

WHAT DOES HOLLYWOOD HAVE TO DO WITH WHEATON? THE PLACE OF (POP) CULTURE IN THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

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In her intriguing book *God-Talk in America*, Phyllis A. Tickle, contributing editor in religion to Publishers Weekly, declares, “more theology is conveyed in, and probably retained from, one hour of popular television than from all of the sermons that are also delivered on any given weekend in America’s synagogues, churches, and mosques.”¹ Is this a purely brash remark? Is it sheer overstatement? Is it nothing more than well-crafted rhetoric designed for maximum shock value? Perhaps. But we ought not reject Tickle’s words too quickly. Her observation captures a trend Christian scholars and theological educators dare not ignore: Pop culture in general—and the entertainment industry in particular—has emerged as a potent shaper of the fundamental convictions of North American society rivalling, if not surpassing, the church itself.

The thesis of this essay is that the influence of pop culture, especially among younger North Americans, challenges us to think through the way we engage in theological reflection and, in turn, how we approach theological education in an age of entertainment and the media. Although “Hollywood” may choose simply to ignore “Wheaton,” we whom God has called to vocations in the “Wheatons” of the land do well to be aware of the machinations of the folks at “Hollywood.” I intend to set forth this thesis by moving through three major topics: the phenomenon of culture itself; the place of culture in theology and finally the role of pop culture in theological education.

I. HOLLYWOOD AMONG THE WHEATONITES: THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE TO SOCIETY

I begin by looking first at the word *culture* and the importance of culture to contemporary society.

1. *The nature of culture.* *Culture* is derived from the Latin *cultivare* (“to till the soil”). This etymological connection to the practice of “cultivation” led to the original meaning of *culture*, namely, “the care and tending of crops or

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¹ Phyllis A. Tickle, *God-Talk in America* (New York: Crossroad, 1997) 126.

animals,”² especially as this activity is aimed at improving or perfecting its object. The idea of a specifically *human* culture, indicative of our use of the term, was likely a metaphorical extension of this “tending” process to the human person.

In Enlightenment Europe, culture was connected to the process of educating and refining the individual, as well as denoting the artistic and intellectual products (such as art and literature) deemed to be the means to becoming, or to be expressions of, the “refined” person. The resulting preference for what we might call “high culture” formed a marked contrast to the practices, customs, and even the language of the “uneducated” lower classes. Understood in this manner, *culture* was often used somewhat interchangeably with *civilization*, especially by thinkers in France.

While the idea of “high culture” still lives on in certain quarters, in the 1920s it was replaced by a far-reaching shift in the meaning of the term, especially in intellectual circles in the United States. Rather than denoting the ideal—the goal of an education process—*culture* came to refer to an already given dimension of human social life. Culture now consisted of the customs and rituals of a particular social group. This understanding finds its genesis in the field of anthropology, including the work of structuralist anthropologists such as Claude Levi-Strauss (b. 1908), who explored the connection between social practices and identity formation. As a consequence, the term came to denote the ongoing practices of human beings in the context of groups by means of which group participants construct the character of their own lives, as well as the specific pattern of behaviors that distinguishes any society from all others. This understanding is evident in the description offered in 1948 by Melvin Herskovitz: “culture is essentially a construct that describes the total body of belief, behaviors, knowledge, sanctions, values and goals that mark the way of life of a people. . . . In the final analysis it comprises the things that people have, the things they do, and what they think.”³

In recent years, however, anthropologists have understood culture more in connection with systems of meaning. Clifford Geertz, to cite a prominent example, describes the phenomenon using the metaphorical language of the “web.” Cultures comprise the “webs of significance” that people spin and in which they are then suspended.⁴ As he expresses in his well-known, terse definition:

[Culture] denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which [people] communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.⁵

Under Geertz’s influence, *culture* has become a shorthand way of talking about the shared dimension of meaning-making that typifies people in a given society.

² For this background, see Michael Warren, *Seeing Through the Media: A Religious View of Communications and Cultural Analysis* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1997) 41.

³ Melvin Herskovitz, *Man and His Works* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948) 625.

⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973) 5.

⁵ *Ibid.* 89.

