Chapter 1

what is "popular culture"?

> I have almost as many problems with "popular" as I have with "culture." When you put the two terms together the difficulties can be pretty horrendous.
>
> (Hall, 1981)

introduction

Academic disciplines and debates have their trends and fashions – rather like high street clothing stores, only academic fashions tend to last longer than the latest skirt length or color. In many universities in the 1980s and early 1990s, it was hard to attend a seminar in the humanities and social sciences without the notion of "postmodernism" cropping up at some point. More recently debates concerning "globalization" seem to be taking over as a major new focus for academic concern across a range of disciplines.[1] Another major trend in Western academic work which has been growing steadily since the early 1960s has been an interest in the study of "popular culture." Books, articles, and research theses that explore popular culture are now being produced by scholars working in anthropology, art and design history, cultural and communication studies, the study of literature, geography, history, philosophy, and increasingly within theology and religious studies.

Texts on popular culture in relation to theology and religious studies began to be published in the early 1970s, with one of the initial interests in this area being the relationship between theology and film (see, e.g., Cooper and Skrade, 1970; Hurley, 1970). Since then, film has continued to be a major focus of theological studies of popular culture, but books and articles have also been published which explore the theological or religious significance of TV shows, sports, pop music, consumer culture, and the mass media (see Forbes and Mahan, 2000, for a useful annotated bibliography of this literature). The creation of the "Religion and Popular Culture" study group within the American Academy of Religion, and the

development of specialist journals such as the Journal of Religion and Film and the Journal of Religion and Popular Culture, further indicates that this is a growing area of interest amongst theologians and scholars of religion.

The primary aim of this book is to provide an overview of key debates and methods for those working in theology and religious studies who want to engage in the critical study of popular culture. In the first part of the book, we will explore a range of concepts and debates that are central to popular culture studies, as well as thinking about what particular areas of interest theologians and scholars of religion have within this field. A key starting point – and one often neglected in the literature on popular culture in theology and religious studies – is to think about what is really meant by the term "popular culture." Exploring this issue will be the central topic for this opening chapter.

defining "popular culture"

So what exactly is "popular culture"? One of the striking features of many recent publications on popular culture in theology and religious studies is that it is relatively rare for writers to define precisely what they mean by this term. Now to worry about such issues of definition may just seem rather pedantic on my part, but as a starting point for this book, I'd like to suggest that when we begin to explore how to define "popular culture" we start making some interesting discoveries.

When I began doing the research for this book, I asked a colleague who is a specialist in the study of popular culture in his particular discipline if he could tell me what popular culture was and why he thought people studied it. "Well," he replied, "I can certainly tell you why people have written about popular culture in my subject, but I'm not sure I can tell you exactly what it is." Now his difficulty in defining popular culture is not a consequence of lack of study or academic effort on his part. Indeed the disarming honesty of my colleague illustrates a point that I want to go on and explore in greater depth in this chapter. This is that "popular culture" is not a concept whose meaning is agreed upon by everyone who claims to study it, nor is it in fact an object that simply exists "out there" in the real world waiting for us to come and do research on it. Rather "popular culture" is a term that has been used in quite different ways by different writers depending on the particular academic project that they are committed to (see also Strinati, 1995, pp.xviiff; Storey, 2003).

Whilst the idea that "popular culture" has no universally agreed definition may be somewhat disconcerting at this point in our discussion, this is in reality no different to many other terms that we commonly use in theology and religious studies. Concepts such as "spirituality," or indeed "religion" itself, do not have commonly agreed definitions (see, e.g., King, 1999). Indeed the value of these terms is not as labels that correspond to realities in the external world (even if words could function in this way in this first place).[2] Rather terms like "religion" or "popular culture" are useful in so far as they make certain kinds of activity possible, such as academic research and debate, by helping us to think about the world in certain kinds of ways.

One of the reasons why the term "popular culture" has so many different meanings amongst academic writers is that it is rarely defined in its own right. Indeed it is more commonly defined in relation to other forms of culture. As John Storey (2001) puts it:

> Part of the difficulty stems from the implied *otherness* which is always absent/present when we use the term "popular culture" . . . [P]opular culture is always defined, implicitly or explicitly, in contrast to other conceptual categories: folk culture, mass culture, dominant culture, working-class culture, etc . . . Moreover . . . whichever conceptual category is deployed as popular culture's absent/present *other*, it will always powerfully affect the connotations brought into play when we use the term "popular culture." (Storey, 2001, p.1)

There are three key ways in which "popular culture" has been defined in relation to a cultural "other" or "others":[3]

1 popular culture as an opposing cultural form to *high culture* or *the avant-garde*;
2 popular culture as a category that is defined in relation to both *high culture* and *folk culture*, or which is seen as displacing *folk culture*;
3 popular culture as a form of social and cultural resistance against *dominant culture* or *mass culture*.

