The study of popular culture itself, and of the relationship between religion and popular culture, are both significant growth areas in academic fields. This is witnessed to by the increasing number of books in this particular field. When I first began teaching in this area about a decade ago there was very little that was available, a situation now being well put to right. These two books are significant contributions to the field, partly because they both provide a good overview of theoretical approaches to the study of popular culture which is not well done in many of the other books, and also because they both operate with a well developed theological understanding. If I could make a basic distinction between the two to begin with, Lynch’s book is driven more by cultural studies and Cobb’s is stronger in its theological framework. The differences make them together a very rich resource for students and teachers in this field.

Both books begin by defining popular culture and approaches to it. This itself is significant as popular culture has generally been ignored or dismissed as of any worthwhile cultural value either by high culture elitists, those who romantically hold to notions of a pure folk culture or by Marxist interpreters who see it as an opiate for the masses imposed from on high. They both work their way through these perceptions to help us understand its value in itself. On the other hand they both seek to distance themselves from those who would celebrate everything in it without bringing critical and ethical judgments to bear on it. They bring a theological framework to bear in doing this, but at the same time argue that popular culture can also raise critical questions to bear on the theological task. In this way they are reflective of a shift that has taken place in theology. In a previous age the conversation partner for theology was such high cultural pursuits as philosophy and science. With the increasing dominance of popular culture in every avenue of life this needs to be just as much a conversation partner, and these two books contribute significantly to this.

As befits someone working at Birmingham University, where the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was an important influence in the development of theory about cultural studies, Lynch takes a culturalist approach, defining popular culture as “the shared environment, practices, and resources of everyday life for ordinary people with a particular society” (14). Lynch makes a helpful distinction between religious studies and theology, and at times takes an approach more from the former and at others from the latter. In regard to religion he argues for a functionalist approach rather than a substantive one, and then considers how popular culture actually functions in a variety of ways to do what religions have always done. The works of a considerable number of cultural theorists, including Adorno, Bourdieu, Barthes, De Certau and Baumann are examined alongside theologians such as Tillich, Niebuhr, Tracy and Browning.

The first part of the book gives an introduction to a central set of issues in the area while the second explores some issues of methodology and approaches. I found this part of the book to be the most helpful where he outlines three different approaches: author focused, text-based and ethnographic or audience-reception centred. The latter is particularly important, as many approaches to popular culture, particularly those critical of it, tend to see people as just passive consumers manipulated by the producers. However people do a variety of things with cultural goods and how they use them in the end is perhaps even more important in their religious functioning than the text itself or the authors intent. He explores an author focussed approach through the life and music of Eminem, a text based approach through an episode of the Simpson’s and an audience reception approach through club culture. Not only do these studies illustrate the methodology described well but also provide rich insights into the theological and religious significance of the subject being studied. Alongside these insights into the religious dimension of a wide variety of other products of popular culture are also explored.

Towards the end of the book, in a chapter on a theological aesthetics of popular culture, Lynch writes that “popular culture can play an important role in providing us with meaningful visions
of existence and understandings of human experience, opportunities for enjoying and practicing skills, imaginational pleasure, resources for developing relationships and communities, and a way of encountering transcendence” (192). This book is a very timely and helpful resources for anyone seeking to understand more deeply the complex and multifaceted ways in which they do this.

As indicated Cobb’s work has a much more strongly theological focus. The first section of the book looks at theories of popular culture, looking at what is popular culture, cultural studies and then moving quickly to the relationship between theology and culture. The second, and longer, section of the book examines how a wide variety of popular cultural texts convey theological meaning, which is examined in the traditional categories of images of God, human nature, sin, salvation and life everlasting. The work engages in a two way hermeneutical flow as to how the portrayals may be critiqued by traditional understandings but also how those understandings themselves may be critiqued by popular culture.

In doing this he draws from a wide range of thinkers across a range of disciplines. These include classical Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Tertullian, more recent theologians such as Schleiermacher, Niebuhr and Tillich, and those in other fields including Cowan Tyler, Dick Hegbie and Umberto Ecco. Bringing a strongly theological perspective it is though this discipline which is dominant, and in this his approach is fundamentally Tillichian, seeing issues of ultimate concern as lying at the heart of human culture and therefore culture as fundamentally religious. He seeks to help us “investigate what kinds of religious impulses rumble below the surfaces of popular culture” (5).

Cobb demonstrates a high degree of appreciation for and understanding of the arts of popular culture, something which is not always found amongst those of strong theological persuasion and indeed, I would suggest, in religious responses to it general. As with Lynch, he argues that we first must let art be read and understood on its own terms and of itself, before any judgement is brought. This means entering deeply into engagement with it. Much religious response to this demonstrates only a surface understanding of what is happening and a shallow engagement with it. Both demonstrate the practice of what they are arguing for. In doing this with Cobb, I found I was introduced to tremendously wide range of novelists, films, songs and works of art that were quite unfamiliar to me and yet which seemed to be of tremendous cultural and, if Cobb’s (and Lynch’s) central argument is to be followed, of considerable religious significance.

Much of the social and cultural study of religion has been dominated over the past century or more by the study of its institutional forms. As regular involvement with this has shown signs of decline over this period so the whole theory of religious decline, and ultimately perhaps of death, was widely disseminated. More recently however the awareness has become more widespread that the institutional is only one domain of religion, and only one means by which religion can be carried. It now seems to be increasingly accepted that the desire for transcendence and for meaning, which lie central to what religion has always done, continue to be sought by people. With these being looked for less through religious institutions, so it seems popular culture has increasingly been used by people as means of accessing these. Judging by the subject matter of much recent material being produced, those who are the producers of this have been only too willing to provide material that will assist people in their religious quest. As Cobb puts it, as we in Western cultures ‘learned to cope with a ‘disenchanted universe,’ in Max Weber’s sober observation, this was pushed back by brilliant marketers who re-enchanted our world with a cast of mythical characters as vast as any medieval hagiography” (161).

Both Lynch and Cobb have provided well researched and organised books, that will help us in understanding how this is happening in contemporary culture, and will enable those who read them to engage helpfully with it, in enabling people to discern what is helpful and what might be harmful in their personal and religious engagement with it, rather than to embrace it all uncritically or on the other hand dismiss it all as being either insignificant or religiously taboo.

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