Viewed from this perspective, culture plays a crucial role in personal and social life. According to Raymond Williams, culture functions as a “signifying system through which a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored.”⁶ Thus, culture generates a shared context in which a people engage in the construction of meaning and of meaningful social actions. Through culture, participants in a society are bound together by a common attachment to, or investment in, items that constitute common reference points for making sense out of the world and of social behavior.⁷

Culture, then, encompasses the body of shared assumptions about the world, including the shared “knowledge” base; the ways in which people articulate their felt aspirations as well as the issues and concerns of people; and the technological tools that people use in the pursuit of their goals and aspirations (e.g. the computer and the automobile). But perhaps no dimension of culture is more crucial than symbols, especially language.

The contemporary understanding of language as both culturally-determined and culture-building emerged in part from the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). In contrast to his predecessors who viewed language as a natural phenomenon that develops according to fixed and discoverable laws, Saussure proposed that a language is a social phenomenon⁸ and that a linguistic system is a product of social convention.⁹ Together with non-linguistic modalities, such as metaphorical images, language—which we inherit from our social community—provides the conceptual tools through which we construct the world we inhabit, as well as the vehicles through which we communicate and thereby share meaning with others. Sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann explain: “Language objectivates the shared experiences and makes them available to all within the linguistic community, thus becoming both the basis and the instrument of the collective stock of knowledge.”¹⁰

One additional piece must be added, however, to our picture. According to Berger, world construction entails above all the imposition of a meaningful order (a “nomos”) upon our variegated experiences, and we impose this “common order of interpretation” by means of the cultural tools our society makes available to us.¹¹ Because these cultural “world-fashioning” tools carry transcendent significance—i.e. they claim to disclose the essence of reality—they are theological in character. In other words, cultural expressions speak about what a society believes to be ultimate, and in this sense, they are theological expressions.

⁶ Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982) 13.

⁷ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 57.

⁸ David Holdcroft, *Saussure: Signs, System and Arbitrariness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 7–8.

⁹ *Ibid.* 10.

¹⁰ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Anchor Books edition (New York: Anchor Books, 1967) 68.

¹¹ Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969) 20.

2. *The religious importance of pop culture.* There was a time in Western society when what we often call “culture” was closely connected to the Christian church. Especially in the Middle Ages, artistic productions—whether in music or in the fine arts—focused almost exclusively on religious themes and served the worship life of the church. However, beginning in the Renaissance (the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) and advancing in the Enlightenment (the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) art came to be increasingly disengaged from its former ecclesiastical setting, opening the way for the secularization of artistic work in particular and cultural expression in general that typifies modern society.

One intriguing aspect of the *postmodern* situation, however, is what we might refer to as the “respiritualization” of cultural expression. In a manner unprecedented in the late modern era, contemporary North Americans appear to be open to the spiritual.¹² People seem to have grown dissatisfied with what they consider to be the truncated, materialist focus indicative of the modern world. And as a result they are increasingly ready to search for answers beyond the realm of the material. Consequently, words like *values*, *soul*, and *spiritual* are common parlance today. “Spirituality” is “in,” even though participation in traditional organized religion has nose-dived. Eight out of ten adult Canadians say they believe in God, eighty-two percent consider themselves to be “somewhat” or “very spiritual,” and about half report that their lives have become more spiritual in the last several years.¹³ Nevertheless, less than 25% attend church regularly. The students in David Batstone’s religion classes at the University of San Francisco offered a similar portrait. Although 80% claimed that they are “not religious,” the same percentage declared that they think of themselves as “spiritual.”¹⁴ GenX writer Tom Beaudoin explains the broader generational tendency behind these statistics: “Xers take symbols, values, and rituals from various religious traditions and combine them into their personal ‘spirituality.’ They see this spirituality as being far removed from ‘religion,’ which they frequently equate with a religious institution.”¹⁵

One additional factor makes this shift noteworthy for our purposes. Many people today transfer the religious quest from institutionalized ecclesiastical forms to pop cultural expression. The “lived theology” of many of our contemporaries is not expressed in the sacred practices of traditional religions, especially Christianity, but in and through popular culture.¹⁶

In a sense, pop culture as we know it is a relatively recent invention. We might say that it is the invention of the baby boomer generation. Boomers not only elevated pop culture icons from Elvis Presley to the Beatles into national heroes but also transformed them into objects of veneration. The

¹² See, for example, John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene, *Megatrends 2000: Ten New Directions for the 1990s* (New York: Avon Books, 1990) 295–296.

¹³ Sharon Doyle Driedger, “On a Higher Plane,” *Maclean’s* 108/52 (Dec. 25, 1995–Jan. 1, 1996) 23.

¹⁴ Martin Wroe, “American Pie in the Sky,” *Third Way* 18/7 (September 1995) 13.

