christian," so that adherents of the more familiar forms (Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and others) have been afforded protections, as have adherents of less familiar forms, and no forms at all. The Internal Revenue Service has granted "tax exempt" status to the Temple of the Jedi Order, some states recognize weddings performed by ministers of the Church of Latter-Day Dude, and some states permit members of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster to wear colanders as "religious" head coverings in drivers' licensing photos.

Clearly, governmental officials—judges, administrators, and others—are making determinations for themselves about what is and what is not "religion" as it may (or may not) be protected in the US Constitution. So, in their own way, are the people who seek to write off donations to Jediism, perform Dudeist weddings, or represent the Pastafarian community in official government identification photographs. Some may be consulting with religion scholars, but it is reasonable to presume that many are not. If the study of *religion* and *popular culture* is at the intersection of these terms, the study of the "religion" side of that, it would appear in the early years of the twenty-first century, must begin with the presumption that the "popular" use of the term is just as important—if not more so—as the scholarly use of the term.

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The two readings in Unit I open the study of religion and popular culture by providing a glimpse into the origins of the field—an overview of the topics and social processes that are studied, definitions of crucial terms (religion, popular, culture), and perhaps most importantly, a sense of what is at stake in exploring the religious dimensions of popular culture. Written by two prominent scholars of religion, Charles Long and David Chidester, these excerpts put strong emphasis on the social dynamics of "the popular" in relation to other forms of culture, the political implications of the study of religion and popular culture, and the diversity of perspectives that have emerged in this field from the late eighteenth century to the present. We have offered these two readings as a starting point because they raise important questions:

- How are the terms "religion," "religious," and "sacred" to be used? What is the relationship of "the sacred" and "the profane"? What is "religious work," or the "political economy of the sacred"?
- What might be some of the meanings that have emerged for "popular" over time, and how did "popular" culture come to be seen as something in tension with (or opposition to) "high," "elite," "folk," or other forms of culture?
- What might have prompted a moment of "discovery of the people" among European intellectuals? And what was it about folk peasants and non-European small-scale ("tribal") societies that might have been appealing?
- Is the "mode of transmission" important to the meaning of the "popular"? Is there a particular mode, genre, or form of popular culture that might be most attractive to those who study religion, or conducive to its study? And is there something about small-scale societies that distinguish these modes of transmission from more complex industrialized societies?
- As you will see when you read Unit II, some of the later scholars are fairly direct when they situate themselves and their work in terms of other social, psychological, political, and economic forces—the state, the market, redemptive sacrifice, the body, and globalization—and some of them might argue that the earlier ones do it too. Should they make these connections to other elements of the human experience? And should scholars of religion and popular culture do this as well?

In practice, it may be best to remember that, while we noted just a few pages ago that "A significant number of authors writing about the intersection of religion and popular culture argue that the study is beset by various distinct—if not always acknowledged—definitional dilemmas," most of those authors either work out their own definitions, or leave the task of defining to the practitioner, or the reader. We believe that these first two readings will provide a strong foundation for anyone's initial journey into the intersection of religion and popular culture.

Suggested Reading on Religion and/or Popular Culture

Ashby, LeRoy. *With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture since 1830*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006.

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Beaudoin, Tom. *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998.
Betts, Raymond F., and Lyz Bly. *A History of Popular Culture: More of Everything, Faster and Brighter*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2012.
Bloesch, Sarah J., and Meredith Minister. *Cultural Approaches to Studying Religion: An Introduction to Theories and Methods*. London: Bloomsbury, 2018.
Cullen, Jim, ed. *Popular Culture in American History*, 2nd ed. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.
Forbes, Bruce David, and Jeffrey H. Mahan. *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, 1st ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.
Klassen, Chris. *Religion and Popular Culture: A Cultural Studies Approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
Martin, Joel, and Conrad E. Ostwalt. *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995.
McDannell, Colleen. *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995.
Miles, Margaret R. *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996.
Moore, R. Laurence. *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
Smith, Jonathan Z. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982.

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1 Charles H. Long and David Chidester

Born in Little Rock, Arkansas, Charles H. Long (1926–2020) attended the University of Chicago and studied under one of the founders of the “history of religions” field in the academic study of religion, Joachim Wach, writing his dissertation on myth and culture in West Africa. A member of the faculty at the University of Chicago, the University of North Carolina, Syracuse University, and the University of California, Santa Barbara, Long was one of the cofounders (with Mircea Eliade and Joseph Kitigawa) of the influential journal *History of Religions*. He is the co-editor—with Joseph Kitigawa (as well as Jerald Brauer and Marshall Hodgson)—of *Myths and Symbols, Studies in Honor of Mircea Eliade* (1969) and the author of *Alpha: The Myths of Creation* (1963) and *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (1986), as well as numerous articles and book chapters on African and African American religion, religion in the Atlantic World, interpretation, and discourses of power.