We will now consider each of these distinctions in turn.

popular culture, high culture, and the avant-garde

One of the key ways in which a number of writers have understood popular culture is to distinguish it from another opposing form of culture, such as

high culture or the avant-garde. Usually this distinction has been made in order to emphasize the inferior and debased quality of popular culture. Indeed, the writers who have been most important in introducing debates about popular culture into academic and artistic contexts have often been those who were most implacably opposed to its apparent power and influence. Important figures in this regard have been the British writers Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis, as well as American critics such as Clement Greenberg and Dwight McDonald.

In his book *Culture and Anarchy*, first published in 1869, Matthew Arnold argued that culture should be thought of as "the best that has been thought and known in the world" (Arnold, 1889, p.31), and that maintaining and developing such culture represented the only secure basis for a civilized society. Arnold can therefore be seen as an advocate of *high culture*, a form of culture which is often understood in terms of a classical tradition of literature, philosophy, and the arts.

Arnold did not suggest that this culture was necessarily simply the preserve of the aristocratic or upper classes. Indeed he argued that across all social classes there were some people with a "humane spirit," and that exposure to the civilizing effects of culture would encourage this humanity and desire for social perfection amongst those capable of feeling it. Nevertheless, it is clear that Arnold perceived a clear distinction between the civilized culture that he valued and the culture of the working-class masses, which he saw as hedonistic, immature, and anarchistic. Writing in a period of growing political organization in the British working-classes, Arnold argued that political institutions should act to maintain a social framework in which civilized culture could be preserved, and that the authority of these institutions should be respected, even if the working-classes found them repressive.

The elitist tone of Arnold's writing is maintained in the subsequent work of F.R. Leavis, whose writing was most influential from the early 1930s to the late 1950s. Like Arnold, Leavis claimed that true cultural judgment and taste was the preserve of a limited social group. As a literary critic, Leavis saw this group as comprising those who had the ability to appreciate the classic texts of Western literature and the classic products of Western art. The existence of such a cultural elite was essential though, in his view, to the well-being of society:

> Upon this minority depends our power of profiting by the finest human experience of the past; they keep alive the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition. Upon them depend the implicit standards that order the finer living of an age, the sense that this is worth more than that, this rather than that is the direction to go, that the center is here rather than there. In their keeping . . . is

Figure 1.1 These photographs by Nick Danziger illustrate the difference between notions of "high" and "popular" culture. In the (upper) picture of the House of Lords library in London, the environment emphasizes elite knowledge and aesthetics. In the (lower) picture of women playing bingo in Glasgow, we see an example of mass-produced entertainment. (© Nick Danziger)

> the language, the changing idiom, upon which fine living depends, and without which distinction of spirit is thwarted and incoherent. (Leavis, 1930, p.4).

Like Arnold, then, Leavis also saw those with proper cultural taste and judgment as the guardians of civilized society. For it is only through the cultural wisdom and sensitivity that this elite has refined through their engagement with the classic canon of Western art and literature that society can hope to maintain any sense of moral and aesthetic judgment. Leavis saw the growing forms of popular entertainment (particularly Hollywood film) and the popular press as a dangerous threat to such cultural discrimination. These forms of popular distraction were designed merely as commercial enterprises and had no fundamental commitment to the cultural education of the general public. In the context of a rapidly changing social and cultural environment, then, Leavis argued for the need for an educated minority to maintain its cultural taste and judgment in the threat of commercially compromised forms of mass culture.

A related argument about the debased nature of mass or popular culture was advanced from the 1930s onwards by the leading American art critic, Clement Greenberg. Unlike Arnold and Leavis, though, who contrasted popular culture with the high culture of classic literature, art, and philosophy, Greenberg sought to contrast mass culture with new and progressive forms of culture, the *avant-garde*. As an art critic, Greenberg argued that the most important and progressive movement in twentieth-century art was the trend towards abstraction and away from figurative art in which the artist seeks to reproduce a recognizable image of the real world (see Greenberg, 1940). "Pure art," in Greenberg's terms, could therefore be found in the work of an abstract painter such as Piet Mondrian, whose later work consisted of geometrical shapes and a limited range of colors, as well as the work of the later American abstract expressionist painters, such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman. This movement to abstraction in art was, argued Greenberg, part of a wider trend in the arts to clarify the essence of each discipline (whether music, art, sculpture, or literature) and to express this essence rather than attempt to mimic other forms of artistic production.