¹⁵ Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998) 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 18.

pop cultural realm boomers inaugurated has been for GenXers a given. It is a central dimension of life, in which they were steeped nearly from the cradle. In Beaudoin's words: "we are nurtured by the amniotic fluid of popular culture with the media as a primary source of meaning. . . . We express our religious interests, dreams, fears, hopes, and desires through popular culture."¹⁷ Beaudoin goes so far as to assert,

The extent to which popular culture has meaning for our generation gets at the heart of what makes it a distinct group. In addition to a unique set of social and economic conditions that prevailed for those of us born in the 1960s and 1970s, our generation . . . readily "respond" to (find meaning in) a shared set of cultural referents. These pop culture "events" significantly influenced and continue to shape the meaning systems and values of this generation, both actively and potentially, explicitly and implicitly.¹⁸

Hence, many people today—especially many younger adults and teenagers—look to Hollywood (and Nashville) to provide the common cultural artifacts by means of which they understand themselves and through which they express their deepest longings. Pop culture has "gone religious." This development suggests that we Wheatonites must give due consideration to the question, "What does Hollywood have to do with Wheaton?"

II. HOLLYWOOD AND THE WHEATONITES: THE PLACE OF CULTURE IN THEOLOGY

What does Wheaton have to do with Hollywood? At first glance, my question appears to be simply a contemporary formulation of an issue theologians have debated since the second century, namely, What is the role of culture in theology? To what extent ought Christian theologians take culture seriously?

1. *Culture and theology: paradigmatic responses.* Although an ancient problem, the question of the relationship between culture, understood broadly, and theology has generated an intense and often heated discussion since the late nineteenth century.

The older liberal theological project provided one response. Beginning with Friedrich Schleiermacher's *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799), liberal thinkers sought to give place to culture in their theological reflections. In fact, so keen was their intent to bring the faith into the modern era that it is now fashionable to fault them for linking theology too closely with the cultural impulses of the day. Indeed, any theologian who takes culture seriously risks elevating culture above the Biblical message or allowing contemporary thinking to sit in judgment over Christian teaching. And sensitivity to culture does open the way to a drift into syncretism, as critics of liberalism repeatedly point out.

In their attempt to avoid these risks, many evangelicals have tended to the opposite extreme. Because theology involves the discovery of truth that is

¹⁷ Ibid. xiv.

¹⁸ Ibid. 22.

transcultural, they argue, theologians need give little, if any, thought to culture.¹⁹ These scholars rightfully warn against the perils of cultural accommodationism. Nevertheless, evangelicals who seek to construct a culture-free theology are attempting the impossible. We simply cannot escape from our cultural context into some transcultural intellectual vantage point. On the contrary, all theology is by its very nature as a human enterprise culturally embedded. In fact, when we look back to the supposedly grand, culture-free, timeless theological systems of past eras, we can see how culturally-conditioned—or culturally-sensitive—they actually were.

Not only are attempts to construct a culture-free theology doomed to failure, they are theologically and Biblically unwarranted. Rather than coming to us in transcultural form, divine truth is always culturally embedded. Lesslie Newbigin points out that this is the case with the gospel itself: “We must start with the basic fact that there is no such thing as a pure gospel if by that is meant something which is not embodied in a culture. . . . Every interpretation of the gospel is embodied in some cultural form.”²⁰ Justo Gonzales confirms this assessment. “The knowledge of Christ never comes to us apart from culture, or devoid of cultural baggage,” he writes. Gonzales then explains,

From its very inception, the gospel was proclaimed within a culture. Jesus came to his contemporaries within the circumstances of the Jewish culture of his time and place. It was as Jews—more concretely, as Galilean Jews—that his first disciples received him. Ever since, in the passage to the various forms of Hellenistic culture, in the conversion of the Germanic peoples, and in every other missionary enterprise and conversion experience, people have met Christ mediated through cultures—both theirs and the culture of those who communicated the gospel to them.²¹

As Gonzales’s statement suggests, the culture-specific nature of divine truth arises directly out of the doctrine of the incarnation with its reminder that the Word became flesh in a specific cultural context (John 1:14). In keeping with the nature of the incarnation, Paul readily drew from Greek cultural artifacts. Hence, he appealed to the works of pagan poets in his conversation with the Athenian philosophers (Acts 17:28). John Goldingay notes, “Paul is *the* great discursive theologian in Scripture, but his systematic, analytic thinking characteristically takes the form of contextual theological reflection.”²²

The goal of our theologizing is culture-specific as well. As the incarnate Word, Jesus ministered to culturally-embedded people in first-century Palestine in a culturally sensitive manner. Hence, he approached the Samaritan woman (John 4:1–24) in a manner quite different from his response to Nicodemus (John 3:1–21). So also our calling is to serve the present generation by speaking within and to the cultural context in which God has placed us.