Working within the University of Chicago-based “history of religions” tradition, Long emphasized the role of words, signs, and symbols in the communication and transmission of power and the possibility (or often, the likelihood) of the subjugation of one community to the authority of another. Long’s work was primarily (but not exclusively) intended for the interactions of Euro- and African American communities in the Atlantic and North American contexts, and he was not often considered a scholar of religion and popular culture as such. But in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, what Long calls the “mode of expression” of religion and religiosity (sometimes labeled “spirituality”) has become less institution-based, and the “mode of understanding” has more often been transmitted through film, television, the Internet, and a wide variety of formats, both electronic and static. The boundaries which might once have been more easily distinguishable between “popular religion” and religion in popular culture have become blurred. Much of the expression of power (or the exertion or subjugation of it) has relocated away from religious institutions and is now increasingly communicated through culture. It is no surprise that, as the signs, symbols, and images are now transmitted via popular culture, they convey the Western world’s power in the construction of a modern global culture. Long’s work provides an important bridge between the academic study of religion and the decades-long avoidance of the popular and contributes to conversations about the expression (or concealment) of power, even in the “popular” cultural productions bought and sold with ease in American society. His notions of “the popular,” like much of his work, have proven quite prescient.

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"Popular Religion" (2005)[1]

The idea that the positive meaning of a society is represented by the "common people," "the folk," or the peasants may be seen as an expression of "cultural primitivism," the dissatisfaction of the civilized with the quality and style of civilization and the expression of a desire to return for orientation to the archaic roots of the culture. This "discovery of the people," to use Peter **Burke**'s apt phrase, began in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Europe. The philosophical justification for this orientation can be seen in the writings of Giovanni Battista **Vico** (1668–1744) and Johann Gottfried **Herder** (1744–1803). Probably more than any others, these two thinkers represented new theoretical approaches to the nature of history, religion, and society. They distinguished the notions of the "*populari*" and "the *volk*" as the basis for an alternate and new meaning of humanism apart from the rationalizing and civilizing processes set in motion by the European **Enlightenment**.

The discovery of two new and different forms of societal orders—one outside Europe (the so-called "primitives"), the other internal to European cultures (the peasants and the folk)—was prompted, in fact, by a search for origins. The search was in some sense antithetical, and in other senses supplementary, to the meaning of the origins of the West in the biblical and Greek cultures. The discovery that the archaic levels of human culture and society had an empirical locus in existing Western cultures became the philosophical, theological, and ideological basis for the legitimation of these new structures of order in modern and contemporary societies.

The notion of popular religion has to do with the discovery of archaic forms, whether within or outside Western cultures. It is at this level that the meaning of popular religion forms a continuum with both primitive religions and peasant and folk cultures in all parts of the world. This continuum is based upon structural similarities defined by the organic nature of all of these types of societies rather than upon historical or genetic causation.

Primitive and peasant-folk societies are, relatively speaking, demographically small. The relationships among people in these societies were thought to be personal in nature. Underlying all modes of communication is an intuitive or empathetic understanding of the ultimate nature and purpose of life.

This is what Herder meant by "the organic mode of life," an idea given methodological precision by the social philosopher Ferdinand **Tonnies**, who made a typological distinction between communities ordered in terms of **Gemeinschaft** and those expressing a **Gesellschaft** orientation to life and the world. Gemeinschaft represents community as organic form; Gesellschaft is society as a mechanical aggregate and artifact. A similar distinction is made by the anthropologist Robert **Redfield** when he describes pre-urban cultures as those in which the moral order predominates over the technical order. The moral order, in this interpretation, is the common understanding of the ultimate nature and purpose of life within the community. The notions of the organic nature of community (Gemeinschaft) and the primacy of the moral order lead to different meanings of the religious life in primitive and folk or peasant cultures as compared to societies in urban Gesellschaft orientations.

[1]Charles Long, excerpt from "Popular Religion," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, vol. 11 (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 2005), 7324–33.

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Furthermore, the relationship or the distinction between the religious and the cognitive within the two kinds of societies differs.

