

Commentary

Theology and Cultural Studies

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In the search for possible approaches to the relationship between theology and cultural studies -an ongoing project of mine - there is a need to consider a pair of fundamental contradictions in both disciplines. As far as the study of culture is concerned the self-defining opposition is that between mass or commercial culture (which is then the subject of this new discipline) and high or serious culture. For theology and the study of religions there is a comparable opposition between official and popular religion. The reason for dealing with these oppositions is that they tempt me into an initially promising avenue for developing a theological cultural criticism. Further, the whole issue of the mass/high culture distinction is important since theological reflection, when it has in the past devoted attention to culture, has tended to focus on what may provisionally be termed high culture, while the sorts of things that interest people of my own generation belong to the realm of so-called mass culture.

One of the pitfalls in considering mass or popular culture is to lock such a concept into a timeless opposition with high or serious culture.¹ If we let opposition

become eternal, rather than selecting the opposition itself as the ground of debate, then the discussion invariably becomes one of taking up a position for or against either mass or high culture. Thus, proponents of the study of high culture, including those interested in such study from a religious or theological perspective, will argue that the more worthwhile objects of study are those cultural products which, in contrast to the degraded items of mass culture, have stood the test of time; those literary and cultural items which have risen above their own particular local circumstances, whether in ancient Israel or Greece or a Europe of not so many years ago, to become classics or great books. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Donne's poetry, Shakespeare's plays, and Joyce's *Ulysses* form part of the literary canon of western civilisation. A central item for this list would have to be the Hebrew and Greek Bible, which must surely be regarded as one of the greater classics of our own civilisation; an observation which at first appearance locates me, as one who researches and teaches the Bible, clearly in the circle of those students of high culture. The auton-

omy of such texts from their conditions of production is the key for proponents of high culture.

By contrast, the advocates of mass culture regard this as so much elitism, arguing that the vast majority of people consume mass cultural products - such as film, TV, popular music, pulp novels and now computer entertainment - in comparison with the opera and theatre of high culture. This populism is also to some extent anti-intellectual, the study of high culture being understood as a waste of time, undertaken by those with nothing better to do than justify their positions as lecturers and professors of literature or the Bible by constructing an ever greater number of interpretations of the same texts (this is especially pertinent to students of closed texts such as the Hebrew Bible). Such an anti-intellectualism resonates with a large part of the population; something which shows up in numerous everyday encounters (eg, if an intellectual's spouse comes from a traditional working class family) as well as larger political events (eg, I would suggest that one factor in the defeat of the unbeatable Liberal and National parties by Labor in the 1993 federal election lies in the intellectual background of the coalition leader, Dr John Hewson, a former Professor of Economics at the University of NSW).

Alongside populism and anti-intellectualism comes the third factor of a social or class nature: the high cultural establishments, such as opera or theatre or museums, are by and large the preserve of upper middle class patrons - along with petty bourgeois intellectuals - and indeed constitute part of the class identifiers for these people. This is, however, a narrow section of society. Mass cultural materials, by contrast, speak to a far broader social range, including a good section of the

(lower) middle class and the majority of the working class, among whom are the most avid consumers of popular culture. In the light of these arguments, then, cultural criticism proper, and thus a theological cultural criticism, would seem to be concerned with popular or mass culture, and indeed the rise of cultural criticism since the sixties has often relied upon the sorts of populist arguments outlined above.

Thus far in this discussion I have allowed the contradiction between mass and high culture to stand for the sake of argument, although it will not remain immune from criticism for much longer. However, if we assume that this opposition is universal then an easy avenue for a theological appropriation of cultural criticism seems to open up. In order to do so, we might have recourse to a distinction which bears much resemblance to that between mass and high culture; namely, official and popular religion. It has become something of a commonplace in the study of religions to distinguish between the religion of the state or of the ruling class and the religion practised and believed by ordinary people or the non-ruling class in their everyday lives. Thus the official religion of Athens, with its temples to Athena Nike, Athena Parthenos, Apollo, Hephaistos, and so on may be contrasted with the popular worship of household gods (see Mikalson). Similarly, the faith of a ruler in medieval and reformation Europe was normally understood to be the official faith of his or her domain, yet the beliefs of peasants and others often took a different form, being described as folk religion or superstition. So also today, religious professionals - whether guru, rabbi, priest or minister - responsible for the pastoral and religious oversight of a group of believers find that a

significant number of their own respective groups will have beliefs which differ from the dogmas of the religions in question and more particularly of the religious professionals themselves.

