

THE ALTARS WHERE WE WORSHIP

The Religious Significance of Popular Culture

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Foreword

“Altar-ization”: this coinage does not make its appearance until the very last page of this text, but from page 1 on, readers will have no difficulty knowing what the book is about. The authors are focused, relentless, and admirably clear. Readers are invited to share in “rigorous reflection concerning altar-ization of [six] aspects of American culture.” In case “reflection” sounds lulling, the coauthors wake readers up with the next sentence: “We cannot overlook the truth that religion is in crisis.” Religion may be declining, they report and may prove, but at the same time, worship at popular culture altars is prospering.

Right off, some readers may want to protest the word “we” in the title. Do “we” worship at one or more or all of these alternative altars here described? Advertisers and other writers like to include many who do not belong when they say “we.” Thus “this season we all are wearing orange,” or “we are preferring violent horror films,” or “we all are communicating with Apple Apps.” “We”? Who asked my permission to be included?

Some protest: “But I wear red, not orange.” Or “I like sentimental tear-jerkers.” Or “I don’t even own a cell phone.”

Yet some form of worship at some or all of these altars is almost inescapable. The authors state that they are less interested in inquiring about *whether* “we” worship at these altars, than about *how* we do so. The six chosen altars appear in sequence, and readers may pick and choose among them: “Body and Sex,” “Big Business,” “Entertainment,” “Politics,” “Sports,” “Science and Technology” are the options here. Readers who think about the ubiquity and force of each of these will likely be ready for “rigorous reflection,” and they will get it here.

These authors reconceptualize cultural reflection by helping readers realize an alternative to the familiar “religious *versus* secular” polarity, rich as that is, but limited also as it is. They deserve credit for enriching the language of searchers. For instance, religion, they suggest, is more likely than not best conceived as the “meaning-making” element in personal, cultural, and social life. And the choice of focus on “worship” relieves the authors of the necessity to treat all dimensions of “meaning making” or “religion” or “what have you.”

Still, the Floyd-Thomases and Mark Toulouse cannot avoid implicit and explicit references to religion. They very helpfully draw on seven dimensions of religion familiarly posed by scholar Ninian Smart, and in tour-de-force fashion stick to them patiently and consistently as they search and discover the altars that beckon and that serve the citizenry as contemporaries engage in “altar-ization.”

Worship is the focus. In religion and meaning making, an altar is not a study or arena, though “worship” often encapsulates what scholarship and conflict provide as corollaries or supports. As for “altars,” they are defined as elevated and attracting locales for worship, offerings, and sacrifices. Observers of “popular culture” notice innumerable evidences of the sacrifices “we” make to enhance devotion to sex, entertainment, politics, and the like. The authors are right: whether one is “religious” or not, it is clear that religion is in crisis in popular culture, a fact that demands rigorous reflection.

The Altars Where We Worship provides significant aid for those who would reflect on the crisis and join the authors in their search-and-discovery missions. One does not need to restrict the search to a particular academic discipline or cultural scope. Reporters, sociologists, prophets, advertisers, critics, theologians, literary critics, cartoonists, and more, whatever they reflexively bring to the reflection, will here find illustrations about and equipment for addressing popular culture.

The range of scholars on whom they draw or to whose work they point is broad. One finds pop-music celebrities jowl-by-cheek next to big thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty. I recall reading a book by Huston Smith some years ago in which he quoted that French philosopher. As I remember it, we pondered this line: “because we are present to a world, we are condemned to meaning.” All sentient beings are present to a world, or worlds, and they are observably “condemned to meaning.”

So here are “meaning makers” addressing readers who are also “meaning makers.” They are not aspiring to be formal philosophers, and they do not parade their learning or hide their meanings behind obscure words. If I had to summarize all their gifts and achievements here, I would describe them as gifted and ambitious noticers. “Noticers”? The word is not in the dictionaries,

but it is not hard to deduce what it means. I recall a poem, “Afterwards,” in which Thomas Hardy was writing his virtual eulogy. He spoke of what he had seen but which many overlooked in the natural world around them: he was one who “used to notice such things.”

The noticers who wrote this book do not advertise themselves as expert in nature watching, though they may be such. They instead notice many things in culture, in popular culture, objects and events that one can easily overlook because they seem obvious. Yet these authors subject such overlookable entities and lift them up for observation, reflection, and perhaps responding action.

Mercifully, while they are by no means uncritical about popular culture, they are not cultural snobs and they do not whine (much) because many entities that they cherish are scorned by this or that set of worshipers at the altars here described. They do not finish their task by demanding specific responses to all the crises of our time. But they may well inspire and equip others to join them in the company of “noticers” who may become responding and critical activists, and they are to be celebrated for their alluring achievement.