While it can be said that religion is present when a distinction is made between the **sacred and the profane**, the locus of this distinction in primitive and folk-peasant cultures is a commonly shared one. There is a unified sense of those objects, actions, and sentiments that are sacred, and those that are profane. The religious and the moral orders tend to be synonymous; thus, the expression of religious faith on the **ordinary and extraordinary** levels of these cultures forms a continuum. The extraordinary expressions are those that commemorate important punctuations of the temporal and social cycles (e.g., a new year, the harvest and first fruits, birth, marriage, and death). The ordinary modes are expressed in the customs, traditions, and mundane activities that maintain and sustain the culture on a daily basis.

One of the goals of the early studies of folk, peasant, and popular cultures was to come to an understanding of the qualitative meaning of religion in human cultures of this kind. Attention was focused on the meaning of custom and tradition, on the one hand, and upon the qualitative meaning and mode of transmission of the traditional values in cultures that were not predominantly literate.

The two early innovators, Herder and, especially, Vico, had already emphasized the modes and genres of language of the nonliterate. Vico based his entire philosophical corpus on the origin and development of language, or, to be more exact, of rhetoric. By the term rhetoric Vico made reference to the manner in which language is produced as a mode of constituting bonds between human beings, the world, and other beings outside the community. Closely related to Herder's philosophy of culture and history is the work of the **Grimm** brothers in their philological studies of the Germanic languages. Their collection of fairy tales, **Märchen**, and folk tales represents the beginning of serious scholarly study of oral traditions. In the work of the Grimms, the first articulation of the relationship between genres of oral literature and modes of transmission is raised. This relationship is important, for, given the presupposed organic form of nonliterate societies, the genres of transmission of ultimate meaning, whether ordinary or extraordinary, defined a locus of the religious. The **romantic** notion (present in Herder and in the theologians Friedrich **Schleiermacher** and Paul **Tillich**), namely, that religion is the ultimate ground and substance of culture, underlies the importance given to transmission, manifestation, and expression of this form of culture as religion. Religion is thus understood to be pervasive in society and culture, finding its expression not only in religious institutions, but in all the dimensions of cultural life.

The genres of the folk tale, folk song, art, and myth became the expressive forms of popular religion. The investigation of poetic meaning and wisdom, and of metaphorical, symbolic expressions, emerged as sources of the religious·sentiment in the traditions of popular religion. The initial "discovery of the people" as an approach to the interpretation of culture and society and as a new form of human value was made under the aegis of intuitive methods within literary studies and from the perspective of a speculative philosophy of history. Once serious scholarly attention was given to the data of the popular, certain ambiguities were noted. The original discovery of the people was based, by and large, on a contrast between the popular and the urban, or the artificiality of the urban mode as a form of civilization. In this sense, the popular represented the archaic and original forms of culture; it was its roots. However, the meaning of the popular could not be limited to

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the conservative, value-retaining, residual, self-contained unit of a society or culture. One of the basic elements in the meaning of a popular cultural tradition was the mode of its transmission, and it was precisely this element that allowed the meaning of such a tradition to be extended beyond that of the nonliterate strata of society—the rural peasants and the folk.

Varieties and Dimensions. Critical investigations of the meaning of popular culture and religion from the disciplinary orientations of the anthropology and history of religion, and from the sociology of knowledge, revealed a wide variety of the forms of popular religion.

[…]

Of these, the following seven are the most significant.

1. *Popular religion is identical with the organic (usually rural and peasant) form of a society. The religious and moral orders are also identical; in this sense, popular religion is closely related to the meanings of primitive and folk religion*. This is the original meaning of popular religion as the religion of folk and peasant culture. Though the distinction between the folk and peasant religion and the religion of the urban areas is clear-cut in the industrial periods of all cultures, such a distinction does not rest simply on this basis. In the feudal periods of various cultures, this distinction is more pronounced in relationship to certain practices and in the hierarchical structures of the society. Within feudal structures, the upper classes participated in and controlled a form of literacy that was confined within this group. In various cultures, this meant access to an orientation of religious meaning revolving around sacred texts. […]

The limitation of the modes of literacy suggests that though there are authoritative sacred texts, they are situated in a context that is often dominated by illiteracy and oral traditions. The line of demarcation between the culture of literacy and that of the oral traditions is seldom clear-cut. In many cases, the traditions of literacy embody a great deal of the content, form, and style of the oral traditions of the peasants and the folk. Prior to the universalization of the modes of literacy in many cultures, the prestige of literacy was to be found in the belief in, and regard for, the sacred text, which itself was believed to have a magical, authoritative meaning in addition to the content of its particular writings. The written words of the god or gods (the authoritative text) resided with, and were under the control of, elites within the culture.