¹⁹ Hence, Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 1:9.

²⁰ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 144.

²¹ Justo L. Gonzales, *Out of Every Tribe and Nation: Christian Theology at the Ethnic Roundtable* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992) 30.

²² John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 365.

Apart from a few noteworthy exceptions,²³ a near-consensus has emerged among theologians today, which says that theology must take culture seriously. Colin Gunton states the point starkly, but succinctly: “we must acknowledge the fact that all theologies belong in a particular context, and so are, to a degree, limited by the constraints of that context. To that extent, the context is one of the authorities to which the theologian must listen.”²⁴ A theological method that acknowledges the connection between theology and culture must avoid both the error of cultural accommodationism on the one hand and the misguided quest for a culture-free theology on the other. Instead, it involves an interactional approach²⁵ that brings the Biblical message (together with the Christian heritage) into critical conversation with contemporary culture. But what is entailed in this interaction?

2. *Toward an interactive paradigm.* One goal of theological reflection is to facilitate the community of Christ in speaking to contemporary people. If people inhabit a “socially constructed reality,” as sociologists such as Berger and Luckmann suggest,²⁶ culture can become a crucial tool in our theologizing. Discerning what characterizes their socially constructed world places us in a better position to bring the Christian gospel into conversation with the generation God calls us to serve. Such a conversation includes articulating Christian beliefs in a manner that contemporary people can understand, a task facilitated as we express the gospel through the “language” of the culture—through the cognitive tools, concepts, images and thought-forms, by means of which people today speak about the world they inhabit. This conversation is advanced as well, as we set forth Christian beliefs in a manner that addresses the problems, longings, and ethos of contemporary culture, knowing that the social context in which we live presses upon us certain specific issues which at their core are theological.

“Cultural artifacts,” including the pop cultural productions of the “Hollywoods” of our society, offer a window into the world of people to whom we desire to communicate the Christian message. In this sense, “Hollywood” does have something to do with “Wheaton.”

The interaction between theology and culture is not intended solely as a means to facilitate our addressing the social context, however. Culture can also provide insight into the faith. Reading our culture can assist us in reading the Biblical texts so as to hear more clearly the voice of the Spirit speaking to us through the pages of Scripture. For this to occur, we must move beyond the widely-held assumption that the church is the *sole* repository of *all* truth and the *only* location in which the Holy Spirit is operative. Rather, we must

²³ David Wells appears to be one such exception, although what he rejects seems to be the negative aspects that are present in any culture. David F. Wells, “Introduction: The Word in the World,” in *The Compromised Church* (ed. John H. Armstrong; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1998) 27–34.

²⁴ Colin Gunton, “Using and Being Used: Scripture and Systematic Theology,” *Theology Today* 47/3 (1990) 253.

²⁵ For this descriptor, see William Dyrness, *Learning about Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 29.

²⁶ Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality* 189.

realize that God's Spirit—who is the Creator Spirit—is present everywhere in the world, and consequently the Holy Spirit can speak through many media. To this I must quickly add two caveats: Wherever the Spirit speaks, he speaks only and always in accordance with, and never contrary to, Biblical truth. And in so far as culture is always a “mixed bag,” in the end we can only discern the voice of the Spirit in culture as we are in tune with, and measure it by, the Spirit speaking through Scripture.

A crucial aspect of the interactional process is the use of contemporary “knowledge” in the theological task. The discoveries and insights of the various disciplines of human learning offer assistance to us in our theological work. To cite one example, contemporary theories about addictions and addictive behavior provide valuable assistance in our attempts to understand the Biblical teaching about sin. Likewise, current discoveries about the process of human identity formation can make us aware of the multitude of dimensions entailed in the new identity the Spirit seeks to create in us through our union with Christ. Our theological reflections can draw from the so-called “secular” sciences, because ultimately no truth is in fact secular.

