

## **Culture & Christianity**

### **(3) Christianity and Popular Culture**

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Let me begin by reiterating Rachel Mann's apologies for not being with us this evening because of her cough and flu-like symptoms, and the fact that she's following government advice at this stage to self-isolate. In her absence, I'd like to explore a couple of ideas about how we can see spirituality (Christianity in this case) interacting with popular culture. The first is what we can call *forms* of interaction between Christianity and pop culture, and the second is the *common ground* between the two.

So let's start with the **forms** of interaction, and we can identify four different ways in which they relate to each other:

**(i) Christianity in Popular Culture** – Derek Nimmo, Rowan Atkinson, Dawn French are well-known for many roles but one of the things they have in common is playing vicars on TV and elsewhere. We see Christian imagery and language in *all* forms of popular culture – The place of faith in novels such as Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* or in Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code*; Christian tropes in popular music such as Lady Gaga's *Judas*, Madonna's *Like a Prayer* and a wide range of heavy metal bands; and the role of the priest in Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* or the religious symbolism of *The Matrix Trilogy*. I'm sure that you'll be able to think of many other examples across all of these genres and more.

**(ii) Popular Culture in Christianity** – Religious groups adapt their practices to their surrounding cultural context e.g. the *Left Behind* series of Christian fiction or the multi-million dollar Christian Contemporary Music industry in which an evangelical forms of Christian theology are re-packaged in various styles of popular culture. If you have access to the HBO series *The Righteous Gemstones* on TV at the moment then it combines both of these categories – *Christianity in Popular Culture* and *Popular Culture in Religion* – in one show about a family run American megachurch.

**(iii) Popular Culture as Christianity/Religion/Spirituality** – In other words, being a *fan* of something can take on similar ritualised characteristics to faith. Fandom is seen as a form of religious or spiritual-like practice across sport, cinema, popular music, gaming, celebrity and more. For those that are interested, that's what the book I've written with Clive Marsh is essentially about – *Personal Jesus: How popular music shapes our souls* (2013) discusses how listening to the many forms of popular music can take on 'religious' dimensions.

**(iv) Christianity and Popular Culture in Dialogue** – This involves creative theology and religious meaning making within the setting of popular cultural production and consumption, where popular cultural texts and practices are used as a medium for theological reflection. A good example of this is in the recent spate of Lent courses based on popular films, of which Rachel Mann’s course on *The Greatest Showman* is a good example.

So we have these four forms of interaction between Christianity and popular culture: (i) Christianity **in** Popular Culture; (ii) Popular Culture **in** Christianity; (iii) Popular Culture **as** Christianity/Religion/spirituality; (iv) Christianity and Popular Culture **in Dialogue**.

Now we turn to the second idea, the common ground between Christianity and popular culture. Again, this covers a wide range of pop art forms: film, theatre, music, dance, TV and radio, social media, fiction and graphic novels/comics, pastimes and hobbies, sport and so on. Again let me just highlight four shared areas between these phenomena and Christianity, religion and spirituality:

**(i) Embodiment and performance** – most forms of popular culture involve our bodies. With popular music that could mean making music (playing an instrument, singing) or responding to music (dancing, clapping of hands); watching films, TV or theatre might involve change of breathing rate or posture as excitement or tension increase and decrease; with activities like cooking or knitting our bodies are engaged with a creative process even though we might be listening to the radio or watching TV at the same time. Christianity too is an embodied activity which can include physical responses to music, speech, smell and more.

**(ii) Ritual and storytelling** – all forms of popular culture are situated within a series of narratives. Two recent books can stand for many others in this field. So for example, Jason Bivins places American jazz within the stories of US culture and religion plus stories of African American experiences. Whilst Helen Phelan has explored different forms of singing in contemporary Ireland and how that reflects different stories from Irish culture and the stories of those who have migrated to Ireland in the late twentieth and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Such collective stories shape ritualised behaviour in those cultures and all cultures, just as the stories that different churches, para-church groups and denominations.

**(iii) Belonging and community** – ‘belonging’ is a rapidly changing concept particularly under the impact of social media. People ‘belong’ in very different ways to a generation ago. Nevertheless individuals still belong even if it is through following friends on *Facebook* or supporting a football team more online than at a stadium or downloading a band’s music on *Spotify* rather than attending concerts. Similar changes are taking place within the world of Christian spirituality. To take one example, in the past people would often own physical copies of the Bible – maybe an Authorized Version and a modern translation. Whilst that can still be the case, younger generations may more often access the Bible through the multiple versions available on a site like biblegateway.com The way that people belong to groups and churches is changing as forms of popular culture change.

**(iv) Spiritual experience and affective space** – ‘Affective space’ is a term used to describe ‘any practice or activity that entails significant emotional engagement ... around the

experience of listening, watching or participating’ (Marsh and Roberts 2013, p 16). We can think of individual affective space as like a rugby ball. We’re in the middle and to either side (for want of a better term, the ‘pointy ends’) are the institutional elements which shape our lives (governments, corporate bodies, social norms, inherited family behaviours, friendship groups) and at the other end the emotional side of our lives (self-expression, play, sense of authenticity). Our spiritual experience is being nurtured and shaped within that affective space by all forms of institutional and popular culture

So once again, four areas where Christianity and popular culture share common ground: (i) Embodiment and performance; (ii) Ritual and storytelling; (iii) Belonging and community; (iv) Spiritual experience and affective space. And we can see many of these at work in a project like Warwick Poppies 2018 – knitting is an physical and embodied pastime; the exhibition allowed people to share and tell their stories; it gave people a sense of belonging to a wider community; people engaged with the knitted poppies in an affective space that brought together both formal and emotional levels.

Where do these two elements of shared **forms** and shared **common ground** leave us? In essence, I’d say that we human beings are meaning making creatures. We seek meaning in and for our lives, and we do that in a variety of ways. For some it’s through their work or their family, for others it’s through their faith or their passions such as a love of sport or the arts. Of course, these are not mutually exclusive and the creation of meaning in our lives may involve a variety of such activity.

And we shouldn’t under estimate the role that *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders*, *Strictly Come Dancing* and *The Voice*, and many other forms of popular culture play in contemporary meaning making. Nor should we miss the significant overlap that there is between Christianity, spirituality and popular culture. Indeed, we’ve already had that illustrated in our Lent Addresses by Elli Wort’s research into Hull’s experience as City of Culture 2017 and Fergus Butler-Gallie’s thoughts on religious and political satire and humour.