Another characteristic of folk-peasant societies is that they define the lives of their members within the context of a certain ecological niche (agricultural, pastoral, etc.), and the modes and genres of their existence are attached to this context by ties of tradition and sentiment. The group and the ecological structure thus define a continuity of relationships. The sentiment and the moral order of communities of this kind are synonymous with the meaning of their religion. In agricultural peasant and folk cultures, the rhythms of the agricultural seasons are woven into the patterns of human relationships and sociability. […] Robert Redfield has suggested that the folk-peasant mode of life is an enduring structure of human community found in every part of the world. As such it is not only an empirical datum of a type of human community, but may also represent an enduring source of religious and moral values.

2. *Popular religion as the religion of the laity in a religious community in contrast to that of the clergy. The clergy is the bearer of a learned tradition usually based upon the*

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prestige of literacy. Another type of popular religion is notable in religious communities where literacy is by and large limited to the clergy. The clergy carries out the authority of the tradition through the use of religious texts. The laity may memorize and repeat certain of these texts in worship and rituals, but they are not in possession of the instruments and institutional authority of sacred literacy. Both clergy and laity may participate in and honor other traditions that arise from the life of the laity. Such traditions are those related to the sacralization of agricultural seasons and worship centered around the cults of relics and saints, holy persons, pilgrimages, and so on.

Another meaning of this kind of popular religion stems from a society in which literacy is not confined to the clergy or elite. The laity may have access to certain authoritative or quasi-authoritative texts without being in possession of the power of normative interpretation and sanction of these texts. They therefore interpret these texts in their own manner, according to their own needs and sensibilities. […]

3. *Popular religion as the pervasive beliefs, rituals, and values of a society. Popular religion of this type is a kind of* ***civil religion*** *or religion of the public. It forms the general and wide context for the discussion of anything of a religious nature within the society*. […]

[These] forms of popular religion are found in all cultures where the religious substratum of the culture radiates into, and finds explicit expression—or vague nuances and derivations—in the formation and processes of public institutions other than those dedicated to specific religious ceremonials. As such, this form of popular religion provides a generalized rhetoric and norm for the meaning and discussion of religion within the context of the culture in which it is found. In most cases the meaning of this kind of popular religion is expressed in terms of a dominant religious tradition that has had a profound and pervasive influence upon the culture. […]

4. *Popular religion as an amalgam of* ***esoteric*** *beliefs and practices differing from the common or civil religion, but usually located in the lower strata of a society*. Popular religion in this form more often than not exists alongside other forms of religion in a society. Reference is made here to the religious valuation of esoteric forms of healing, predictions of events not based on logical reasoning, and therapeutic practices that have an esoteric origin and may imply a different **cosmology** than the one prevalent within the society as a whole. In most cases the practitioners and clients have not eschewed the ordinary modes of healing and therapy; the esoteric beliefs and practices are supplementary, representing a mild critique of the normative forms of this kind of knowledge and practice in the society at large. This form of popular religion is present in industrial societies in practices such as **phrenology**, palm reading, astrology, and in the accompanying esoteric, "metaphysical" beliefs. […]

5. *Popular religion as the religion of a subclass or minority group in a culture*. Particular classes defined by their ethnicity or by an ideology or mythology associated with their work (e.g., miners, blacksmiths, butchers, soldiers, etc.), form another mode of popular religion. In most cases such groups do not represent foreign communities residing in another culture, but pose the problem of "otherness" or strangeness for people outside their communities due to their racial type or occupation. These groups are, nevertheless, integrated into the social structure as a necessary ingredient of a common cultural ideology and its functioning; they constitute "a part of the society by not being a part of it." In most traditional cultures of the world, certain occupations, such as mining or blacksmithing, represent this meaning. They are restricted to certain places of residence within the villages and they in turn have

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their own rituals and alternate understandings of the nature of the cosmos. While the role and function of such occupations is understood by the rest of society, and is felt to have a place in its general cosmology, they nevertheless form the basis for an alternate understanding of the nature of society. […]

6. *Popular religion as the religion of the masses in opposition to the religion of the sophisticated, discriminating, and learned within a society*. This is a variation on the difference between the laity and the clergy in hierarchical and traditional societies. Reference is made in this form of popular religion to a meaning of the masses that is the product of democratic politics and industrialism. Whereas in the older, traditional, hierarchical societies, the clergy and the laity both possessed traditions, the modern definition of "the masses" implies the loss of tradition and **canons** of value and taste, which are now defined in terms of a privileged class order of the elite who have had the benefit of special education. Alexis **de Tocqueville**'s comments on the meaning of democracy in America imply that democracy and mass culture are synonymous. The form of popular religion will tend to express the **existential** and **ephemeral** concerns of the mass population at any moment of its history.