What I am proposing is not new, of course. Christian thinkers have always drawn images from the surrounding world as well as insights from the “latest scientific findings” to facilitate them in understanding and articulating Christian truth. A classic example is the profound effect socio-political changes—such as the rise of feudal society and later the advent of nation-states—had on the development of atonement theories. Hence, one reason why Anselm raised the question, *Cur Deus Homo?* was the diminished credence the older ransom theory carried in feudal society.²⁷ His satisfaction theory, in turn, needed alteration when the advent of modern nation-states rendered obsolete the concept of honor upon which it was based.²⁸ In the new setting, Anselm's objective theory was metamorphosed into the idea of penal substitution so widely articulated today.

Perhaps a more mundane area in which Christians borrow cultural images is church music, which boasts a long history of drawing from culture, even pop culture. Consider, for example, the lyrics of the nineteenth-century gospel song, “Let the Lower Lights Be Burning,” which I remember singing as a child on the Dakota prairies. Similar to other compositions of that era, the song uses the perils of ocean travel to state a Christian truth. Except for one use of the word “sin,” the song contains no explicitly “Christian” references; it avoids almost completely the “language of Zion.” So thoroughgoing is the metaphor that the piece could just as readily be sung at a gathering of the local Maritime Rescue Society. Yet, placed within the Christian context for which it was written, it becomes a powerful call to believers to remain faithful in the task of evangelism.

We must take this aspect of the interactional approach one step further, however. Christians ought to engage with culture not only to speak to society and to gain insights for Christian theological reflection. Rather, as Wolfhart

²⁷ Robert S. Paul, *The Atonement and the Sacraments* (New York: Abingdon, 1960) 74.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 110.

Pannenberg has so consistently argued, concern with culture also arises out of the apologetic task inherent in the theological enterprise. Because God is the ground of truth, Pannenberg argues, all truth ultimately comes together in God. The goal of theology, in turn, is to demonstrate the unity of truth in God, that is, to bring all human knowledge together in our affirmation of God. Or, stated in another way, theology seeks to show how the postulate of God illumines all human knowledge.²⁹

The challenge of bringing all truth under the confession of faith in the God of the Bible requires that we interact with culture. And this includes engaging with “Hollywood,” for pop culture expresses many aspects of the language that constructs the world inhabited by contemporary North Americans.

III. HOLLYWOOD IN THE HALLS OF WHEATON: THE ROLE OF POP CULTURE IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

In speaking about the influence of pop culture today, Phyllis Tickle declares, “With few exceptions, Della Reese’s theology is going to win out every time over that of any sermon that runs counter to it.”³⁰ If this audacious statement is a fair assessment of the contemporary situation, it has far-reaching implications for theological education.

1. *The end of the modern paradigm.* Comments such as Tickle’s lead some Christians to conclude that the seemingly pervasive influence of pop culture is so outstripping the traditional Protestant medium of sermonizing and “apologizing” that we ought simply to cease training pulpiteers and mass-media apologists. In a sense, this reaction is not unwarranted. We can no longer expect people to flock to the ecclesiastical amphitheatre to lap up the eternal truths dished out in long expositions and honed apologies for the faith that make no connection to contemporary life. The effectiveness of the church in contemporary society may in fact require a quite different kind of pulpiteer and apologist.

Why, then, does our pedagogical approach in the academy—developed as it was in the modern era—routinely convey the very opposite message? Theological education tends to perpetuate the Enlightenment model that prizes the learned professor who delivers a plate of intellectual goodies to a room filled with students eager to feed on such cognitive delights.

The basis for this educational style lies in an epistemological foundationalism, which in North American theological circles all too often tends to assume an almost naive realist metaphysic and views theology as the attempt to construct a storehouse of transcultural knowledge upon a foundation of first principles that can be held with certainty. In this context, the primary purpose of theological education is to pass on to students the repository of knowledge built up through the long tradition of theological inquiry. En route

²⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (trans. Geoffrey Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 1:59–60.

³⁰ Tickle, *God-Talk in America* 128.

to this goal, the educator generally also seeks to train students in the correct theological method, so that they too might engage in the academic task and perhaps even add to the common store of knowledge.

In this educational model, the study of culture does routinely find a place in the curriculum. But the tendency is to limit its role to the domain of practical theology, especially missiology, often understood as the study of the techniques for bringing knowledge to those devoid of it. In this way, cultural study all too readily becomes little more than a necessary step in the process of translating theological truth crafted by persons embedded in one social-historical context into the language of the target cultural group.