Whilst Greenberg saw this progressive avant-garde movement in the arts as a positive sign of cultural development, he also detected an opposing, more insidious, cultural trend in popular culture or "kitsch" (Greenberg, 1939). According to Greenberg, the kitsch of pulp fiction, popular music, magazines, and Hollywood movies is a product of industrialized societies in which the working and lower-middle classes gained sufficient income to require some form of cultural entertainment, but insufficient education or leisure-time to

appreciate more demanding forms of art and culture. As a consequence, mass-produced, "ersatz culture" began to be sold to the lower classes in various forms which offered "pre-digested" forms of entertainment that offered easy pleasures to its audience without requiring much intellectual or analytical effort on their part. Where as avant-garde art is serious and demanding, kitsch is accessible, commercial, and undemanding. Thus, again, for Greenberg, popular or mass culture can be seen as an insidious alternative to genuine artistic and cultural development.

Whilst there is a degree of contrast between the support of Arnold and Leavis for a classic canon of Western art and literature, and Greenberg's enthusiastic reception of progressive developments in the arts, there is evidently a common ground in their assessment of popular culture. For all of them, popular culture is debased, detached from true sources of cultural inspiration, and threatens to overwhelm the great achievements of human culture in a mass of mediocrity and banality. As Dwight McDonald (1957, p.62) observed "mass Culture is very, very democratic: it absolutely refuses to discriminate against, or between, anything or anybody. All is grist to its mill, and all comes out finely ground indeed."

For contemporary readers, reared on the populism of late modern liberal democracies (see, e.g., Chaney, 2002), the social and cultural elitism of writers such as Arnold, Leavis, and Greenberg can seem unintelligible at best, and deeply distasteful at worst. In their defense one might wonder whether the undiscriminating populism of our age is in serious danger of reducing culture to the level of the mediocre and the banal. Furthermore, when Leavis and Greenberg were writing in the 1930s, it is understandable that they should be suspicious of mass culture, when popular forms of art and entertainment had a significant role in the management of the populations within totalitarian regimes in the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and Fascist Italy.

Nevertheless, there are grounds for challenging any simplistic division between high culture/the avant-garde and popular culture, particularly when this division is also made between upper/bourgeois and working-class cultures. Firstly, the idea of a canon of classic literature, art and music is not a stable phenomenon – indeed what is perceived as classic literature and arts can change significantly within a matter of decades (see, e.g., Levine, 1996, pp.91ff.). The idea of *high culture* should therefore be seen as the creation of certain writers working at certain historical contexts, rather than something that is a universal and timeless cultural category (DiMaggio, 1998).[4] Furthermore, distinguishing between high and popular cultures fails to acknowledge the complexity of the cultural life of the majority of the population. Thus, for example, in his article "Culture is ordinary," Raymond Williams (2001)

reminds us that working-class culture has its own integrity, and would, for some people, include an appreciation of classical music and poetry that would seem incompatible with other forms of popular cultural entertainment. With reference to Clement Greenberg, we might also add the question, "which avant-garde?" For it is clear that other twentieth-century artists whose work can be considered avant-garde, particularly those associated with Dadaism and surrealism, were strongly committed to using images and objects from everyday popular culture as part of their radical artistic practice (see Motherwell, 1989; Kuenzli, 1996; Highmore, 2002). Whilst we might question the detailed arguments of Arnold, Leavis, and Greenberg, their work has been highly significant in shaping debates concerning popular culture. Indeed, their enduring influence can be seen in the skepticism that many people in the academic community continue to hold towards the notion of the study of popular culture as a serious academic pursuit (for more detailed analysis of this skepticism see, e.g., Levine, 1996, pp.3ff.).

popular culture and folk culture

If one way of defining popular culture is to contrast it with an opposing other, such as high culture or the avant-garde, then a second approach is to contrast it with two other cultural forms, namely high culture and folk culture. This is the approach taken by the editors of a recent major collection of essays on religion and popular culture, Bruce Forbes and Jeffrey Mahan (2000, pp.2f.), who distinguish between these cultural categories in the following way:

> To employ suggestive examples from the realm of food: high culture is a gourmet meal, folk culture is grandma's casserole, and popular culture is a McDonald's hamburger. All three are forms of "culture," which is intended here as a neutral term that includes the whole range of human products and thoughts that surround our lives, providing the context in which we live . . . The distinctions between the three classifications of culture (high, folk, and popular) have to do especially with the size of their audiences, and perhaps also the means by which they are transmitted. High or elite culture, often transmitted in a written form (a literary magazine, the score of an opera, a gourmet cookbook), has a limited audience by its very intention, and is addressed to persons who are perceived to have superior backgrounds or more sophisticated taste. Folk culture, often transmitted orally (family recipes, local legends, regional marriage customs), also has a limited audience, because oral communication is roughly limited to the more immediate family, community, or other local or regional group. Popular culture might be communicated in many ways, but it