Once again we have an opposition - official and popular religion - which seems to assist us in understanding the nature of religion in varying social and historical contexts. Its well-nigh universal status echoes that of the distinction between high and popular culture, as do the terms of the opposition themselves. Thus high culture with its focus on great or classic art bears some categorical resemblance to official or state religion, especially in the way architectural and other artistic work is produced under the auspices of official religion. Indeed, in both cases - high culture and official religion - the state and the ruling class as such turn out to be the major patrons; they have the money and material resources to enable such art to be produced. In the same way that the cathedral is the location of priceless works of art, so also the multinational high-rise has its entrance lobby and executive spaces bedecked with the works of high modernism. But it is the other two terms of both pairs which seem to be of greater interest for what might be termed a theological cultural criticism, for mass or popular culture and popular religion at first sight deal with two closely related and overlapping fields. It may in fact be argued that popular religion forms a subset of the wider phenomenon of popular culture.

Similar sorts of arguments noted earlier in favour of the study of mass culture may also be advanced for the study of popular religion: the greater number of those who practise and believe popular forms of religion; the less educated and indeed anti-intellectual flavour of popular religion in contrast to the intellectualist

taint of official religion; and the class shift towards the lower end. With these sorts of associations and connections a theological cultural criticism would involve the relatively straightforward application of the increasing number of cultural critical theories to popular religion. Theories developed in and for the study of popular culture should also by definition work with popular religion. It would make life much more simple for those interested (as I am) in the interaction between theology and cultural criticism if it were indeed possible to apply the theories developed in the study of pop music or film directly to religious music and film, or to use the same categories used in researching pulp novels to analyse folk literature and stories from the past. This attractive and even promising approach is, however, both facile and futile for it inherits all the more lethal flaws of the initial terms and oppositions themselves.

The problems with these oppositions may be grouped according to, firstly, the individual items in the oppositions - mass culture, popular religion, high culture, official religion - and, secondly, the nature of the oppositions themselves. As far as the terms are concerned, some major problems cluster around the foregrounding of popular culture as an area worthy of attention. Thus, while the populist position is extremely useful in identifying the elitist and class signals of the high culture advocates, it is fraught with its own particular difficulties, not least of which is the rejection - so much more at home in the anti-populist position - of theory or method. Without some sophisticated theoretical tools, the proponents of mass culture have nothing left to say when the opposition has been castigated yet one more time. A good example of this is the weekly under-

ground newspaper, Green Left in which the same populist themes recur time and again with little advance or theoretical rigour.

A further difficulty is a rather simplistic view of the function of culture itself: too often the products of high culture are viewed as the transparent devices of ruling class or imperialist ideology, all the while neglecting the often ambiguous, anti-social and strongly political situations and messages of a good section of high -particularly modernist but also post-modernist (so Hans Haacke and Fiona Burns; see Ryan and Wallis) - culture. This assumption of transparency in cultural production is often expressed in terms of conspiracy theories (stupidity rather than conspiracy is always the better explanation) and further compounds the inability to deal adequately with the populist's own chosen territory of analysis. While not so anti-theoretical, the study of popular religion has a comparable set of problems. It extends the uncomplicated and transparent understanding of culture to religion: thus, official religion, like high culture, functions as part of the ideological arsenal of the ruling class. Religion serves by and large to legitimate and maintain those in power.

Secondly, to an even greater extent than the study of popular culture researchers of popular religion are intellectuals. Their studies in other words are done from above in the search for what is unconsciously believed to be the more authentic, grassroots, forms of religious belief and practice. No longer sharing, if ever they did, the beliefs of those they study, they resemble the anthropologist who undergoes great hardship in order to find the pristine, unspoiled tribe (a desire expressed so well -but also in self criticism - by Claude Levi-Strauss in his

Tristes Tropiques). The difficulties, however, run deeper than the terms of the oppositions: the more fundamental problems with this possible approach to a theological cultural criticism may be located within the oppositions -mass/high culture, official/popular religion -themselves.