2. Toward a new educational model. The contemporary situation, however, requires a radical shift in understanding. No longer can professors view their primary function as being the authors, or even the bearers of the one, overarching, transcultural, theological *Summa*. Instead, we must realize that theology is a cooperative venture and that our most significant role as theological educators is that of being empowerers. Our task is to do with and for our students precisely what we want future pulpiteers and teachers in the church to do among their congregants: empower them to interact theologically with life.

To this end, we continue to engage in constructive theology, of course. Indeed, I am not suggesting that we discontinue the quest for determining and restating solid Christian doctrine. Nevertheless, such construction must not be viewed as an end in itself. Rather, one of its chief purposes is to serve theology's critical task.

The ultimate goal of theological education, in turn, is not merely to pass on to the next generation the great truths we have come to possess in the exact ways in which we have come to express them. Rather, theological education must move beyond inculcating doctrine to nurturing thinking Christians—both clergy and laity. To be a thinking Christian involves being able—and motivated—to bring to light and appraise the theological convictions that lie behind one's own attitudes and actions, as well as those of the people one serves within the church and within the society in which one lives.

A central aspect of this task of being a thinking Christian—and hence to the kind of theological education that fosters it—is a willingness to take seriously the prevalence of theological talk in our society, not the least of which is the theological discourse that is both overt and lying beneath the surface of pop cultural expressions. Taking this theological discourse seriously involves learning how to perceive its presence, evaluate it, and respond to it constructively in a distinctively Christian manner. Here “Hollywood” can help. The media—television, movies, pop music, etc.—have become the most prevalent voices articulating the language that is constructing the world of contemporary North Americans. If this is the case, then we need to press the media, including the entertainment industry, into the service of theological education. We need to requisition or appropriate “Hollywood” for our task at “Wheaton.”

One way I seek to do this is by bringing what I call “pop cultural artifacts” into the theology classroom. I seek out those media pieces—from pop music to TV programming and films—that catch the public eye. In the classroom, we together “tease out” the theological agenda at work in the artifact. We seek to determine what this piece is saying about the world people today inhabit, what it indicates about how people think, and how it reveals the aspirations contemporary people hold dear.

Such study, however, ought never to stay on the level of description. Instead, it must move to prescription as well. Hence, as a community of theologians, in the classroom we seek to evaluate the theology articulated in the cultural artifact, engaging with it from our distinctive theological perspective as Christians. This task is all the more significant when we remind ourselves of an aspect of culture that been implicit throughout this essay but which I have not yet mentioned explicitly. The underlying meanings that people seek to pour into cultural expressions are not necessarily Christian, godly, or wholesome. For this reason, Christians must hone their discernment skills within this dimension of contemporary living as with every other aspect. In addition to appraising underlying meanings, ideologies, and agendas, in the classroom we muse over the question as to how each piece provides both a window into the contemporary world and a bridge for engaging the Christian gospel with our contemporaries. Thereby, we engage in critical theological appraisal with a missiological intent. Our goal is to become more effective as a gospel people in the world and more effective communicators of the gospel to our world.

IV. CONCLUSION

My passion as a theological educator is to assist in training church leaders and church people who can engage theologically with life. Too many Christians today have become spiritual “couch potatoes,” content to allow pop culture to entertain them. This poses what I see as one of the gravest dangers currently present in the church. Regardless of how often their pastors might rail against the evils of the entertainment industry, Christians continue to patronize “Hollywood.” Unfortunately, so many believers (both young and old) merely inhale uncritically the world view “Hollywood” advances and thereby become unwitting participants in the world the language of Hollywood creates. Here Phyllis Tickle is right. The theology of the Della Reeses of our day, coming as it does in the form of entertainment, has a distinct communicative advantage over any disengaged and unengaging presentation from pastors and professors alike, regardless of how “correct” their theology may in fact be.

In a context in which pop culture is quickly becoming a powerful format for “god-talk,” to cite Tickle’s description, we need to equip a cadre of Christians who inhabit the world God is building. We need Christians who, because they are grounded in solid constructive theology, engage in the critical theological endeavor as a matter of course, including the task of critically appraising the

convictions that lie behind the barrage of pop cultural artifacts emanating continuously from “Hollywood.” And we need a cadre of Christians who are able to live out the gospel within, and communicate the gospel to, a society imbued with the “god-talk” of Hollywood. To engage contemporary pop culture in this critical manner and to train others to do so as well is, I believe, one of the most crucial tasks that our contemporary society now thrusts upon those of us who inhabit the land of “Wheaton.”