> most often becomes widespread, and thus popular, though mass media . . . As its very name implies, popular culture is marked by its larger audience. (Forbes and Mahan, 2000, pp.2–3)

This triangular distinction between high, folk and popular culture can be presented in a purely descriptive way as it is here, in which these three different categories appear as different but equal forms of culture.

For other writers, though, the contrast between folk and popular culture serves as a critical tool for identifying fundamental problems with popular culture. In this more critical account, the emergence of industrialized societies focused around mass production and consumption generated a commercialized popular culture that displaced more authentic, traditional folk cultures. Dwight McDonald articulated this critique neatly when he commented:

> It is also true that Mass Culture is to some extent a continuation of the old Folk Art which until the Industrial Revolution was the culture of the common people, but here, too, the differences are more striking than the similarities. Folk Art grew from below. It was a spontaneous, autochthonous expression of the people, shaped by themselves, pretty much without the benefit of High Culture, to suit their own needs. Mass Culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying. (McDonald, 1957, p.60)

This critique of commercialized forms of mass culture displacing the traditional culture of the common people was also a central theme in Richard Hoggart's (1957) seminal book, *The Uses of Literacy*. Here Hoggart argued that traditional forms of English working-class culture were under threat from new, less communally-rooted entertainments such as American film and popular music.[5] Whilst offering a powerfully-worded critique of emerging forms of popular culture, Hoggart's book also had the effect of validating the academic study of working-class culture. When he subsequently founded the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University, UK, in 1961, this became a leading research center which, as we shall see shortly, in time generated some quite different understandings of popular culture to those initially suggested by Hoggart (see Turner, 2003).

The relationship between high, folk, and popular culture has therefore been characterized in two different ways. Forbes and Mahan set out a relationship in which all three of these cultural categories remain meaningful in

contemporary society, and in which each are presented as equally valid forms of culture. Writers such as Dwight McDonald and Richard Hoggart (as well as Leavis and Greenberg), however, suggest that folk culture is something that is now largely threatened or indeed displaced by commercialized forms of popular culture. Furthermore, they argue that popular culture has the effect of weakening community and ensuring social and political compliance. It is culture provided *for* the people, rather than being the authentic culture *of* the people.

Whilst these distinctions between high, folk, and popular culture are indeed informative and provide another perspective on how we might understand popular culture, there are again significant problems. Firstly, it is unclear how useful or meaningful the distinction is between folk and popular culture in contemporary society. Truett Anderson (1996, p.1), for example, reports the attempt by some young people in Lapland to mix traditional yodeling with techno music (a blend they refer to as "techno-yoik"). Is this music an example of folk culture or popular culture? Similarly another recent major anthology of essays on religion and popular culture contains an essay by Wade Clark Roof (2001) on the religious significance of barbecues in the American South. Roof's discussion of the significance of the practices of preparing, cooking and eating the barbecue clearly explores a widespread cultural practice in parts of America. But is this folk culture or popular culture? In my home city in Britain, a popular form of entertainment at the moment are salsa dancing nights in which people learn and dance salsa routines. Now salsa dance is folk culture, but it is a traditional folk culture in Cuba and other parts of Latin America. When people learn salsa dancing in Britain now, is this folk culture or popular culture? The idea that people in contemporary Western societies construct their lives from a range of different cultural resources, traditions, and practices – a practice referred to as bricolage – suggests that making clear distinctions between folk culture and popular culture may not be particularly easy or meaningful in our contemporary contexts.

There is also a danger amongst writers such as McDonald and Leavis that an overly romanticized contrast is drawn between "authentic," preindustrial folk culture and debased, commercialized mass culture. For example, the increasing rates of literacy and availability of cheap song lyric sheets meant that as early as the seventeenth-century, British "folk" music began to develop standardized conventions about correct lyrics for particular songs (see Easton et al., 1988, p.44). Folk culture was therefore liable to certain forms of standardization well before the onset of the Industrial Revolution. Furthermore, forms of preindustrial folk culture such as the carnival, or the original British version of football,[6] were arguably tolerated by the ruling classes precisely

because they provided an outlet for social frustration other than organized political protest. To imagine that folk culture was simply the culture *of* the people, and that it served no hegemonic function in maintaining their social compliance may well then be somewhat naïve (see Reay, 1985; Easton et al., 1988). Indeed any theory of popular culture that involves some kind of narrative of a "cultural fall" from some glorious past of high or folk culture requires a critical scrutiny of its historical accuracy and adequacy.

