

THE POPULAR CULTURE WE ARE IN

Whoever marries the spirit of this age will
find himself a widower in the next.

WILLIAM R. INGE

In 1966, sitting in San Francisco's Fillmore West between two guys who were smoking marijuana on the overstuffed couch, listening to Jefferson Airplane, way before the trendy bracelet told me to, I asked myself, "What would Jesus do?" I was drawn to this question by what I observed around me. It was an age of spiritual yearning and an influential popular culture. It was an age of inauthentic churches and disillusioned youth. I could not have known then what I know now—that San Francisco, famous for its earthquakes, was in fact the epicenter of a cultural quake whose aftershocks are still felt to this day. The culturally seismic sixties gave rise to a powerful, pervasive popular culture offering both what Joni Mitchell described as "a song and a celebration"¹ and a hopeful new path to spiritual enlightenment while dialogue about the divine morphed beyond the religious arena and into movies and music suddenly brimming with sacred lyrics.

The Doobie Brothers belted out "Jesus Is Just Alright"; Norman Greenbaum declared, "You gotta have a friend in Jesus, so you know that when you die, he's gonna recommend you to the spirit in the sky."² The Beatles embodied the leap to the East, a widespread interest in Hinduism and Japanese Buddhism. George Harrison, the only Beatle for whom Eastern religion actually stuck, sang his tribute to Krishna, "My Sweet Lord." Joni Mitchell's "Ladies of the

Canyon” weighed in with all the fury and insight of an Old Testament prophet, denouncing consumerism, fame, and apathy about the environment. Spiritual optimism reigned, as exemplified in “Aquarius,” which promised “harmony and understanding, sympathy and trust abounding!”³ The locus of spiritual dialogue was migrating out of the church and into popular culture. The convergence of these contemporary forces would crack the foundations of organized religion, erode its authority and confidence, and, in many ways, displace it as the center of spiritual influence. In a lightning-rod moment, John Lennon quipped that the Beatles were more popular than Jesus. In a subsequent press conference, Lennon explained that he was actually deploring the rising influence of everything popular and the diminishment of religion: “I could have said TV or cinema or anything else that’s popular. Or motorcars are bigger than Jesus. . . . I’m not knocking Christianity or saying it’s bad, I’m just saying it seems to be shrinking and losing contact. . . . We [the Beatles] all deplored the fact that it is, you know. And nothing better seems to be replacing it.”⁴

But something *was* replacing it. Media consultant Michael Wolfe said recently in *The New Yorker*, “I really believe entertainment in a lot of ways has become a way for people to come together. It has, in fact, become—I’m convinced of this, it’s become a replacement for religion; in the same way people used to quote scripture, they’re now quoting Seinfeld.”⁵

Catholic sociologist Andrew Greeley goes even further, arguing that popular culture is not just a source of dialogue about the ideas conveyed by popular culture’s stories and characters but a place where God chooses to encounter people. He concludes, “My thesis is simple enough: Popular culture is a ‘locus theologicus,’ a theological place, the locale in which one may encounter God. Popular culture provides an opportunity to experience God and to tell stories of God, to put the matter more abstractly, to learn about God and to teach about God.”⁶

In *Reel Spirituality*, Fuller Seminary’s Robert Johnston observes a progression in how even religious people relate to film, charting a

continuum of theological approaches to movies, beginning with avoidance, moving to caution, dialogue, appropriation, and, ultimately, to an understanding of film as a place for “divine encounter.” It is a place where “God shows up.”⁷ This significant shift from identifying popular culture as a place “about God” to thinking of it as a “God place” means spiritual seekers, whether irreligious or religious, consider movies and music as places to encounter the transcendent, to meet God and to “do theology.”

With Gallup polls consistently showing 82 percent of Americans saying that they are spiritual seekers and 52 percent saying that they’ve talked about spiritual issues in the previous twenty-four hours,⁸ it is important to understand how popular culture influences our spiritual journeys and quests for truth and meaning in our lives. If to be savvy means “to get it,” the four dynamics of today’s popular culture that we need to “get” are its general superficiality, its soullessness, its powerful influence, and its spiritual delusions.

The Superficiality of Popular Culture

In light of the influence and power we’ve given popular culture, which extends even to shaping our spiritual journeys, one might think that it is thoughtful and substantial, but in fact, it suffers from an almost unbearable lightness. Though popular culture holds tremendous potential for good, unfortunately, today’s trend is toward a diversionary, mindless, celebrity-driven superficiality. Sadly, this reflects our general societal condition, for popular culture can only rise to the spiritual, intellectual, and artistic heights of its average citizenry. As music critic and sociologist Simon Frith says, “popular” and “culture” combine to produce a culture “*for the people, of the people, and by the people.*”⁹

Popular culture need not be mindless and superficial; as a matter of fact, at one time, America boasted a significant middlebrow culture, a population interested in ideas and issues, equally turned off by the pretensions and elitism of highbrow culture and by lowbrow mindlessness. But in the 1960s, the emerging youth culture

valued feelings and experience over ideas, and the continual introduction of new technologies provided immediate and regular access rather than occasional availability. In a few brief decades technology has advanced from vacuum tubes to transistors and transistors to digital chips, allowing a progression in portability from the immobile Philco console radio in the living room to the hand-held transistor radio to the pocket-sized MP3 player. At the same time computers got faster while shrinking from room-sized mainframes to the laptop, and the World Wide Web and cellular phones allowed connectivity to anyone, anywhere and anytime—24/7!

