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Review of 'The Routledge Companion to Religion & Popular Culture'

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This volume represents a substantial analysis of how religion and popular culture interact. It begins with two methodological chapters by the editors with John Lyden examining the difficulties of defining ‘religion,’ ‘culture’ and ‘popular,’ whilst Eric Mazur considers why people study this subject and what this says about the broader exploration of religion and culture. In his analysis of how they interact, Lyden draws upon Bruce Forbes and Jeff Mahan’s four-fold framework set out in Religion and Popular Culture in America (2005). This comprises: 1) religion in popular culture – how religion is depicted in movies, music videos, television and so forth; 2) popular culture in religion – how religious communities have adopted forms of popular culture such as the various genres of Contemporary Christian Music; 3) popular culture as religion – many forms of popular culture are perceived as functioning in a way that is analogous to religion; and 4) religion and popular culture in dialogue – which may involve the academic study of the how religious adherents are seeking to better understand what is happening, either for greater clarity or to evangelise, or denounce it.

Whilst writing this review the controversial 2016 Academy Award winners were announced and it was instructive to search online using the title of each nominated film with the word ‘religion’ after it. Many of the immediate results would appear to fall into at least one of these categories – although, as Lyden makes clear, the lines between each of these classifications can blur very quickly.
The approach that the editors take in this volume to the vast and fluid subject of religion and popular culture also has a four-fold shape to it but is more open-ended than Forbes and Mahan’s approach. Essentially the book is divided into four sections which explore the relationship between religion and popular culture through: (i) Mediated encounters; (ii) Material encounters; (iii) Locative encounters; and (iv) Religious traditions. Mediated encounters are those that occur through electronic transmission (television, film, music, videogames). Material encounters are interactions that involve physical items such as print media, cooking, fashion, games, kitsch. Locative encounters involve religious interaction with popular culture in real space (shopping, social events, moments of civic or patriotic significance, sports events). The section on religious traditions examines the portrayal of key religious conventions and practises within popular culture by ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ to those traditions (specifically Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Contemporary Paganism, Mormonism, Protestant Christianity and Roman Catholic Christianity.)

In this review I shall take one contribution from each section as an example the ways in which religion and popular culture interact. For instance, the chapter on the mediated encounter provided in television by Elijah Siegler traces an interesting thread through the history of TV and how it has developed priest-like functions (bringing comfort, ritualizing life) and then a more prophetic role (speaking truth to power) before evolving into, what he sees as, a more rabbinic voice of encouraging debate and discussion. In their chapter on comics and graphic novels, Christine Hoff Kraemer and A. David Lewis describe how comic books have significant advantages when communicating religious ideas – not least their accessibility, emotional engagement and sense of participation. Drawing on the work of Jeffrey Kripal, they observe that: ‘One recurring trope in comics is that notion that reality itself is a narrative being actively written, either
by divine personality, or collectively by all beings in the universe’ which actively encourages us to ‘become our own authors’ (p 213).

The locative encounters of shopping, dance music events, sports and civil religion are perhaps the most widely studied areas of overlap between religion and popular culture (with the possible additions of film and music). Sarah McFarland Taylor’s analysis of consumption and Jeffrey Scholes chapter on sport share common ground in identifying space as important to both – stores and malls as ‘temples of consumerism’ and a sports stadium as a venue for sacred/profane encounters. Finally, the sections on religious traditions are largely descriptive of how the different strands of faith are represented in mainstream media. The one that stands out is William Lafi Youmans on Islam and the contested area of how individual Muslims and Islamic institutions are depicted in Western popular culture.

The great strength of Lyden and Mazur’s volume is its breadth. In the 28 chapters the book covers a wide range of how popular culture reflects religion and how religion responds to popular culture. It provides a helpful overview of where we are on the journey since the mid-1990s when religion and popular culture began to move from the margins of academic study and into the mainstream. If it has a weakness, it is that the writers focus predominantly on religion and popular culture in the context of the United States of America. Perhaps that is inevitable given the sway of US culture and because academic study of this subject is more widespread there than in Europe or the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, as investigation and enquiry into religion and popular culture deepens and extends this collection will be foundational to that continuing journey.

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