popular culture and dominant/mass culture

A third way in which popular culture has been defined is to suggest that it has a far more positive social function than that attributed to it by many of the writers whom we have considered so far. This third approach is to see popular culture as a potential or actual form of cultural resistance to the dominant culture within a given society. One of the leading writers to have made a case for this approach is Stuart Hall, who like Hoggart was a leading figure in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University. Hall (1981) has argued that we can best understand "popular" culture not as that which is simply "popular" with the masses or with a particular list of popular entertainments and practices, but as the opposing dialectical force to the dominant or elite culture within a given society. Popular culture, in this sense, is therefore whatever is excluded from the elite or dominant culture in a given society. Moreover "popular" culture is also the focus of attempts by that social or cultural elite to shape or control the culture of the mass classes, and is where those mass classes both concede to and resist those forms of social control. Hall's understanding of popular culture is therefore based in an understanding of social and cultural struggle in which dominant social groups seek to maintain their power and shape the wider population according to their view of the world, and in which the mass population partly accepts and partly resists this cultural influence.

Hall's understanding of popular culture reflects the notion of subculture that emerged out of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (see, e.g., Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Hebdige, 1979). Hebdige describes subcultures as attempts by those outside the dominant group in a given society to take existing items, images or practices in that culture and to give them new meanings that resist dominant ideas and values. At the heart of subculture, suggests Hebdige, is a "refusal" – a refusal to be defined and limited by the identities of the "normal," dominant social order. Hebdige's own classic study of a subcultural form explored how the punk movement

assimilated a wide range of cultural products, from safety-pins, tartan kilts, and reggae music, to attempt to set out a new identity for disillusioned white youth who did not wish to be incorporated into dominant notions of white racism and nationalism.

A similar understanding of popular culture has also been proposed by John Fiske (Fiske, 1989). Up until now in this chapter, I have been using the terms "mass" and "popular" culture interchangeably, but Fiske contrasts the two. Mass culture, he argues, is the cultural system of commercially produced and marketed entertainments and commodities that are offered to the mass population. Popular culture, by contrast, is what people actually do with these entertainments and commodities in their real lives, which may have little to do with the meanings or uses that their commercial producers intended for them. Fiske's work is strongly influenced by the work of the French social theorist, Michel de Certeau (see de Certeau, 1984; Buchanan, 2000). De Certeau suggested that the majority of people have little control of the cultural products and entertainments out of which they shape their lives. We have little direct control, for example, over the content of TV schedules or Hollywood films. Yet this does not mean that we are merely passive consumers, rather we maintain our freedom in the way in which we consume and make use of these cultural products. We may not have designed the territory in which we live our day-to-day lives, but we still retain some freedom in choosing how to act within that territory.

The work of Hall, Hebdige, Fiske, and others, therefore offers a different understanding of popular culture to those critics who simply define it as the debased shadow of high culture or the avant-garde, or as the commercially compromised usurper of authentic folk culture. In their work, popular culture becomes a set of cultural practices in which people can attempt to resist dominant cultural ideas that are oppressive, out-dated, or out of touch with their experience or aspirations. There are some differences in the degree of optimism that these writers have for the possibility of genuine cultural resistance. Hall sees this as an on-going cultural battle in which neither the dominant nor the masses win any final victories, and Hebdige (1979, p.3) speculates on whether subcultural refusal ends up being any more significant than "graffiti on the prison wall." Fiske, by contrast, is more genuinely optimistic of people's ability to resist manipulation and coercion by dominant cultural elites. Each of these writers, though, see more potential for the exercise of human agency, imagination, and creativity through popular culture than many of the writers we have discussed so far in this chapter.

Again, there are problems with this approach, though. We might question, for example, how adequate it is to characterize society in terms of a dominant

social elite and the wider population who are excluded from this elite. Indeed in late modern, multicultural societies we are increasingly aware that there is more than one form of social and cultural domination, and more than one kind of dominating group. For example, white feminist writers have clearly articulated the social and cultural domination that men exert over women, but these feminists have in turn been subject to critique by black womanist writers for failing to take sufficient account of social and cultural domination on grounds of color and ethnicity (see, e.g., hooks, 1981). Furthermore it is evident that people who take part in what may look like subcultural groups or practices may not attribute subcultural meanings to them at all or intend this to be any kind of resistance against a perceived social order. Rather wearing elements of punk clothing might be an expression of a person's personal taste or their desire to associate themselves with a particular current trend (see Muggleton, 2001).