Overnight, there was a demand for more culturally accessible, less demanding, youth-oriented entertainment. British artist Richard Hamilton, credited with creating the first work of pop art, was also the first to define its ethic: “mass-produced, low-cost, young, sexy, witty, transient, glamorous, gimmicky, expendable and popular.”¹⁰

Today’s popular culture generally reveals that humans, despite our magnificent spiritual, intellectual, and imaginative capacities, have chosen to wade in the shallow but spiritually toxic waters of superficiality.

Popular Culture Is Diversionary Entertainment

The word *entertainment* means diversionary, something that draws our attention from one thing to another. Diversion is not necessarily a pejorative term—a person can be diverted from the frivolous to the serious through entertainment. Film director Sydney Pollack tells the story of two Oxford dons and playwrights who were sitting at the Boarshead, grousing because neither one of them could get produced and neither one could get performed. One turned to the other and said, “Oh, the hell with it. Let’s just do what Shakespeare did—give them entertainment.”¹¹ We recognize, of course, that Shakespeare was using diversionary entertainment to draw attention to important issues of his time.

However, we ought to be wary of entertainment when it occupies a disproportionate amount of our time or consistently diverts

our attention away from issues that matter and toward the inconsequential. That is the situation today. As we increasingly morph real life into entertainment and vice versa, entertainment is becoming our central reality, and real life is becoming subsumed in our entertainments. In *Life the Movie*, Neil Gabler says, “It is not any ‘ism’ but entertainment that is arguably the most pervasive, powerful, and ineluctable force of our time—a force so overwhelming that it has finally metastasized into life.”¹²

The reality TV fad exemplifies this merging of entertainment and real life. News organizations once provided citizens with information and thoughtful commentary so they could make informed choices, but today, real-life tragedies and the mundane failures and heartaches of ordinary people are hyped like new movie releases, complete with special effects. The normal human response to a person in need is to help, but that is not the case in an entertainment culture. Actor George Clooney observes, “People’s misery becoming entertainment, that’s what’s dangerous. And that seems to be the place we’re going.”¹³ Humans sit in front of television sets, passively watching human misery unfold, while just outside their door, down the street, or in an apartment next door, a real person faces the same problem and there is no one to help them because we’re all preoccupied with our favorite characters on reality TV.

When diversion becomes a way of life, we avoid the very issues to which we should be most attentive. We are diverted from the grim, unpleasant truth that our lives lack meaning without God, that consumption does not satisfy, that the differential between wealth and poverty is unjust, that our neighbor is in need, and that the appropriate human response to people in need is sleeves-rolled-up service, not simply watching.

Popular Culture Is Mindless Amusement

The word *amusement* means “to entertain or occupy in a pleasant manner; to stir with pleasing or mirthful emotions,” but if you read the word *amuse* as a (“not”) and *muse* “to think,” you could define

it as “to be absent in mind.” Today’s electronic amusement appeals to senses and emotions rather than to the mind. Such appeals produce what sociologist Pitirim Sorokin called a “sensate” culture, one that values what can be grasped through the senses rather than what is grasped through the thoughtful consideration of ideas.¹⁴

Appealing to the senses is not unimportant or bad. In addition to giving us mental capacities, God created us with physical, emotional, and spiritual capacities. The senses can work in harmony with the mind, as Flannery O’Connor explains: “The beginning of human knowledge is through the senses, and the fiction writer begins where human perception begins. He appeals through the senses, and you cannot appeal to the sense with abstractions. The first and most obvious characteristic of fiction is that it deals with reality through what can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted and touched.”¹⁵

However, with the advent of television, E. B. White warned that the visual might replace words: “TV has taken a big bite out of the written word. But words still count with me.”¹⁶ Why are words so important? Words convey ideas, and ideas engage the mind. White’s prediction is proving true; today’s popular culture often depreciates words, ideas, and, consequently, the mind. In his classic book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman developed this thought: “To engage the written word means to follow a line of thought, which requires considerable powers of classifying, inference making, and reasoning.” He goes on to say, “An image-based society, on the other hand, dispenses with all these because images do not demand them. How much logical discipline does one need to recognize a picture?”¹⁷ Postman’s worst fears about the emergence of the nonlinear sensate over the rational are confirmed by MTV’s founding chairman Bob Pittman: “What we’ve introduced is non-narrative form; we rely on mood and emotion. We make you feel a certain way as opposed to you walking away with any particular knowledge.”¹⁸

When feelings and sensory inputs replace words and ideas, will the daily consumption of such media diminish our reasoning abilities? Media researcher David Harvey’s work shows how exposure to

a regular, repeated collage of unrelated images and apparently equal events affects television viewers: “As a result of the dominance of television, one idea seems as good as another. Entertainment, gratification and sensory stimulation displace reason, morality and truth.”¹⁹

Amusement culture can be addictive; its very superficiality and weightlessness is what makes it so consumable. Orson Welles confessed, “I hate television. I hate it as much as peanuts. But I can’t stop eating peanuts.”²⁰ Because sensory repetition can desensitize the audience to a particular sensation, producers have learned that to retain an audience and avoid boredom requires a constant escalation of new and more sensational experiences.

