

The Bloomsbury Reader in the Study of Religion and Popular Culture

Edited by

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

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Unit III Durable Forms in the Study of Religion and Popular Culture

Introduction to Unit III

There is, in the study of religion, a long-raging debate over the act of comparison. Max Müller, often considered one of the founders of the academic study of religion, argued famously that, in terms of religious traditions or practices, “he who knows one, knows none”; in other words, that comparison was the basis for understanding. This became one of the models for the field—hence departments of comparative religion (or religions) at such US institutions as Drew University (New Jersey), Miami University (Ohio), and Western Michigan University, among others.

But according to its critics, the dangers of comparison were ever-present. In the early 1960s, as state-supported colleges and universities were taking a cue from the US Supreme Court’s decision affirming the constitutionality of teaching about religion and broadening beyond theology and Christianity in their course offerings, Rabbi Samuel Sandmel—professor of biblical literature and past president of the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis—was warning fellow scholars against “parallelomania.” In an article on early Christian texts, Sandmel applied the term he traced back to an unidentified French text from the 1830s to scholars in his own field and defined it as “that extravagance among scholars which first overdoes the supposed similarity in passages and then proceeds to describe source and derivation as if implying literary connection flowing in an inevitable or predetermined direction” (1962: 1). Sandmel admitted that he was “not seeking to discourage the study of these parallels, but . . . to encourage them.” Nonetheless, he felt it necessary to advise “caution about exaggerations” as they related to “parallels,” as well as their “source and derivation,” and he admonished his colleagues to “recognize parallelomania for the disease that it is” (1962: 13).

Twenty years later, history of religions scholar Jonathan Z. Smith argued in an essay titled “In Comparison a Magic Dwells” that one who engages in comparison is actually being “more impressionistic than methodical.” Although a scholar may be drawn to a topic “by a sense of its uniqueness,” he argued, nonetheless “at some point along the way, as if unbidden, as a sort of *déjà vu*, the scholar remembers that he has seen ‘it’ or ‘something like it’ before,” and that the similarity “must then be accorded significance and provided with an explanation.” Smith asks: “is comparison an enterprise of magic or science?” and concludes that it “appears to be more a matter of memory than a project for inquiry” (1982: 22). It is, therefore, entirely suspect.

The fear is that, through overzealous comparison, scholars might endorse a position articulated as the title of a work by British poet and artist William Blake: *All Religions Are One* (1795). Better known as “perennialism” (from Aldous Huxley’s 1945 work *The Perennial Philosophy*), this approach suggested that, while different in the details, all religions were basically the same at some deeper level. Described by analogy in the words of one of the presumed champions of this approach, philosopher of religion Huston Smith, “It is possible to climb life’s mountain from any side, but when the top is reached trails converge” (1991: 73).

For a variety of reasons—including the willingness either to define “religion” broadly or to abandon any willingness to define it at all—the problem seems only amplified in the study of religion and popular culture. In their 2000 work *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan suggest that one way of understanding the intersection of religion and popular culture is where participants in some aspect of popular culture act as if that aspect was a religion. This is a common enough approach in the study of the topic; one of the more important early models examined *Star Trek* fandom as a religious phenomenon (Jindra 1994). The danger, though, is not that the author will argue that all religions are the same, but rather that anything (or everything) can be considered a religion. Sean McCloud, describing the relatively new subfield of “fandom as religion,” diagnoses these investigators as afflicted by “the approaches of scholars who connect the facile similarities between popular culture fandoms and religious movements so thoroughly that they see them as being the same thing” (2003: 191).

But while Huston Smith may have been a perennialist, the line quoted above—about all religious “paths converging at the top” of the mountain—was part of Smith’s description of an “idea that comes out more clearly” in Hinduism than “through the other great religions; namely, her [i.e., the Hindu tradition’s] conviction that the various major religions are alternate paths to the same goal” (1991: 72–3). In this part of Huston Smith’s discussion of Hinduism, he is drawing primarily from the nineteenth-century mystic Ramakrishna, who sought to experience the divine in a wide variety of religious traditions, and whose most famous student (Swami Vivekananda) is often credited with introducing Hinduism to the English-speaking world. We cannot confirm from this quote whether or not Huston Smith was a perennialist; there is strong evidence that he was, but this isn’t it. What we can confirm is only that he understood (rightly or wrongly) that Hinduism took this view.

The lesson here might be that, like most arguments, reality (or practice) probably lies somewhere in between the two positions. In his own article, McCloud concludes that “several studies do show some persuasive parallels between popular culture fandoms and religious movements” (2003: 198). Comparison is an important aspect of the path to understanding. If something is unique and beyond comparison, then there is no way it can be contextualized, and is therefore beyond comprehension; but if it is just one more example of “more of the same,” then is there no real point in seeking to understand it, since there is no particular lesson to be learned.

Comparison may even be a necessary element in the study of human cultural activity. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz reminds us that the study of culture is “not an experimental science in search of laws but an interpretive one in search of meaning.” Citing sociologist Max Weber’s concept that “man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,” Geertz identifies culture as “those webs” so spun by humanity, and that it is

“explanation” he seeks, answers to the riddles of why people do what they do (1973: 5). By comparing, we begin the process of evaluating impressions, and finding explanations—probably not *the* explanation, but at the very least, *an* explanation—for the social phenomena we encounter in our world.

But there is no doubt that, as important as comparison might be, it should be done with a great deal of caution, and with full recognition that contrary facts must be accounted for and not bulldozed under the romance of symmetry.

Durable Forms

Which brings us to Unit III.