From our discussion so far, it is clear that there is no academic consensus on what the term "popular culture" means. The way in which a particular writer defines "popular culture" is clearly shaped by the wider academic and cultural project with which they are concerned, and the definitions that we have noted here are clearly conflicting and contradictory. In attempting to give a definition of popular culture, one option open to us is simply to align ourselves with one of the approaches that we have just described, and for example, to adopt the understanding of popular culture offered by Greenberg, McDonald, Hall, or Fiske. Another option, and one that I would like to explore now, is to attempt to find some common assumptions about popular culture that underlie each of these definitions which might give us a broader starting point for thinking about this subject.

popular culture and everyday life

In a historical study of British popular culture between the mid-sixteenth and mid-eighteenth centuries, Barry Reay (1998, p.1) suggests that popular culture "refers to widely held and commonly expressed thoughts and actions." This is clearly a very broad definition, but I would suggest it is helpful in that it makes a basic connection between popular culture and the shared context, practices and resources of "everyday life." Indeed if we think back over the definitions of popular culture that we explored earlier in the chapter, it is possible to suggest that each of these writers assumed that popular or mass culture related to the everyday lives of the wider population of the particular society that they were writing about. These writers might not have always approved of what made

up the everyday lives of these people; Arnold's complaints about uncouth working-class behavior are perhaps particularly noteworthy in this regard. But nevertheless, whether regarded as a source of concern or celebration, popular culture was assumed by each of these writers to be bound up with what it meant to live an ordinary day-to-day life in a particular social and cultural context.

It might be tempting at this point to suggest that popular culture is therefore the shared environment, practices, and resources of everyday life for *ordinary* people within a particular society. This again would be too simplistic, however (see, e.g., Highmore, 2002, pp.1ff.). Who do we consider ordinary? To what extent is the day-to-day life of a young black man in the south side of Chicago comparable to the day-to-day life of a white young woman in a small town in Ohio? Or to what extent is there any similarity between the day-to-day life of a female Bangladeshi immigrant living in the East-end of London and the day-to-day life of a retired man living in an affluent village in Sussex? Are all of these people ordinary, and if so is there any continuity or common ground to ordinary life in contemporary society? The day-to-day lives of these people are likely to be very different to each other in terms of what these people may be able to do, buy, what they will be interested in, who they will talk to and interact with, what they will talk to other people about and what they will seek out as entertainment. To use the term "ordinary" people (or indeed the term "popular") can create the image for us of a homogenous population who all do the same kinds of things, engage with the same kinds of people, have the same kinds of opportunities and ability to consume, and who are amused by broadly the same kinds of things. As David Chaney reminds us, though:

> The popular is not a natural, transparent, term of description; it is a weapon in a variety of struggles to cope with the crippling unease of a recognition that there are limitations to *any and all* way(s) of talking about ourselves. The history of collective life is not a continuous landscape under the harmonious sun of a universal language. (Chaney, 1993, p.193)

Terms like "popular," "ordinary," or even "everyday life" can therefore function in ways that may offer reassurance that we know what we are talking about, but in reality act in ways that obscure the genuine complexities of social and cultural life. If we try to bear these complexities in mind, however, I would suggest that there may still be some value in thinking about popular culture as the shared environment, practices, and resources of everyday life in a given society. The fact that everyday life can be constituted in such different ways for members of a different society might incline us to think more in terms of

popular *cultures* (an option preferred by Barry Reay). The popular cultural world of the Bangladeshi immigrant in London is likely to be significantly different to that of the retired white man living in an affluent area, for example, particularly if the Bangladeshi woman does not speak English. Nevertheless, if we remain aware these complexities, associating popular culture with everyday life can have certain benefits for our academic work in this area.

There are three particular benefits that I would like to suggest. Firstly, if we think about popular culture as the shared environment, practices, and resources of everyday life then this offers us a broader understanding of popular culture than is sometimes evident in studies undertaken by academics in theology and religious studies. Academic training for theologians and religious scholars often focuses around the study of texts, whether sacred texts such as the Torah, Qu'ran, or the Bible, or other historical texts such as the writings of leading historical theologians or other religious figures. Given this focus on texts within the discipline, it is perhaps unsurprising that when people trained in theology and religious studies have come to study popular culture they have focused on popular cultural texts such as TV shows, music videos, films, pop songs, or pop literature (see, e.g., Beaudoin, 1998). Whilst these studies can generate some interesting insights on these particular popular cultural "texts," to focus simply on these can produce a skewed perspective on the wider patterns and practices of everyday life (on this issue, see also Storey, 1999; Chaney, 2002). Engaging with mass-produced forms of entertainment is an important element of everyday life for many people in contemporary Western society. But reading, watching, and listening to these popular "texts" is only one part of everyday life, in which other parts may consist of cooking and eating, caring for children or other dependents, spending time at work or with friends, having sex, tidying, mending or improving our homes, washing, dressing or daydreaming. To think of popular culture as the environment, practices, and resources of everyday life reminds us that popular culture may be as much to with these other activities as with interacting with specific popular "texts" such as films or TV programs.