The thoughtful person knows that superficial pop culture is the cultural equivalent of junk food; it looks, feels, and tastes good but is often utterly lacking in nutrients. Sorokin argued that sensate cultures eventually collapse because humans are designed for intellectual stimulation, not just sensory manipulation. What are the implications of being commanded to love God with our mind in a mindless entertainment age?

Popular Culture Is Celebrity-Driven

After years of studying the inner workings of Hollywood and its effect on American culture, movie critic Richard Schickel concluded, “Celebrity is possibly the most vital shaping force in our society.”²¹ The late Peter Jennings concurred: “No country in the world is so driven by personality, has such a hunger to identify with personalities, larger-than-life personalities especially . . . as this one.”²²

An adoring public turns to their icons for advice on what to believe and how to live. *Vanity Fair* said, “Oprah Winfrey arguably has more influence on the culture than any university president, politician or religious leader except the Pope,”²³ and *Christianity Today* lamented, “To her audience of more than 22 million mostly female viewers, [Oprah] has become a post-modern priestess—an

icon of church-free spirituality.”²⁴ As one young woman said, “Those of us who are fans, we use these celebrity lives in ways that transform our own. I sometimes think that these are our gods and goddesses, these are our icons, and their stories become kind of parables for how to lead our lives.”²⁵

Today, celebrities are often known for their “known-ness” rather than substantial accomplishments, personal character, or virtues; Paris Hilton is an obvious example. A bemused scholarly librarian of Congress, Daniel Boorstein, notes, “Shakespeare divided great men into three classes: those born great, those who achieved greatness, those who had greatness thrust upon them. It never occurred to him to mention those who hired public relations experts and press secretaries to make themselves look great.”²⁶ Human greatness is diminished by this devolution from accomplishment as the basis for being known to “being known for being known.” Certainly, Mother Teresa’s lifetime of service is of greater value than the accomplishments of today’s revolving-door celebrities who achieve notoriety in a transitory fifteen minutes of fame.

A thoughtful person might ask, What are the implications of allowing our lives to be influenced by people whom we do not know and will never meet and whose beliefs and values are often antithetical to our own? What need in our lives are we trying to fill through spending even a nanosecond of time on celebrity culture, with its who-wears-what, who-cheats-on-whom gossip? What are the implications of knowing more about what’s going on in the personal lives of celebrities than we do about our neighbors, coworkers, or, worse yet, our own family members?

The Soullessness of Popular Culture

If being human means possessing spiritual, intellectual, and creative capacities, we ought to be concerned about squandering popular culture’s potential on a superficial, diversionary, mindless celebrity culture.

Critics and the general population often react derisively to the insipid gruel offered by entertainment culture, so why doesn't somebody make it better? Anyone who desires to change popular culture, to restore the soul of culture, will face a tough battle against the powerful forces driving it. Behind the scenes of popular culture are three partners united in a marriage of convenience: technology, marketing, and the age-old motivator, money.

Though often devoid of spiritual, intellectual, or aesthetic substance, popular culture nevertheless thrives because the sustaining forces of today's entertainment culture are technological and economic, not spiritual, ideational, or artistic. Despite its mind-numbing shallowness, popular culture appears alive and brimming with vitality because impersonal commercial interests are propping up and exploiting today's spiritually, intellectually, and artistically anemic enterprise.

Popular Culture Is Centered in Money

Andy Warhol quipped, "Buying is much more American than thinking,"²⁷ and Nobel-winning economist Milton Friedman apparently thinks it is in the economy's best interest to keep it that way: "Few trends could so thoroughly undermine the very foundations of our free society as the acceptance by corporate officials of a social responsibility other than to make as much money for their stockholders as possible. This is a fundamentally subversive doctrine."²⁸ The subversive doctrines of the 1960s gave way to America's addictive consumerism, and the result is a spiritually, intellectually, aesthetically bankrupt money machine called popular culture. "Greed is good," we learned from the film *Wall Street*.²⁹

The core value in today's media culture is not a product's (song's, movie's, book's, game's) aesthetic quality nor its spiritual or moral advisability nor its usefulness to the individual or society; the core value is money. Money flows from the popular and as we have seen, the popular flows from the "mass-produced, low-cost, young,

sexy, witty, transient, glamorous, gimmicky, expendable.” The highest court of appeals is populated with P. T. Barnum’s masses and suckers, and new ones are born every minute.

