

Religion and Popular Culture in Canada: Introducing the Theme

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[1] Teaching courses on religion and popular culture in a Canadian academic institution has provided me with significant challenges. According to Raymond Williams (1983), “popular” can have at least four meanings in common parlance. (1) It can mean that which is well-liked by a lot of people (e.g., the top ten bestselling books); (2) it can mean that which is inferior to elite or high culture (e.g., pop music versus opera); (3) it can mean that which deliberately tries to win the favour of “the people” (e.g., political campaigns); or (4) it can mean that which is made by the people (e.g., youtube). Some of these definitions lead to an assumption that popular culture is not particularly “deep” or meaningful. For some people then, the question is, as David Chidester asks in his book *Authentic Fakes*, “[h]ow does the serious work of religion, which engages the transcendent, the sacred, and the ultimate meaning of human life in the face of death, relate to the comparatively frivolous play of popular culture?” The *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* has consistently shown the multiple ways this serious work of religion relates to popular culture.

[2] It is not enough, however, to generically question the relationship between religion and popular culture without placing both religion and popular culture in some kinds of context known to students. Though we live in a globalized world and have access to multiple popular cultures, particularly the omnipresent American culture, there is also something to be said for including the very local. As such, I continually question how to bring the local context of popular culture into the discussion for my Canadian students. In my past searches for books and articles on religion and popular culture in Canadian contexts, I have come up with very little. This edition of the *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* will help fill some of that gap.

[3] Why is there such a dearth of resources on religion and popular culture in Canada? Are Canadian religious studies scholars simply not interested in popular culture? No, of course, this is not the case. But the peculiarities of the relationship between Canada and its more globally vocal neighbour add some complication to the study of religion and popular culture in Canada. Many Canadians consume American popular culture more consistently than they do Canadian popular culture. At least that is the case when popular culture is defined as mass media and/or entertainment media. But this definition is, perhaps, too narrow. Nor does the consumption of American popular culture preclude a Canadian cultural mode of that consumption which has profound implications for understanding Canadian religious, cultural and political identities. In *The Beaver Bites Back?*, editor, Frank E. Manning, suggests an ambiguity and resistance to American popular culture by Canadian consumers. The resistance does not lead so much to a rejection of these cultural products, as much as a crafting of alternative meaning (Manning 1993). Canadians are entertained by Americans, but they remain Canadians in a way that is more than simply a national distinction.

[4] When we broaden the definition of popular culture beyond mass, entertainment media, we begin to see even more space for a discussion of religion and popular culture in Canada. This edition of *JRPC* brings to the discussion multiple sites of popular culture in Canada. Michael J. Gilmour's essay on the music group Arcade Fire and Tracy Trothen's essay on hockey provide us with analyses of the more familiar entertainment culture. Though make no mistake, these essays challenge readers to move beyond the familiar and ask serious theological questions about violence, parody and the influence of Christianity on and in popular culture. Laurence Nixon and Olivier Bauer take us out of the realm of the entertaining and into the realm of the everyday practice of culture and religiosity. Nixon highlights the differences between popular and official understandings of ritual, piety and what might be called religious "kitch" at St. Joseph's Oratory. Bauer points out the contradictory and potentially empowering usages of the Catholic host in Quebecois religious and popular cultures. Finally, Rebecca Margolis takes us into the world of popular usage of Yiddish, from Hasidic communities to theatre to literature. In all of these essays we see the importance of Canadian contexts in understanding the popular, and the importance of the popular in understanding Canadian culture.

Bibliography

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