What I am suggesting here is that theologians and religious scholars have tended to adopt what Raymond Williams has referred to as a "documentary" approach to the study of culture, which focuses on the significance of artifacts and texts produced by a particular society. What I would like to advocate as a complementary alternative is the culturalist approach proposed by Williams that studies (popular) culture more as a "way of life" for particular people in particular contexts, rather than simply as a collection of texts and other cultural products. This broader approach involves looking at the wider structures, relationships, patterns and meanings of everyday life within which

popular cultural texts are produced and "consumed." As we shall see in the coming chapters (especially chapters 6–8), both the documentary and culturalist approaches have particular uses for those working in theology and religious studies who wish to engage with popular culture, and both of these approaches require us to develop use different skills and methods in our academic work. It is important, however, for theologians and scholars of religion not to become trapped in "textual" approaches to the study of popular culture, and to miss out on some of the questions that are raised by a wider culturalist method. Whilst this might seem a rather abstract claim at the outset of the book, the importance of this issue will become clearer as our discussion develops in the coming pages.

A second benefit from thinking about popular culture as the environment, practices, and resources of everyday life is that it helps us to locate the study of popular culture as part of a longer project of academic enquiry (see Highmore, 2002). At the start of the chapter, I noted that academic interest in popular culture had been steadily growing since the early 1960s. In fact, the volume of academic books and articles on this subject has risen dramatically in just the past twenty years.[7] Given the ebb and flow of trends in academic work, it is quite conceivable that the study of "popular culture" may have become unfashionable in twenty years time, or more likely, that we will have conceived a new conceptual approach to studying this subject that may have dispensed with the term "popular culture" altogether. If this is the case it may be useful to see current interest in "popular culture" not merely as a twentieth-century fin-de-siècle fad, but as part of a longer academic project of engaging analytically and critically with the practices and resources of everyday life.

The study of "everyday life" has not always been perceived to be an appropriate focus for academic or artistic activity. Indeed it was only in the later nineteenth century, with the development of the discipline of sociology and the sustained images of everyday life in the work of French Impressionist painters, that the everyday began to subjected to sustained critical and artistic attention. The twentieth century, however, has seen a growing commitment in academic contexts to treat the everyday as a serious focus for study. The work of Freud, at the turn of the twentieth century, attributed fundamental significance to apparently trivial everyday phenomena such as dreams, jokes, mistakes, and slips of the tongue, and his work in turn influenced artistic movements such as Dadaism and surrealism. The writing of social and cultural theorists such as George Simmel and Walter Benjamin in the early decades of the twentieth century gave a critical approach to questions concerning the social function of money and shopping arcade culture. The emerging discipline of anthropology began to shift in the early part of the twentieth century from a focus purely on "primitive" cultures to a growing

interest in the ethnography of Western cultures. The study of the Middletown project was thus undertaken in the United States in the 1920s and the Mass Observation project set up in Britain in the following decade. By the time that explicit academic studies of popular culture began to be undertaken in the 1960s, and the Pop Art movement exemplified by Andy Warhol was ostensibly celebrating the images and products of consumer culture, there had already been a long history of the academic and artistic study of everyday life. It is helpful, then, not to perceive the study of popular culture as a wholly new academic venture, but as part of a longer tradition in which the environment, practices, and resources of everyday life have been considered to be suitable subjects for critical academic study.

Finally, I would suggest that there is a third significant benefit to thinking about popular culture in terms of the environment, practices, and resources of everyday life. This is that it offers a more open definition of popular culture than many of the definitions that we considered in the first part of this chapter. By not attaching itself to any prior position on cultural values or cultural politics, the view of popular culture that I am suggesting here has the potential to allow a greater consensus about the nature of the subject that we are studying. Again, it is important to reiterate that what I am suggesting is not *the* definition of "popular culture," that establishes once and for all what popular culture is out there in the "real world." Rather I would claim that thinking about popular culture as the shared environment, practices, and resources of everyday life is a useful way of approaching this subject because it both helps us to maintain a open mind to studying whatever may be significant in everyday life in a particular social context.

but why study everyday life?