Profit motives drive marketers to create and exploit youth markets in particular because of youths’ disposable income. It doesn’t take a genius to see the devastating consequences of transforming teens from creative producers to consumers. Professional artist and occasional philosopher Robert Bateman puts it this way:

For the last few decades we have been conducting an interesting social experiment in North America. We have been working on the creation of a new variety of human being I will call homo sapiens teenager consumerensis. . . . Teenagers are trained to have special needs . . . special foods, beverages, clothing, music, films. Eight year olds are persuaded that they are teenagers already and then the twenty-five year olds are convinced that they are still teenagers. This experiment is hurtling on apace using some of the most creative minds in our society and every modern technological and psychological tool, sparing no expense. Often sex, violence and greed are exploited to help sell products including TV shows and films. For the first time in the history of our species the most vital, active years of a person’s growing life are dedicated to one major goal—self indulgence.³⁰

It should be obvious that the situation Bateman describes is dehumanizing and inconsistent with Christian values. Thoughtful, creative Christians have always believed that humans should create a culture that reflects our highest and best achievements. Our art should glorify God and reflect our spiritual, intellectual, and creative capacities. We know that the love of money is the root of evil and that we are called to seek God’s kingdom first, not material possessions. So where is the resistance to cultural conformity?

Popular Culture Is Spread by Marketing

In a few short decades, humans have been transformed from producers to passive consumers. In today's popular culture, we are but credit cards, targeted by marketers who reach us through new technologies that provide round-the-clock access to us.

The confluence of new sophisticated, research-based, demographically targeted marketing techniques, new technologies, and the creation of a well-defined youth market in the 1960s gave birth to what drives popular culture today—products aimed at specific demographics, especially youth. The driving force behind the emergence of popular culture, especially as it relates to youth culture, is not a love of artistry or the good, the true, and the beautiful; it is the cultivation of a sizable, wealthy, impulsive generation groomed to be consumers from the cradle to the grave.

Because of our economic prosperity, most young people in the Western world possess both time and money. They are energetically predisposed to the new, novel, and different. They are early adopters of new technology and are already wired in to the entertainment and information culture. They are susceptible to peer pressure. In short, they are the ideal consumer. In a frightening Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) special, “The Merchants of Cool,” host and media analyst Douglas Rushkoff reports, “A typical American teenager will process over 3,000 discrete advertisements in a single day and 10 million by the time they're eighteen. Kids are also consuming massive quantities of entertainment media.”³¹

MTV, the youth-oriented music entertainment network, trumpets youth culture's grassroots spontaneity, but in fact, large corporations calculatingly orchestrate what appears to be serendipitous. Robert McChesney, communications professor at the University of Illinois, describes their marketing muscle: “The entertainment companies, . . . a handful of massive conglomerates that own four of the five music companies that sell 90 percent of the music in the United States, . . . also own all the film studios, all the major TV

networks, all the TV stations, pretty much, in the ten largest markets. They own all or part of every single commercial cable channel. . . . They look at the teen market as part of this massive empire that they're colonizing. Their weaponry are films, music, books, CDs, Internet access, clothing, amusement parks, sports teams."³²

The savvy culture watcher is rightly distressed at the pervasiveness of affluenza, which PBS producer John de Graaf and his coauthors describe as "a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more."³³ We buy things we don't need, made by people who don't know or care about us, with money we don't have, to impress people we don't really like! Humans are called to produce, not just consume. When the mall becomes the center of social life, and young and old alike regulate their emotions through purchasing new stuff, we are looking at serious signs of dehumanization.

Popular Culture Is Sustained by Technology

In 1943, Thomas Watson, chairman of IBM, allegedly said, "I think there is a world market for maybe five computers."³⁴ Supposedly, he could not envision the rapidity of technological advancement and its social consequences just around the corner. Today's pervasive popular culture was born in a primitive age when people watched one of three channels on a black-and-white TV, played music on vinyl LP records, or listened to the radio in their car or while gathered around the RCA in the comfort of their own home. Since the 1960s, consumer products have expanded the distribution opportunities for popular culture, progressively offering more portability and accessibility, from transistor radios and mainframe computers to desktops to laptops to handheld PDA's; eight-track tapes to cassette tapes, CDs, MiniDiscs, and MP3 files; three network TV stations to thousands of satellite stations broadcast on high-definition color screens; rotary phones to touch-tone phones to cellular phones;

films in stand-alone local theaters to multiplexes to personal copies on videocassettes, laserdiscs, and DVDs.

Technology provides continual connectivity to a global village. An MCI commercial announces, "There will be a road. It will not connect two points. It will connect all points. It will not go from here to there. There will be no there. We will all only be here." Travel to the Middle East, and you'll see satellite dishes mounted on Bedouin tents. The Dayak people dwelling in the remote jungles of Kalimantan are exposed to MTV. This connectivity sometimes offers rich benefits: we can quickly discover others who share our passions and interests; we can pass along timely and important information instantly; we are no longer held hostage by bureaucratic gatekeepers. As a broadcaster, I knew things had changed when I learned about the Tiananmen Square rebellion through faxes sent by technically savvy students in China.