These scholars of religion offer a work that is at once prescient about the times in which we live and rigorously mindful of methodologies useful for the study of religion. As a result, the book is noteworthy both for the depth of its critical insights and for a style accessible to a wide variety of audiences. *The Altars Where We Worship* is an interdisciplinary book well worth the investment of one’s time.

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Preface

As authors, we come with our own popular proclivities. Mark figures the odds and the angles. Juan is a trivia and media buff. And Stacey is fascinated with mind-benders, solving puzzles or figuring out what the next popular trend will be. Admittedly, we are all *homo ludens*, creatures of play who are equally competitive in our own right. You could say we like to win. Perhaps for this reason, the game show provided a perfect context for immersing ourselves in pop culture. Although we are scholars, we knew that, like most Americans, we had our favorite game shows.

Families gather around the television to see if they can outplay other families as they watch *Family Feud*. We try to shout out as fast as we can random answers that come to mind as we watch *Password* or the *\$100,000 Pyramid*. Others of us test our genius on *Jeopardy* or try to figure out the multiple-choice strategy of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. What does this say about game shows? What does this say about us? Is the American Dream something we can achieve through random guesses or expertise in trivia? Do game shows confer upon us a certain social status or appearance of wisdom that we otherwise are denied in our everyday lives? Can all our dreams really come true (fame and riches) in the span of thirty minutes?

In order to play, you have to pass the initial “screening test.” Such tests not only examine one’s knowledge or skill suited to the game, but actually are interested at least as much in whether potential contestants will appeal to the audience. Will a contestant be a good “face for the show”? Game shows want somebody for whom the audience will root—this contestant “deserves” to win. Staff members attempt to assemble a group of players the audience can

affirm, so that one among them can experience fifteen minutes of fame and be celebrated as a winner.

An opportunity presented itself for us to try our hand in a contestant lineup. So we dove into the pool of contestants on *Wheel of Fortune*, the longest-running syndicated game show in United States television history. Not only did we feel this game show best represented a combination of luck (spinning a roulette wheel) and basic knowledge (how to play hangman, ability to spell, know the parts of speech and American idioms and icons); it also conveyed something more poignant. Who deserves a chance at the wheel?

Wheel of Fortune was on tour in Texas featuring “Best Friends Week.” We felt it was an ideal time to immerse ourselves in what social scientists call participant observation. We could test our hypothesis by putting together a participant-observation scheme wherein two of us would be participants and the other would observe. We knew our chances were slim. Mark sent an e-mail in response to the routine local appeal from the show. Each year the show receives over a million requests to be included in an audition. Only six hundred actual contestants are chosen. We knew we had to survive the lottery from the mass of e-mails in the Dallas-Fort Worth area before we would have any kind of chance.

Once we got through the lottery, Stacey was certain that if we presented ourselves the “right way,” our team of friends would be chosen as one of fifteen couples from among hundreds of couples who showed up on a Friday to audition for their chance at spinning the wheel. We had to decide which two of us would be the “friends.” Obviously, Mark would have to be a contestant. We felt that a man and woman pair would be the most “attractive.” So, Mark and Stacey would be participants while Juan would be the observer who helped us process our experience. Stacey believed the right chemistry and narrative would get us the chance at spinning the wheel. We knew we had to exude in our audition a balanced mix of professionalism, excitement, lightheartedness, mystery, vitality, and open familiarity with one another. We came up with a strategy for the day, including a little routine to use with one another during our time in the lights.

On the day of our audition, we spent some six hours in a room with other “best friends” being carefully watched and profiled. Sure enough, the match of a fifty-something white man (Mark) and a thirty-something black woman (Stacey) worked—an unlikely couple of “best friends” who constituted together both a curiosity and an idealization of American racial harmony. Wheel representatives judged us on their general impression that we would represent the qualities of “a *Wheel of Fortune* player” and that the two of us represented a *good* cross section of the population in a supposedly postracist America. We passed!

With taping to take place on August 25, all fifteen chosen couples arrived at the Nokia Center at 7:30 that morning. Taping did not begin until 3:00 p.m. All of the contestants were coached about how important excitement was to the game's image, airbrushed by professionals (ours were makeup artists for the soaps), interviewed, protected, and herded by security, photographed, rehearsed, and placed under contract. We could not go to the bathroom without an escort. Mark met Vanna White in the hall and exchanged hellos while being escorted along with a few other male contestants to the bathroom. As time for taping came nearer, we actually talked seriously and quietly between ourselves about bolting. To make things worse, we were chosen to tape the first show.