One of the dangers of the study of everyday life is that it risks descending into the trivial and the banal. In its worst forms, the study of popular culture can appear to be an academic holiday, in which scholars have a break from their more normal weightier interests, and write texts on forms of popular culture that particularly interest or amuse them. Alternatively, it can be a kind of academic tourism in which a researcher engages with some exotic form of popular culture, and returns with some anecdotal souvenirs but makes no significant contribution to critical debate on that issue.

Ultimately, academics need to be accountable in explaining why the study of popular culture is a significant and appropriate focus for their work. The issue of why theologians and scholars of religion should study popular culture is something that we will return to in more depth in the next chapter. For

now though, we can observe that the longer academic project of the study of everyday life has been undertaken for two particular reasons.[8]

Firstly, some writers have engaged in this kind of study because they believe that the analysis of everyday resources or practices has an important *explanatory* significance in helping us to understand more about the nature of human existence or the nature of human society. These explanations may well take us beyond the "common-sense" interpretations of everyday life. As Hegel said, "the familiar is not necessarily the known" (Gardiner, 2000, p.1). Freud's belief that phenomena such as dreams revealed key insights into the structure and content of the human psyche is a good example of an explanation of human existence that arises out of everyday life and which helps us to see everyday things in a new light.

Secondly, other writers have emphasized the important of the study of the everyday because of their commitment to particular cultural and political projects. For such writers, the study of the everyday has an important *critical*, *liberatory*, or *ideological* function in raising our awareness of oppressive structures and concepts within our own cultural context (see, e.g., Giroux, 1994; hooks, 1996). Thus, by raising awareness of oppressive social and political ideas that may lay hidden within seemingly innocuous forms of popular culture, it becomes possible for us to resist these, and to think and act in less dehumanizing ways.

This distinction between explanatory and liberatory/critical approaches to the study of popular culture is also a useful one when we come to think about how we study popular culture within theology and religious studies. Indeed, as we shall explore more in the next chapter, some scholars in these disciplines are primarily interested in studying popular culture because they hope to offer clearer explanations of religious experiences, trends, and processes in the contemporary world. By contrast other theologians and scholars of religion are more interested in a liberatory/critical engagement with popular culture in an attempt to identify the ways in which it is both constructive and destructive.

conclusion

This chapter has aimed to introduce some of the key issues in approaching the study of popular culture, initially by considering the different ways in which writers have defined what "popular culture" is. We have seen that popular culture has often been defined in relation to a cultural "other" or "others," and explored a range of ways in which this relationship has been

thought about (e.g., in relation to concepts such as high, folk, or mass culture). We have noted the problem of reaching an agreed definition of popular culture, and discussed the idea that it would be a mistake to assume that popular culture is a straightforward object waiting to be studied "out there" in the "real world." Whilst acknowledging that terms such as "popular" and "everyday" can obscure the complexities of social life, I have suggested that it may be most constructive to see the term "popular culture" as a term that points us towards the study of the environment, practices, and resources of everyday life. Such an understanding of popular culture might allow us to keep a more open mind about what might usefully be studied in this subject area, as well as helping us to understand our work as part of a larger tradition of academic study.

By examining these various definitions of popular culture, it is clear that this field of study inevitably raises questions about cultural values and cultural politics. Some of the central questions are:

1 how can we map what is happening within our contemporary culture?
2 what cultural images, texts, ideas and values can help us to build a humane and civilized society (cf. Arnold, Leavis)?
3 where are the progressive forces in contemporary culture, and what is threatening these or holding them back (cf. Greenberg)?
4 what forms of culture foster healthy, discriminating, and responsible human communities (cf. McDonald, Hoggart)?
5 in what ways can people resist the dominant ideologies of their society or find opportunities for authentic self-expression (cf. Hall, Hebdige, Fiske)?

Underlying these attempts to define popular culture are therefore, not simply a concern for how we might describe the structures and practices of contemporary society, but far-reaching questions about cultural values and cultural politics. We may not agree with the answers that specific writers have proposed to some of these questions. But nevertheless, these questions – about what resources can help us to live good and meaningful lives, about the nature of healthy human community and the nature of human liberation – are all issues that are deeply significant for human society.

Studying popular culture can therefore involve both the analysis and critique of contemporary society. In the next chapter, we will look in more detail at what kinds of interests and concerns have led people working in theology and religious studies to examine popular culture, and to think about how these disciplines can make a useful contribution to the field of popular culture studies.