The savvy human is grateful for technology but is also aware of its potentially dehumanizing effects. In the 1960s, social scientist Marshall McLuhan warned, "All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the message. . . . Societies have always been shaped more by the *nature of the media* by which men communicate than by the *content of the communication*"³⁵ (italics added). How is media working us over completely? Technology allows constant connectivity to our diversionary, mindless, celebrity-driven popular culture, offering soul-numbing content around the clock. Technology creates the possibility of doing good faster but also speeds up the distribution of evil. For instance, when Apple announced the iPod's ability to play movies, the first large-scale application was pornography.

While it offers portentous benefits, technology also holds the potential to radically change human existence in detrimental ways. Technology is not a neutral force when placed in the hands of humans; it takes on a life of its own when combined with their

propensities. Neil Postman said that we are becoming a “technopoly” that “consists in the deification of technology, which means that the culture seeks its authorization in technology, finds its satisfaction in technology, and takes its orders from technology. This requires the development of a new kind of social order, and of necessity leads to the rapid dissolution of much that is associated with traditional beliefs.”³⁶ Technology focuses on continual improvement of process over improvement of content, on concrete information over conceptual ideas, and on change over tradition. These biases significantly affect youths who are early adopters of new technologies. Technology connects us as never before, but it also isolates us when we choose to be absorbed in entertainment or to interact with people who are not in our physical presence rather than those who are. A child listens to an iPod on the way to soccer practice while mom or dad drives and talks on the cell phone. Families sit passively in front of a TV instead of talking with each other.

The Power and Influence of Popular Culture

One might think, given its superficiality and soullessness, that popular culture would not play a significant role in our spiritual and intellectual life, but in fact, since the 1960s, popular culture rivals religion as preacher and teacher, as storyteller, and as identity and community shaper. We live mediated lives in which every aspect of our human existence is touched and influenced by a powerful, pervasive, and persuasive media culture.

Popular Culture Is a Preacher and Teacher

Popular culture systematically teaches and preaches, informing its audience about which issues matter most, fulfilling an educational role once occupied by schools and a spiritual role once filled by religion. Poet Carl Sandburg recognized this early, saying in the 1950s, “I meet people occasionally who think motion pictures, the prod-

uct Hollywood makes is merely entertainment, has nothing to do with education. That's one of the darnedest fool fallacies that is current. Anything that brings you to tears by way of drama does something to the deepest roots of our personalities. All movies, good or bad, are education, and Hollywood is the foremost educational institution on earth."³⁷ Veteran religion editor Phyllis Tickle points out that since the 1960s, popular culture is where we explore our beliefs: "More theology is conveyed in, and probably retained from one hour of popular television, than from all the sermons that are also delivered on any given weekend in America's synagogues, churches and mosques."³⁸

So much theology is derived from popular culture that many argue that it has replaced religion. A leading Jewish intellectual and commentator on culture, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, believes that popular culture actually is a religion: "Hollywood is not just a place—it is a world in itself. Hollywood has done something remarkable: it has created a great and very successful religion. Through its successful missionaries—the films produced in Hollywood—it has spread around the globe, gaining adherents faster than any other religion in the world. If it has not attained the stature of a full-fledged religion, at least it is a very strong cult."³⁹

Every week, newly released songs, films, or books give voice to our common human concerns and probe the essential human questions: Is there a God? Who is God? Who are we? What is our meaning and identity? Where did we come from? What is our destiny? What is love? Why am I lonely? What will satisfy me and make me happy? Does anybody understand me? Is there any hope? These are the questions that Jesus engaged; today, they are the domain of popular artists. After the global tragedy in New York on September 11, 2001, one-time altar boy Bruce Springsteen's next album probed our common human angst. Of his calling, he said, "The band is like church. We're gonna shout that thing right in your face."⁴⁰ In the same vein, he also said, "I sometimes feel like a preacher; spiritual revival is a necessity and it has to be a communal experience. . . .

I think that fits in with the concept of our band as a group of witnesses. . . . That's one of our functions. We're here to testify to what we have seen."⁴¹

Popular Culture Is a Storyteller

Those who control the stories rule the world. Over time, storytelling has moved from the campfire to the printed word and now to digital bits of information delivered in today's movies, music, games, and TV programs. Stories have always played a central role in our communal life, and theologian Frederick Buechner points out that today, it is the producers of entertainment who supply the glue that binds us together through the stories they tell: "In a world where there are no longer books we have almost all of us read, the movies we have almost all of us seen are perhaps the richest cultural bond we have. They go on haunting us for years the way our dreams go on haunting us. In a way they are our dreams. The best of them remind us of human truths that would not seem as true without them. They help to remind us that we are all of us humans together."⁴²

Jesus practiced the time-honored tradition of storytelling, and today, popular culture conveys messages through this most universally effective method of communication known to humans. Had Steven Spielberg lived in prehistoric days, he would have been the guy telling stories to people huddled around the fire at day's end. He would have been drawing pictures in the cave. Today, he makes movies because he is a born storyteller. Told well, truthful, wise stories can provide insight, understanding, and illumination for a path to a richer life for all who hear, understand, and embrace them; misguided stories, however, can lead an entire population astray. People who believe they know the truth need to realize that cultural influence requires more than knowing the story; it requires telling it thoughtfully and artistically. Never has there been a greater need for wise, gifted storytellers who understand the story we are in and can communicate a better way gracefully and truthfully.