Much of popular culture is distinctively modern and makes robust use of the media and mass replication technologies that have emerged in recent centuries—print, radio, television, film, the Internet, etc. Many of the theories we explored in Units I and II necessarily focus on the modern period and concepts like the “culture industry” that address distinctively modern modes of power and communication. And yet some aspects of popular culture are not particularly new. Various modes of storytelling, collective rituals, and mythical motifs that are widely disseminated today (and in fact seem to thrive in the contemporary media environment) have been around for a very long time and seem to have been employed by many different societies. Thus in this section we turn to durable forms of popular culture, which have endured beyond the particularities of historical eras and thrive across different cultural traditions. We find them in societies around the globe, ancient, medieval, and modern. Although not an exhaustive list, we emphasize five general areas for the study of durable forms that serve as a useful introduction to a historical appreciation of the study of religion and popular culture:

- “Who We Are” begins our journey through self-examination and explores our use of heroes and monsters in describing ourselves;
- “Where We Are” examines our desire to construct meaning-filled space, and what that can communicate about our sense of place;
- “What We Know” considers the way myths function as the mechanism used to transfer basic knowledge of the world in which we live, and in ways that may not always be obvious;
- “Where We Go” explores the ways that seekers find meaning in pilgrimages to sacred places, whether physical or imagined; and
- “What We Do” focuses on the things we do and the ways we can be in the world, through carnivals and festivals.

While these particular forms seem to transcend time and locale, we note here at the outset the importance of cultural difference, as articulated by many of the theorists in Unit II. There are certainly enough points of obvious similarity to make comparison compelling and interesting, much as we have seen in the academic study of comparative religion. For example, monsters in Japan, Europe, and among indigenous peoples share some family resemblances—they are horrific, disruptive, ravenous, superhuman, etc. And yet, as more

detailed scholarship has emerged, we have come to understand that monsters have distinctive roles to play in the popular lore of their host societies. They respond to distinctive political orders, social changes, national traumas, and other unique motivations, not the least of which is the underlying religious culture. Even monsters that, thanks to modern media, are now globally recognized—like King Kong and Godzilla—can hold very different meanings for different audiences.

So what to prioritize in our exploration of durable forms? We suggest two general lines of questioning that will be helpful to any case study or comparative inquiry (be that comparison historical or cross-cultural). The first examines power and function: How does the durable form function in its particular context in terms of social, political, and economic power? Does it serve the powerful in ways that are explicit? For example, parades and processions often have as their basic purpose a clear demonstration of who is in charge. To look upon the king, a statue of a divine figure, the high priest, the elected president, or a military brigade is to submit, consciously or unconsciously, to their right to rule. On the other hand, some durable forms seem to undermine authority. A recurring figure in many European-derived carnival traditions is the “Lord of Misrule” who temporarily “governs” events given over to excess, inversions of social hierarchies, rule breaking, and other forms of social chaos. This “lord” suggests that power is slippery in these events and can be quickly challenged and reversed.

The second line of inquiry explores the wellsprings of cultural creativity: How do the durable forms serve as foundations for the kinds of novel cultural combinations and blendings that we associate with creativity? In this we can see these forms in ways analogous to, on the one hand, artistic creativity, and on the other, the work of entrepreneurs who create new products and services. Take, for example, fairy tales, many of which are of ancient origin and have long been recognized by folklorists as a core feature of local cultures who use them for entertainment and moral instruction. Traditionally exchanged between parents and children as part of an oral culture, fairy tales became “literary” in the nineteenth century thanks to collectors like the Brothers Grimm who committed them to print. With the emergence of film and television in the twentieth century, fairy tales became blockbusters, meticulously animated and carefully wrought by elaborate teams of artisans under the managerial hand of Walt Disney and other big media companies. With each transition, there were creative decisions to be made—what to include and exclude, how to render particular characters, what kind of language to use (verbal and visual), etc. We might even ask if the persistence of these durable forms can be explained not by their essential stability but by their ability to get reinvented over time in new cultural contexts and in new media. While we might recognize some connections between the latest Disney princesses and their forbearers in medieval European storytelling, we also need to see them in the light of present-day changes in the status of women, modern psychological views on childhood development, and the ambitions of a big media conglomerate aiming to expand its “brand.” Likewise, circling back to the issue of power, we can ask: How do durable forms foster creative cultural responses, especially to social, economic, and political changes?

Like religion in a more general sense, these durable forms provide a framework for communities as they adapt to new conditions and strive to creatively express their inner longings and anxieties. Because of their symbolic density and wide scope—they are all “popular” in both the sense of accessibility and in the numbers of participants—they become

particularly rich resources for exploring how the study of religion in popular culture speaks to a wide range of topics. Thus we find that scholars' analyses draw upon the full range of theoretical perspectives, from social and psychological dynamics, political and economic power, creative artistry, theological reflection, and often combinations of these vital themes.

What's Here

The format of each of the chapters in this unit may seem rather informal; they are intended to be more conversational than assertive. Our hope is that each chapter provides an example of how we might approach the study of the broader topic of the unit (with some discussion of related issues, of course), to reveal not only the basic structures of the investigations but the basic formation of some of the questions that go into such a study. With some notions for starting points of these topics, we expect that readers will explore more thoroughly (maybe via the Internet) the examples we have selected to illuminate the durable forms; that they will seek to identify their own examples; or that they will seek to use other theorists to make some kind of sense of it all. Carnivals and sacred spaces, monsters and pilgrimage sites—there is a world of information available to you; we hope merely to get you started.

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