7. *Popular religion as the creation of an ideology of religion by the elite levels of a society*. From the very beginning of the study of popular culture and religion, the discovery, meaning, and valuation of "the popular" were undertaken by elites within the society. Especially with the coming of industrialization and the rise of the nation-state, the provincial traditions of the peasant and rural folk within a culture had to fall under the political and ideological meanings of larger, generalizing and centralizing orders of the state and its bureaucracy. To the extent that the ideological meaning of the rural and peasant cultures served the aims of the state, it was promoted as the older, traditional meaning of the state deriving from its archaic forms. Popular culture and religion in this mode were invented and promoted by the state through **folklore** societies, museums, and by the promotion of historical research into the past of the society. On the basis of a genuine and authentic folk and peasant tradition of culture and religion, a new meaning of the popular forms is now embraced and supported by the state.

Given this variety of forms and meanings of popular religion, it is appropriate to ask what is the common element in all of them. There are two common elements. First of all, "the popular" in any of its varieties is concerned with a mode of transmission of culture. Whether the group be large or small, or whether the content of the religion be sustaining or ephemeral, "the popular" designates the universalization of its mode of transmission. In peasant and folk situations, this mode of transmission is traditionally embodied in symbols and **archetypes** that tend to be long-lasting and integrative. In modern industrial societies, the modes of transmission are several, including literacy, electronic media, newspapers, chapbooks, and so on. Such modes of communication bring into being a popular culture that is different from, but may overlap with, other social strata within the culture. Due to the intensity of these forms of communication, the content of the forms of popular culture is able to change quickly. It is not, however, the content that is at the fore here, but the type of cognition afforded by the modes of transmission. Given the intensification of transmission and the ephemerality of content, this form of popular religion and culture is **semiotic**—it is embedded in a system of signs rather than in symbols and archetypes.

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David Chidester

David Chidester (1952-) earned a PhD in religious studies from the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he studied with intellectual historian of religious studies Walter Capps and religion and literature pioneer Richard Comstock. He is currently Emeritus Professor of Comparative Religion at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, and his scholarship covers a wide variety of topics in Christian history, religion in South Africa, and comparative religions. He has also been involved in a number of projects examining aspects of South African religion and culture.

Drawing from what some have identified as a “Santa Barbara school” of focusing on “religion on the ground,” Chidester’s work blends the University of Chicago-based “history of religions” approach with a focus on the materiality drawn from the lives of those he studies. One of his earlier works, *Salvation and Suicide* (1988), was an award-winning analysis of the teachings of Jim Jones drawn from his writings as well as the many hours of recorded sermons taped by Jones during his ministry (right up to the moment of mass suicide in the South American jungle in 1978) and takes seriously the religious rhetoric and imagery of the man who led hundreds of believers away from their homes in the United States and to their death (mostly, if not all) by suicide. Rather than seeing these people as deluded, and Jones as psychotic, Chidester puts himself into the world of the Peoples Temple, its history, its theology, and its eschatology, and works to make sense of them for the people who experienced it in the jungles of South America.

Chidester’s enterprise of taking people seriously when they use terms common to religion to describe their own (often seemingly nonreligious) objects, activities, and ideas reveals the fluidity of those concepts rather than their misuse. It is, for Chidester, less important to measure people’s usage of a term against some supposed universal definition than to triangulate a sense of what people—including, it turns out, scholars—think they are saying or doing when they use the lexicon of religion. For Chidester, from the beginnings of the European period of colonialism—when a very Christian notion of religion travelled with Empires around the globe—both the practitioner and the scholar have felt the impact of the introduction, imposition, adoption, and transformation of the concept of “religion” to describe that which people have found important, and that which observers have seen people finding important.

More than anything, it is likely Chidester’s 1996 article on religion and American popular culture (“The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock ‘n’ Roll”) that sparked the most recent interest in the academic study of the intersections of religion and popular culture. It is often cited as one of the generative pieces of scholarship in the field, and has been included in edited volumes on the study of religion and popular culture. As the title of the article suggests, Chidester explores how seemingly everyday items—baseball, Coca-Cola, and “rock ‘n’ roll”—serve for their users as “church,” “fetish,” and “potlatch,” respectively. Chidester suggests there, and develops more deeply in his 2005 work *Authentic Fakes* (from which the following excerpt is taken), the argument that the term “religion” is less meaningful than the concept of “religious work”—the “performative” aspects, as he puts it below—in understanding human experience.