Popular Culture Is a Community and Identity Shaper

Communities are formed around the things we hold in common. Since the beginning of time, families and religion have defined the development of identities within community. Today, it is popular culture that plays a key role in forming our identities and shaping our sense of community. Sociologist Todd Gitlin observes, “Popular culture summons improvisational communities—show audiences, fan clubs, chat groups. It saturates everyday conversation. It overlaps with politics. It circulates the materials with which people splice together identities. It forms the imagescape and soundtrack through which we think and feel about who we are or—as film critic Robert Warshaw once put it—who we wish to be and fear we might become.”⁴³

Identity is often triggered externally and visually, through symbols rather than words, by a media that provides racks of identities, each complete with the tribal markings of dress, tattoos, brand of shoes, jewelry, hairstyle, and musical taste. Starting with James Dean’s tight jeans in the 1950s and progressing to Annie Hall’s baggy khaki pants in the 1970s and right through to today’s fashion statements, celebrities in film, sports, and music influence what we wear and how we look. The choices we make form our image, which in turn determines the familiar group with which we associate. Marketers call these subgroups “tribal groups” and find them fertile territory for selling products of common interest to the tribe. Advertisers help consumers choose their tribe by offering a wide range of identities from which consumers may choose. They’ve learned that bored people find exotic and foreign tribal connections particularly interesting, so, for example, they might connect suburban kids with urban culture. Suburban American kids are hooked on anime; teens in Tokyo listen to American inner-city hip hop; and when Napoleon Dynamite’s brother in the farmlands of Idaho hooks up with a big-city African American woman, he starts wearing heavy gold chains around his neck.

Choosing an identity differentiates us from others and provides entry into the desired tribe. Because popular culture is global, not

local, you may have a stronger tribal connection with someone in Zurich than with your next-door neighbor. Online communities are forged by affinity instead of proximity and are displacing in-person encounters with less personal electronically transmitted ones. Identities were once formed almost exclusively through daily relationships with people we knew personally, whose internal core values were lived out in the local community. In the past, we imitated individuals who embodied our core values and whom we respected because we had observed their application of those values in everyday life. Today, our identities are often formed more superficially by adopting outward appearances and behaviors without regard for the internal values held by the originator, who, to us, is disembodied. Thus, people whom we do not know and cannot observe closely are influencing our life choices.

What are the implications of these shifts? Is deep selfhood being replaced by façade, with identities formed through the attaching of external features, like ornaments on a Christmas tree? Is it dehumanizing to displace face-to-face personal relationships with those conveyed electronically? What is the future of a society in which our identities are shaped by a multitude of impersonal, uncaring, commercially motivated forces instead of by people who know and love us? Arthur Kroker, who has been called the McLuhan of the twenty-first century, believes that western societies have abandoned both the external standards and the internal foundations necessary to form authentic identities and are panicked as a result.⁴⁴

Edward Hallowell, psychiatrist and lecturer at Harvard Medical School, observes that while daily personal connections are required for longevity and happiness, in modern society, most people lack any substantial connection with someone who cares and listens attentively each day.⁴⁵ Unhappy, isolated people are bombarded by external media voices offering a myriad of identities, creating what academics call an age of “polyvocality,”⁴⁶ a phenomenon captured lyrically in Zero 7’s song “In the Waiting Line”: “Everyone’s saying different things to me, different things to me.”⁴⁷

How is the saturated, isolated self to choose from among the many impersonal voices vying for attention? What are the implications for finding true community when humans reduce themselves to temporary façades seeking association with others who have temporarily chosen the same façade? Where is the authentic self who can enter into community with another authentic self? Who am I? In its concentrated focus on serving, satisfying, and shaping the self, has modern media destroyed the authentic self? Whatever happened to the human race?

Community and identity have always been mediated. In the past, the mediator was personal and local—families, religious affiliations, and neighbors. The printing press introduced a distant mediation, injecting foreign voices into local situations and thus enabling authors to influence identities and communities and to open up new worlds for their readers. The electronic media age is now only sixty years old, and like the printing press, it has introduced hoards of outsiders into our individual lives, and these hoards are relentless in their pursuit of access to us, bypassing reason with their entertainments and amusements, driven by cash more than ideas. While we are the recipients of this mediator's many benefits, we are just now becoming savvy about its potentially dehumanizing effects. Who will lead us through this era of fragmented, isolated selves to a new epoch of deeply grounded humans capable of genuine community?

