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Pop Goes Religion: Faith in Popular Culture (Book Review)

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Terry Mattingly. *Pop Goes Religion: Faith in Popular Culture.* Nashville, TN: W Publishing, 2005. xxiv+186 pp. \$12.99 (paper), ISBN 0849909988.

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Christian colleges and their liberal arts tradition over the past decades have steadily given weight and importance to the need for training their students to interact with culture, both ethnic and popular. Messiah College has demonstrated this in its co-curricular programs. Westmont College identifies that the ability to interact with culture is an educational objective for all its graduates. George Fox asserts the significance of this aim in its motto: "*Christianity and Culture.*" In 2001, Calvin College scholar William Romanowski observed that many evangelicals keep themselves separated from "sinful" elements of the world found in the entertainment world by appropriating this secular culture and "infusing" it with Christian content.¹⁸ In 2005, with *Pop Goes Religion: Faith in Popular Culture*, Terry Mattingly suggests that evangelicals need to start watching culture through different lenses. Instead of just trying to appropriate pop culture, evangelicals must have eyes to see where spirituality and faith already pervade and converge with American culture. The key is for evangelicals to identify this presence and then differentiate its truth and falsity.

In this volume, Mattingly suggests that "the typical modern American is much more likely to be exposed to a new religious insight or doctrine at the mall or the movie multiplex than in a traditional sanctuary" (xxi). As a journalist and educator he has "tried to prop open the door between the world of faith and the world of entertainment" (xxi). Mattingly is a syndicated columnist as well as the director for the Washington Journalism Centre created by the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities. *Pop Goes Religion* is a collection of his columns spanning the years 1996 to 2005. They are columns that describe ways in which religion and pop culture intersect in our society. The volume challenges scholars to look at their world from the angle of presenting truth through contemporary media and culture. This book provides models and primers for how faith and pop culture can converge in expected and unusual ways.

Scholars of multiple disciplines try to discern the truths present within pop culture as presented in its myriad of forms. These media are used as tools for teaching, bridging or transmitting ideas, in much the same way a missiologist tries to discern truths within a culture to communicate the essentials of the gospel. Instead of scouring pop culture for hints of biblical truth or manipulating media for Christian purposes, Mattingly suggests that a starting point should be identifying those instances where faith and religion already meet pop culture. Mattingly's introduction is the most valuable part of this book for those trying to get a glimpse into how to adjust their vision of the world in order to see faith's interaction with popular culture. He is a gifted and perceptive storyteller, writing with clarity and brevity. His columns are full of necessary detail but are lean on superfluous minutiae.

One of my personal desires in reading this book was to understand how an observer of culture could adjust his or her worldview in order to see faith's interaction with popular culture. Mattingly's introduction provides many of these "glimpses." As an extra benefit, he also provokes the reader's own worldview by his choice of illustrations. While he is clearly careful to be fair in representing the people he interviews, he does hint at his own priorities

¹⁸See William D. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open: Looking For God in Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI, Brazos Press, 2001), 12.

and hopes. He challenges the reader to not assume that entertainment "is the Godforsaken world" (xix). In his own words, "there are so many... introductions I wish I could make" (xix). Mattingly desires to bring culture and faith into an understanding of each other. He acknowledges that both are a deep part of the American landscape; however, they often misunderstand each other and are frequently in "tension" (xx). In *Pop Goes Religion*, he has given a voice to those "whose views have helped shape our times," providing "a collection... of snapshots from the frontlines of the pop-culture wars" (xxiii).

His reflections range over the whole field of mass media. On one hand, Mattingly comments on the highly sexual shows put on by Brittany Spears and the blindness parents sometimes have: "It's important for adults to see this through the eyes of millions of girls who started watching Spears, with parental blessing--when they were nine or 10 years of age" (91). Further, as an observer of culture, he plays the small "p" prophet and provokes the thinking of evangelicals. Quoting Greg Garrett and Chris Seay, he writes: "if movie theaters have become the new cathedrals, as cultural observers from Bill Moyers to George Lucas argue, then the priests of that domain are clad in black leather" (151). Mattingly goes on to challenge his readers to see where popular culture and spirituality do intermix: "Anyone attempting to get a handle on faith that is soaked into TV, movies, popular music and the rest of the mass-media universe should be prepared for surprises" (122). The surprises can be as varied as a bishop's interaction with a ZZ Top member, or the scriptural lyrics present in Van Halen songs.

A favorite theme of the columns is the impact of George Lucas and the *Star Wars* saga on the psyche of our culture: "I do think there are things we can learn from *Star Wars*. ... I think what we have here is a teachable moment, a point at which millions of people are talking about what it means to choose the dark side or the light side" (156). Mattingly suggests that *Star Wars* and epics such as the *Lord of the Rings* illustrate a longing present among the younger generations who "yearn for some kind of mystical religious experience, taught by the masters who hand down ancient traditions and parables that lead to truths that have stood the test of time" (156).

The challenge of faith has always been to make the gospel's message contextual and relevant to the culture in which it exists. Our current North American culture has immersed itself in pop culture — music, movies, television, advertising, fashion, and so forth. Particularly this generation of college students is defined by what it listens to, watches and plays. Scholars such as Romanowski, Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor¹⁹ imply that truth can be found in popular culture and intimate, as Mattingly asserts, that much of American culture finds its truth within areas of pop culture. As observed above, Mattingly himself suggests that we learn much of our theology in the malls. In many ways, North American society is biblically illiterate and it learns its mores, absolute truths and values in the cineplex, on the television and in its music. In a similar way that art was used by the medieval church to teach biblical truth to an illiterate society, so the church and believing scholars must be prepared to use the art of today in order to teach a biblically illiterate society. Mattingly quotes Mark Pinsky:

This is more evidence... of the evaporating attention span of modern American. Should we be embarrassed that we have to turn to popular culture in order to find ways to talk about serious religious issues? Without a doubt, yes. But this is reality (122).

¹⁹See Romanowski; as well as Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God In Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003).

We have a culture both fascinated and repulsed by the superficial. North American pop culture is longing for but unsure of the deep. Pop culture can often be the starting point for sounding the depths and realities of faith.

Altogether this volume was readable and enlightening. However, as a tool, it takes a shotgun approach to identifying faith in culture. It does not isolate or even try to identify tools which might be significant and helpful in following the path Mattingly is pursuing. His path leads through television, movies, music and merchandising to identify where our supposedly rational culture is increasingly mixing the relative with the absolutes in an attempt to grasp the larger issues of life. He provides plenty of examples, which are the strength of this collection. However, one must not expect methodologies, paradigms or tools to enable the reader to do what Mattingly does so well. I believe that this is the shortcoming of the book. The volume was a fascinating look at the points where entertainment, pop culture and faith converge. Yet it does not provide suggestions for how to strengthen the reader's ability to grasp these junctures, or the means to understand them when they are identified. In its stated aim, *Pop Goes Religion* accomplishes its purposes. It is a collection of columns by a man with keen vision. But by the book's conclusion the reader is left hungry for more; for more tools, suggestions and insights in the task which Mattingly invites us to join. If theology is developed in the mall, how do we identify and translate what is being presented by pop culture? My hope is that he follows this volume with a book that is more instructive and fills this gap.