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"Planet Hollywood" (2005)[2]

Religion is a difficult term to define because everyone already "knows" what it means. What passes for common knowledge about religion tends to be organized according to binary oppositions: people know their own religion (as opposed to other religions), true religion (as opposed to false religion), or real religion (as opposed to fake religion). In exploring religion and American popular culture, we need to develop a more complex sense of what we mean by the term religion. Without belaboring the issue of definition, we are confronted with the ambiguity of a word that can be used in a conventional sense as a generic term for distinct religious traditions, communities, institutions, or movements, or in an analytical sense as a generic term for any kind of activity engaged with the transcendent, the sacred, or the ultimate concerns of human life. Both of these senses are important for exploring religion and popular culture. The first focuses our attention on specific religious groups in relation to popular culture; the second directs our attention to potent religious symbols, myths, and rituals that might animate cultural formations.

Fitting the conventional sense of the term, the Muslim organizations in Cape Town, as voluntary religious associations, form part of the rich, complex fabric of Islam in South Africa. Like any religion, Islam embraces a diversity of political positions—progressive, reactionary, and everything in between—in relation to the local social environment. In a **globalizing** world, it also reflects political positions that its adherents adopt in relation to the pervasive presence and power of the United States. Mobilizing in the mosques, some Muslim organizations have taken their religious interests to the streets in opposition to U.S. foreign policy. One of these organizations allegedly bombed [the Cape Town, South Africa] Planet Hollywood, as symbol not only of American popular culture but also of a kind of global religion that has generated like a religious mission. The franchise of Planet Hollywood, which has been described in tourist literature as "the Mecca of movie memorabilia," has restaurants in London and Paris, Jakarta and Tokyo, Dubai and Riyadh, Acapulco and Cancun, and, until 1998, in Cape Town, South Africa, occupying all the major zones of the clashing civilizations identified by political scientist Samuel Huntington as the fractures of conflict in a globalizing world. The bombing in Cape Town appeared to be another violent clash between Muslims and the West, or at least between Muslims and the West that could be imagined as centered in America, a religiously motivated attack on American sacred symbols.

In the aftermath, however, Muslim leaders in Cape Town denounced the bombing. On behalf of the Muslim Judicial Council, Sheikh Achmed Seddik, while acknowledging that Muslims in Cape Town held "heavy anti-American sentiments," strongly condemned the bombing as terrorism. Likewise, a spokesman for Muslims against Global Oppression distanced his organization from the bombing, saying, "This is an act of terror." Although the event was presented in the local and global media as an anti-American act, these Muslim leaders in Cape Town insisted that such an act of terror should also be understood as an anti-Muslim act, since terrorism is inconsistent with the basic religious values of Islam. Nevertheless, while the crime remained unsolved in South Africa, the U.S. State Department placed Muslims against Global Oppression on its list of terrorist organizations.

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[2]David Chidester, excerpt from "Planet Hollywood," in *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 11–30.

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urban lower classes rather than urban elites. In cultural studies, however, the popular has come to refer to a much more complex range of social positions within the production and consumption of culture.

The mass production of popular culture calls attention to what critical theorist Theodor **Adorno** called the "**culture industry**," the machinery of mass cultural production in a capitalist economy. Instead of assuming that popular culture is mass-produced because many people like it, Adorno argued that people like it because they essentially have no choice. Effectively, the culture industry beats them into submission. Readily available and immediately accessible, mass-produced popular culture emerges as the only option within capitalist relations of production. As cultural production becomes an industry, artwork is transformed into a commodity that is created and exchanged for profit. In the process, the distinction between high culture and popular cultures dissolves, since both "bear the stigmata of capitalism."

The culture industry produces two basic effects in popular culture: uniformity and utility. Rather than meeting the diversity of popular desires for leisure or entertainment, the culture industry creates a new uniformity of desire. "Culture now impresses the same stamp on everything," Adorno and his colleague Max **Horkheimer** complained. "Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part." Within the capitalist system of cultural production, leisure is integrated into the cycle of productive labor. Leisure, entertainment, and amusement are extensions of work, employments of "free" time that are organized by the same principle of utility that govern the capitalist system of production. As an integral part of the capitalist economy, the culture industry provides popular cultural diversions that the masses seek "as an escape from the mechanized work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again." In this production-oriented model, therefore, popular culture serves the interests of capital—profitability, uniformity, and utility—by entangling people in a culture industry in which a character such as "Donald Duck in the cartoons . . . gets his beating so that the viewers can get used to the same treatment."