The Spiritual Delusions of Popular Culture

The teacher and the preacher tell the stories. The stories shape our beliefs and values. The beliefs and values guide our choice of an identity. The identity determines our association with a community or tribe. This entire system was once the domain of religion, but today, media culture has displaced religion as the mediator of the spiritual journey. How reliable is this new guide?

Despite all the wondrous potential of popular culture and its occasional excellent contributions, since the 1960s, our spiritual

sensibilities have for the most part been numbed by spiritual relativism. Today's spiritual delusions are the product of misguided beliefs embedded in the sixties credo: I am the supreme arbiter of all things. Experience is better than reason. Feelings trump traditional mores. If it feels good, do it. Relativism trumps absolutes. There is no truth; there is only what is true for you in a given situation. Expression is more important than imaginative capacity or beauty. All authority and every institution must be questioned. You can't trust anybody over thirty.

In his landmark study of teens, most of whom claimed Christianity as their religion, sociologist Christian Smith concludes that America now practices a shared religion that he calls "moralistic therapeutic deism," in which people are promised that therapeutic benefits, such as a happy life, can be achieved through good, moral, kind, nice, pleasant behavior. Teens believe in an uninvolved, undemanding God who is watching everything from above and is drawn into their lives rarely and only if necessary. In such a world, religion is inclusive yet peripheral, beliefs are held inarticulately and loosely, and each individual is the arbiter of what is true for them; there is no right answer. "Who am I to judge?" they might ask.⁴⁸

Moralistic therapeutic deism is inconsistent with basic Judeo-Christian teaching and is the ideological offspring of the sixties, the misguided result of popular culture's mediation of our spiritual journey. Popular culture has fed us a veritable potluck of beliefs about God, heaven, hell, truth, sex, drugs, friendship, love, marriage, morality, and everything else under the sun. Today's individual is the blender into which are poured ingredients provided by television, movies, song lyrics, celebrities, friends, teachers, parents, advertisements, billboards, articles on the Web. Directions: add ingredients, press the button, chill, and serve.

Popular culture has become a mediator between God and humans—the role played by shamans in primitive cultures. The shaman was traditionally the medium between the visible and the invisible, the prophet and seer of the tribe. What are some of the common lessons taught by popular culture, this new shaman?

Spiritual Seeking Doesn't Require God

For centuries, humans have acknowledged God as our creator, the author of moral law, and the judge to whom we are accountable for our actions. Despite the pervasiveness of spiritual themes in Hollywood, a Biblically revealed deity such as that worshipped in the Judeo-Christian tradition is generally a nonfactor. Most treatments of the spiritual are either atheistic (there is no God) or agnostic (there isn't enough evidence to know for sure). Most commonly, in Hollywood films, God is a non-entity, silent, not mentioned, or referred to euphemistically as "the man upstairs." The view that God exists but is uninvolved in daily life is called *deism*, and as we've seen, it is the prevailing view of today's teens, even those who claim to be Christian. In a deistic worldview, humans, not God, are the central player on the stage—a view Tom Cruise articulates when he says, "People can create their own lives. . . . I decided that I'm going to create, for myself, who I am, not what other people say I should be. I'm entitled to that."⁴⁹

Spirituality Is Good; Religion Is Bad

Throughout history, humans have conducted their spiritual journeys within the context of ancient religions, which were rich with lessons from the past and offered disciplines useful for growth and for the progression to maturity. At their worst, religions have been used to abuse and manipulate their adherents. But at their best, these loving, intergenerational communities have been the preservers of continuity, timeless truth, and practice. In Hollywood, spirituality is in and religion is out. Roma Downey, star of the 1990s TV series "Touched by an Angel," observes, "We have always reminded people that there is a God, that it's just the one God: the God of love. We were more spiritual than religious."⁵⁰ In one episode of "The Simpsons," son Bart asks his father, Homer, what his religious beliefs are. Homer replies, "You know, the one with all the well-meaning rules that don't work in real life. Uh, Christianity."⁵¹

Exception: Exotic Religions

While the entertainment culture often ignores or is critical of traditional Judaism and Christianity, Kabbalah, Scientology, or Buddhism usually get a free pass. Then there is Shirley MacLaine, who set up a mind, body, and spirit portal on a Web site that offered information on meditation, guided visualization, numerology, dream interpretation, astrology, chi energy, ESP, prophecy, a chat room for reincarnated people, a room for UFO witnesses, and spirituality for pets. Ancient forms of paganism have emerged everywhere. The singer Bjork reports, “I’ve always thought religion was really dodgy. I’m as anti-authority as ever. I think I’m pagan. I believe in nature.”⁵²

