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Kendell & Stewarts' "Are you still watching?: Using pop culture to tune in, find God, & get renewed for another season" (book review)

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Book Review



Kendell, S., & Stewart, A. (Eds.). (2022). *Are you still watching?: Using pop culture to tune in, find God, & get renewed for another season*. Saint Louis: Chalice Press. 135 pp. \$16.99. ISBN 9780827201064

When navigating the changes catalyzed by the coronavirus pandemic, pastors and podcasters Stephanie Kendell and Arthur Stewart were faced with the question of how to continue to actively involve congregants during virtual worship. As they assert in this volume, the screen may not be what separates people, but what brings them together. Exploring how entertainment media can serve as a means to deeper connection with God and others, this collection of twelve essays engages with contemporary television shows, songs, theatrical productions, and movies to unveil their underlying spiritual truths. Twelve authors, all religious leaders, each articulate takeaways from these pop culture vehicles that may be applied to the interior lives of readers to enrich their growth as followers of Christ, bringing their inward responses to pop culture outward, in their interactions with others.

Differing from other volumes which urge readers to disconnect from technology so as to be more present, and less isolated from others in their lives, this book encourages thoughtful attention to creative pop culture forms as a means of better understanding the diverse peoples and places of the world, as well as how one can make a positive mark on them through contributing their unique insights. Written from a progressive lens situated within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the book offers thought-provoking perspectives into fostering greater connection through remaining inquisitive, nonjudgmental, and open to the possibility of new ideas, as espoused in various channels of the media. The authors express through their lived experiences that pop culture outlets build community by sharing stories allowing people to empathize with others, all carrying the thematic thread of renewal (through engagement with pop culture narratives), though at times, the thematic connection is thin, making the collection as a whole feel somewhat uneven. Though it mostly achieves its purpose of showing readers how to put what they learn about being forces for change into practice, it is in a more topical sense than a scholarly volume would warrant, lacking further explication. Its intriguing premise ultimately is not examined as thoroughly as it could have been, drawing from original episodes and song lyrics discussed, and connecting them to Scripture on some occasions, but largely remaining within these sources (as the endnotes show), without expanding upon subjects through additional references to support theories.

An introduction to the study of pop culture, and its intersections with theology, the book is most appropriate for college libraries, particularly at institutions specializing in communications and media programs. A compilation of works more personal than strictly academic, its conversational tone will appeal to general audiences, though students will especially appreciate the interdisciplinary applications of the volume. Though limited in scope, focused on current rather than historical trends, the book's new angles into pop culture and spirituality may inspire readers to make their own deeper connections to the medias they engage with.

Reviewer

Kathryn Sadakierski