The popular reception, or consumption, of cultural forms, styles, and content calls attention to the many different ways people actually find to make mass-produced culture their own. Following the critical theorist Walter **Benjamin**, many cultural analysts argue that the reception of popular culture involves not passive submission but creative activity. Although recognizing the capitalist control of mass-produced culture, Benjamin nevertheless found that people develop new perceptual and interactive capacities that enable them to transform private hopes and fears into "figures of the collective dreams such as the globe-orbiting Mickey Mouse."

Where Adorno insisted that the productions of the culture industry are oppressive, Benjamin looked for the therapeutic effects, such as the healing potential of collective laughter and even the redemptive possibilities in the reception of popular culture. In the case of Mickey Mouse, for example, Benjamin suggested that audiences are able to think through basic cultural categories—machines, animals, and humans—by participating in a popular form of entertainment that scrambles them. As Benjamin observed, Mickey Mouse cartoons are "full of miracles that not only surpass those of technology but make fun of them." Against the laws of nature and technology, these "miracles" of transformation—changing shape, defying gravity—occur spontaneously "from the body of Mickey Mouse, his partisans and pursuers." For an audience "grown tired of the endless complications of

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the everyday," Benjamin concluded, these miracles promise a kind of "redemption" in an extraordinary world.

Without necessarily subscribing to the proposition of a therapeutic capacity or redemptive potential of popular culture, cultural analysts adopting the reception-oriented model have concentrated on the creative activity of interpretation as itself a means of cultural production that takes place in the process of cultural consumption. As people actively decode cultural content through interpretation, they also participate in rituals of consumption, rituals of exchange, ownership, and care through which the arts and artifacts of popular culture are personalized.

In between cultural production and consumption, the space of popular culture is a contested terrain in which people occupy vastly different and often multiple subject positions grounded in race, ethnicity, social class, occupation, region, gender, sexual orientation, and so on. As the cultural theorist Stuart **Hall** has established, popular culture is the site of struggle in which various alternative cultural objects contend with the hegemony of the dominant culture. Subcultures develop oppositional positions, perhaps even methods of "cultural resistance," thereby creating alternative cultural formations, which social elites work to appropriate and assimilate into the larger society. Not a stable system of production and consumption, popular culture is a battlefield of contending strategies, tactics, and maneuvers in struggles over the legitimate ownership of highly charged cultural symbols of meaning and power.

Glossary

ADORNO, Theodor (1903–69): German philosopher, sociologist, cultural theorist, writer (see separate entry in this volume).

ARCHETYPES: models for, or patterns of, symbolic systems (such as the biblical Adam used to represent all of humanity).

BENJAMIN, Walter (1892–1940): German literary critic, theorist.

BENVENISTE, Emile (1902–76): French linguist, scholar of semiotics.

BURKE, Peter: author of *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978).

CANONS: laws, rules, guidelines, often religious, defining proper behavior and belief.

CIVIL RELIGION: a system of symbols and practices—including the observance of national holidays, singing of national anthems, devotion to the flag, national memorials, cemeteries, and statuary, and other patriotic imagery—that sacralize the state and its core values.

COSMOLOGY: a system—either scientific or religious—for understanding the origin of the cosmos.

CULTURE INDUSTRY: a concept, developed by the Frankfurt School (a collection of social theory and philosophy scholars working at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany, between the First and Second World Wars), of social criticism proposing that the major elements of popular culture, including the major media of film, television, radio, and print, have been industrialized and thus produce uniform content whose message is fundamentally manipulative and serves the interests of those in power.

DURKHEIM, Emile (1858–1917): French sociologist (see separate entry in this volume).

ENLIGHTENMENT: an intellectual, social, and political movement started in seventeenth-century Europe that emphasized the study of nature via science, democratic reforms, and the improvement of society via the dissemination of a more rational worldview.

EPHEMERAL: short-lived, temporary, dream-like.

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ESOTERIC: known by a limited group of people possessing special knowledge.

EXISTENTIAL: related to existence or to the reality of the existence of something.

FIELDS, Karen: American sociologist, scholar of race and religion.

FOLKLORE: the academic study of oral traditions, music, artifacts, and other everyday elements of a culture, including stories, jokes, songs, gestures, toys, games, etc. Often includes the study of how these materials are created, circulated, and interpreted.

GEERTZ, Clifford (1926–2006): American anthropologist (see separate entry in this volume).

GEMEINSCHAFT: a sociological term for small-scale societies that provide close social ties, unified moral beliefs, and face-to-face communications; compare to **GESELLSCHAFT**.