Eclectic Is Good

Historically, humans have believed that God exists with defined personal characteristics and qualities and that it is our task to discover God. Today, people construct God like they would a doll at a Build-A-Bear store, creating a mix-and-match deity designed to their own liking. David Kinnaman, vice president of Barna Research Group, says that Americans are “cutting and pasting religious views from . . . television, movies, conversations with their friends. Popular culture’s general approach is this: you can probably put together a philosophy of life for yourself that is just as accurate, just as helpful as any particular faith might provide, so just do it!”⁵³

There Is No Truth

For centuries, humans have believed that God has woven truth into the fabric of the universe, giving humans the capacity to discern truth from error. This is the basis of classic logic, which teaches that equal and opposite statements cannot both be true. In such a view, truth is objective and does not require the validation of our subject-

tive affirmation. Irrationally, America's spiritual quest has become unlinked from truth. To be accurate, truth is actually out of favor in today's spiritual trek. Filmmaker Stephen Simon reports, "I do not believe that there can ever be a universal truth when it comes to matters of faith. Where I have a major problem is when I am told that I am wrong and that my beliefs are in violation of any 'true' faith. It is precisely that kind of bigotry that has started most of the major conflagrations of history. Once any group thinks they are the only true believers, people usually die for holding other beliefs."⁵⁴

The contemporary erosion of belief in absolute truth affects both religious and irreligious people. Recently, a Barna Research study asked Americans if they believed in absolute truth. Seventy-six percent of Americans said there is no such thing as absolute truth. Sixty-seven percent of born-again Christians said the same.

There Is No Wrong or Right

Judeo-Christian traditions teach that God is holy and just and that from these character qualities flow timeless, inalterable moral expectations that are the essential guide for human behavior. The Ten Commandments are God's revealed moral laws, woven into the universe, absolute and universally applicable to all humans: You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Honor your father and your mother. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony. You shall not covet (Exodus 20, paraphrased).

Such universal absolutes fly in the face of today's moral relativism. Since the 1960s, popular culture has increasingly depicted immoral behavior as normal, without judgment or consequences. In entertainment culture, sexually promiscuous people rarely contract STDs or get pregnant, and the aim of a new romance is to get laid. In this pretend world, casual drug users seldom become addicts

and drunken parties are just plain fun—all part of expected rites of passage into adulthood. Violence is a way of life. Disobeying parents and disrespect for any authority is accepted.

There are numerous examples of work being done by thoughtful creatives that are not spiritually delusional. When culture watchers like Robert Johnston or Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor⁵⁵ observe God showing up in popular culture, sometimes it is in commercially driven, entertainment culture, but more often it is in indie films or among local songwriters, poets, and artists. We need to be attentive to what contemporary thoughtful creatives are seeing and telling us. We must also admit that today's popular culture is frequently spiritually misguided, conveying spiritual seeking without God, intellectual pursuit without truth, and immoral behavior without consequences.

Misguided Popular Culture Is Crippling People's Souls

To undiscerningly travel on the path of mindless popular culture is dangerous because it will never lead us to the spiritual life we need. As a matter of fact, this spiritual fog produces devastating consequences, as noted by filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, who warns that “modern mass culture, aimed at the ‘consumer,’ the civilization of prosthetics, is crippling people’s souls, setting up barriers between man and the crucial questions of his existence, his consciousness of himself as a spiritual being.”⁵⁶

So here’s the deal. The largest companies in the world are hiring smart people and spending billions of dollars to drive a diversionary, mindless, celebrity-fueled popular culture down the highway of new technologies and into our lives in order to sell us stuff we don’t want or need. They don’t care about us, what we believe, or how we want to live. Their ads and products regularly reduce women to sex objects and men to voyeurs and predators.

They are unconcerned with what is in our best interests spiritually or intellectually, and in fact, it is in their best interest to keep us spiritually desensitized and dumb. They play to our unhappiness, magnifying our feeling that we are missing something essential and that if we had this something they offer, we would be fulfilled. They then encourage us to shop, convincing us that shopping will do today what it failed to do yesterday—fill what French religious philosopher Pascal calls our God-shaped vacuum.

Today's superficial popular culture is symptomatic of our human malaise, and technology, marketing, and the lust for profits simply spread our addiction and disease faster and further. For the first time in history, it is possible for entertainment culture to distribute our spiritual sickness worldwide, producing a spiritual pandemic.

The 1960s gave rise to a general hopefulness that we were on the verge of a new age that would be ushered in by popular culture. Instead, we have produced a spiritually confused, superficial popular culture that is artificially sustained by technology, money, and marketing. If you believe, as I do, that humans possess innate spiritual, intellectual, creative, relational, and moral capacities, it seems clear that what we see today is a diminishment of God's image on the part of both the creators and consumers of popular culture. Where do we turn to find a better way? In a nation in which Christianity is the majority religion, conventional wisdom would point us toward the church, but as we will discuss in the next chapter, the bad news is that during the rise of popular culture, American Christianity marginalized itself by choosing to flee popular culture, fight it, or simply fall for it. American Christianity, which initially set out to transform culture, is itself in need of transformation.