In the preceding discussion I have allowed, for the sake of argument, the two major oppositions to retain their eternal status. Each side then continues to mount persuasive arguments in their own favour, generating a dead end in the discussion unless the inquiry is directed at the oppositions themselves. In particular, it is the eternity of the opposition which needs to be removed for any responsible cultural criticism, theological or otherwise. If we rethink these oppositions in dialectical and historical terms, then we move into the idea that cultural production functions as a response to a determinate social, political and economic situation and contradiction. That is to say, the various items of literature, art, music and so on are produced in highly charged and conflictual social and political situations, as are the fundamental ideas and beliefs which inform such items of culture. Among these ideas and beliefs I include the oppositions I have been considering. They depend for their lifeblood on historical situations. In this light it is possible to understand the oppositions between mass and high culture and between official and popular religion as responses to specific social situations.

To begin with the former distinction, I will follow Jameson in arguing that it may be read as a fissured or contradictory cultural response to the situation of the middle or monopoly stage of capitalism, attempting to overcome or resolve the difficulties generated by that social and economic period and yet at the same time

bearing all the marks and traces of that attempted resolution. Thus the transhistorical connections made a little earlier in a rather loose way between various items of high and mass culture throughout the ages will not stand up under closer scrutiny. This means, for example, that the Jewish and Christian Bibles or Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*, produced under the auspices of very different socio-economic systems from our own are quite distinct from that high cultural production known as modernism with its Mies van der Rohe or Wallace Stevens. Similarly, the notion of mass culture must also be redefined: the apparent similarities between the commodity nature of the products of mass culture and the products of folk art dissipate when one becomes aware of the distinct social contexts of the latter, whether the tribe or gens, Greek city-state, village or monastery. By contrast, the products of the mass culture which is dialectically opposed to the high culture of modernism are determined by the splintering effects of commodification (the turning of everything into commodities) in every part of life, not least in literary and artistic production. The effect of commodification is to break up and destroy the older communities which provided the particular social context for older, pre-capitalist cultural products.

If I have constricted the validity of the opposition mass culture / high culture to the cultural period known as modernism, then the relationship of that opposition with the one between official and popular religion also comes into question. Briefly, the contradiction of official religion and popular religion belongs properly to a by-gone era in which the issues of religion were crucial to the exercise of social and political power. While certainly not the case with capitalism, this seems to have

been characteristic of that which preceded capitalism in Europe (and thus forms part of the heritage of those countries colonised by Europe), namely feudalism. Thus the opposition of official and popular religion functions as an effort to deal with certain social and economic contradictions germane to feudalism; namely, a situation in which specific forms of religion were crucial to ruling class ideology over against those forms of religion which gave expression to forces which oppose the ruling class. In other words, the various class and social conflicts were fought in religious terms. Under feudalism - given the strength of official religion - popular religion appears in myriad forms ranging from everyday superstitions and relics of pre-Christian beliefs and practices through to full-blooded witchcraft and the occult. The continuous heresy and witchcraft trials (the two were often inextricably linked as works of the devil) are an important indicator of the depth of opposition between official and popular religion and thus of the ideological importance of religious belief and practice.

Having redefined the two oppositions which have been my focus thus far, it remains to indicate a rearrangement of their relationship with each other. Briefly, the contradiction of official religion and popular religion belongs properly to the feudal world and I would suggest that it functions as an effort to deal with certain social and economic contradictions germane to feudalism. But with the displacement of religion, the contradiction between official and popular forms becomes increasingly meaningless as new social and economic issues rise to the surface under capitalism. One effort to respond to or deal with these issues may then be found in the contradiction or opposition between

mass and high culture. Of course, in our own postmodern moment such distinctions break down, with the wholesale marginalisation of the relics of former official religions and a burgeoning populism in charismatic, fundamentalist and New Age religious forms. The more recent distinction between mass and high culture begins to dissipate, of which one of the signals is the study of what might formerly have been termed mass culture by those critics whose task it once was to study high culture. This is not to say that the oppositions I have been considering are strictly bound by certain time periods or social situations: they overlap and carry over into other periods in a range of complex ways, but in certain periods particular types of ideas and culture rise to prominence as they form the most meaningful way of dealing with social structures in these periods. The wider outcome of this restituting of the mass/high culture and popular/official religion distinctions is the need for a continual questioning of the assumed terms of cultural criticism (and indeed any criticism) if a religious or theological approach is going to make any significant contribution.

Note

My discussion of mass and high culture expands in my own particular way the cryptic comments of Fredric Jameson (1979:133-134; 1990:14-15)

Works Consulted

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