GESELLSCHAFT: a sociological term for large-scale societies that provide greater anonymity, formal and legalistic value systems, and impersonal communications; compare to **GEMEINSCHAFT**.

GLOBALIZING: in the process of globalization, a term used to describe the integration of human processes and systems—including communication, commerce, and patterns of human interaction (fashion, culture, etc.)—across national boundaries.

GRIMM, Jacob Carl (1785–1863) and **Wilhelm Carl GRIMM** (1786–1859): German linguists, founders of the modern study of folklore.

HALL, Stuart (1932–2014): Jamaican cultural theorist, sociologist (see separate entry in this volume).

HERDER, Johann Gottfried (1744–1803): German theologian, philosopher of history and culture.

HORKHEIMER, Max (1895–1973): German philosopher, cultural theorist (see separate entry in this volume).

JAMES, William (1842–1910): American philosopher, psychologist, theorist of religious experience.

MÄRCHEN: "fairytales" (German).

MÜLLER, F. Max (1823–1900): German linguist, scholar of religion, mythology.

ORDINARY and EXTRAORDINARY: terms used by scholars of religion to differentiate the levels of human existence. "Ordinary" expressions of life are the everyday customs and patterns of living found in a society; "Extraordinary" expressions are those customs and patterns—such as life cycle events (weddings, funerals), annual observances (seasonal observances)—that occur regularly but infrequently.

OTTO, Rudolf (1869–1937): German philosopher, theologian, author of *Das Heilige* (1917; *The Idea of the Holy*, 1923).

PHRENOLOGY: the study of the shape of the skull as an indicator of mentality and character.

REDFIELD, Robert (1897–1958): American anthropologist, theorist of acculturation and cultural change.

ROMANTIC: of or related to Romanticism, a broad intellectual movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, influential in the arts, philosophy, religion, music, and other fields, that emphasized individualism, emotion, spontaneity, intuition, and the inspirational character of "Nature" (as opposed to "nature").

SEMIOTIC: referring to the study of signs and symbols used in systems of communication, as well as the social networks and conceptual systems that sustain them.

SACRED and the PROFANE: terms used by scholars of religion to characterize the most basic activities of religious groups: to separate the sacred from the profane, especially in connection to ritual. The "profane" is often that which has general use but is not meaning-filled; the "sacred" is often that which has limited (and set-apart) use but is meaning-filled.

SCHLEIERMACHER, Friedrich (1768–1834): German theologian, profoundly influential for modern Protestant theology.

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SPIRO, Melford (1920–2014): American anthropologist.
TAYLOR, Edward Burnett "E.B." (1832–1917): British anthropologist, heavily influenced by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.
TILLICH, Paul (1886–1965): German Protestant theologian (see separate entry in this volume).
de TOCQUEVILLE, Alexis (1805–59): French historian, writer, author of *Democracy in America* (1835–40).
TONNIES, Ferdinand (1855–1936): German sociologist, theorist.
VICO, Giovanni Battista "Giambattista" (1668–1744): Italian philosopher of history and law.
WEBER, Max (1864–1920): German sociologist, author of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904).

Questions for Conversation

Which of Long's seven definitions of "popular religion" serve best to understand its connection to popular culture? How might they inform our notions of religion and popular culture?

For Long, what might be the more significant differences between "popular" and "folk"?

How does Long's notion of "popular culture" (as "the culture of the people") differ from Chidester's notion?

How are Chidester's "conventional sense" of the term "religion" ("distinct religious traditions, communities, institutions, or movements") and his "analytic sense" ("any kind of activity engaged with the transcendent") related?

In what ways does Chidester's notion of "religious work" expand the scope of study of religion and popular culture? In what ways might it diminish traditional notions of "religion"?

What might Chidester mean by "political economy of the sacred," or "legitimate ownership of sacred symbols"?

How does Long's emphasis on "modes of transmission" inform Chidester's notion of "religious work"?

How do Long and Chidester's notions of "popular" differ? What effect does that have on their notions of religion and popular culture?

Suggestions for Additional Reading

Albanese, Catherine L. "Religion and American Popular Culture: An Introductory Essay," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 4 (1996): 733–42.
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Clark, Lynn Schofield. “When the University Went ‘Pop’: Exploring Cultural Studies, Sociology of Culture, and the Rising Interest in the Study of Popular Culture,” *Sociology Compass* 2, no. 1 (2008): 16–33.
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Mazur, Eric Michael, and Kate McCarthy, eds. *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

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