We were nervous as jittery cats, less for being under the lights and more for the fact we knew our professional images were about to be tested in a number of ways. How would our scholarly colleagues in the American Academy of Religion respond? But as we walked on stage in front of the more than six thousand people packed into the hall, with Stacey sweating bullets and Mark's stomach turning flip-flops, we somehow composed ourselves and became a part of the culture itself. As for Juan, he was simultaneously scholar, friend, and very much a nervous husband desperate for his wife to win. Mark's family cheered from the audience as well.

After winning the first two puzzles, during the commercial break we were "toweled down," made-up again, and shouted at for not showing enough excitement. "You are on the *Wheel of Fortune*, and you are *winning*," the woman told Mark. "You've got to show more excitement! Clap your hands, jump up and down, shout for joy! *Do something!*" "Stacey, you need to show us more of the person we saw smiling, laughing, and being excited!" We were way ahead going into the last round. We had banked over \$20,000 and had lost only one puzzle. But alas, Pat Sajak landed on the \$5,000 space for the final puzzle. Our colleagues, two younger women, scored \$18,000 on the last puzzle and barely passed us to go into the bonus round. In some ways, we were both winners and losers on the show.

We learned several things. At some point, each of us lost all our ability to be observers. We lost all scholarly detachment. We were fully immersed. Mark and Stacey actually became contestants, and Juan found himself transformed into the angst-ridden family member, sitting at the end of his seat, with all of the answers in tow. We wanted to win the "big money." The excited high five between us (which we swore we wouldn't do) after winning the trip to Buenos Aires, Argentina, is probably proof enough of the fact. We simply could not contain ourselves. At that point, Mark turned to Stacey and said quietly, "Let's win this thing!"

We became part of the game-show culture, and at least two of us had our fifteen minutes of fame (or infamy, depending on how you see it). We also

learned how many church members in our own congregations and how many scholars of religion are actually fans of *Wheel of Fortune*. The day of taping, three members of Mark's congregation greeted him from the audience (and were they ever surprised to see who the contestants of the first show were). Moreover, Juan witnessed several people (audience members and contestants alike) participating in religious rituals, praying, calling on God, giving thanks, and so on. He confessed to having a prayerful posture right before Mark and Stacey lost their chance at the big money. Then, after that prayer failed, he prayed that Stacey wouldn't be too disappointed or hard on Mark for not attending to the "do not make Pat angry" rule she had previously articulated (and that made her certain Pat intentionally landed on the \$5,000 so the younger blondes would have a shot at winning). After observing Pat's playful banter with the two women contestants during a commercial break, Mark rather upset Pat when he interrupted what both Mark and Stacey interpreted as flirting by cracking, "It is really good to meet you, Pat; I grew up watching you on television."

To our mutual surprise, our scholarly colleagues were not embarrassed to see us appear on the show; they actually celebrated the fact that they knew people who became contestants. Our university and divinity-school colleagues even held a "watch party." One of the sessions at the American Academy of Religion meeting, where over ten thousand scholars of religion gather, announced the appearance from the podium. We simply had not anticipated that result—that our game-show appearance could get applause, even win accolades, as easily as actual scholarly production. Our scholarly apprehension about laying our reputations on the line to become participant observers on an American game show gave way to being celebrated by religious scholars, who actually offered their own two cents about how we might have played the game better.

This preface represents our own way of making the point that we recognize ourselves as part of what is analyzed in this book. None of us, in fact, is ever exempt from the influences exercised by popular culture in America.

Introduction

Hidden in Plain Sight

The Religious Nature of American Popular Culture

We must therefore, from the experiential point of view, call these godless or quasi-godless creeds “religions”; and accordingly when in our definition we speak of the individual’s relation to “what [s/he] considers the divine,” we must interpret the term “divine” very broadly, as denoting any object that is god *like*, whether it be a concrete deity or not.

William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

Religion *is* important to Americans. But the religion we practice is often *not* the religion we confess. From at least the time of Alexis de Toqueville, observers of the American scene have recognized the essence of religion in everything American. Let’s be honest with ourselves. Even though some Americans claim the country’s population is deeply divided, often described as engaged in a “culture war,” most Americans tend to worship at similar altars. Americans form a nation of believers; but what do they believe? What is the object of their faithful devotion? In response to the query, “What does it mean to have a god?” the German theologian Martin Luther answered, “Trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and idol. . . . Whatever then thy heart clings to . . . and relies upon, that is properly thy God.”¹ Several centuries later, H. Richard Niebuhr commented that “if this be true, that the word ‘god’ means the object of human faith in life’s worthwhileness, it is evident that [people] have many gods, that our natural religion is polytheistic.”²

One could argue that, according to this logic, genuine atheists do not exist, since everyone believes in some source of ultimate meaning or fulfillment. Americans believe, first, in a serviceable God. We want a God who meets our

needs, who provides altars where we can get good service. Second, we want a friendly God, who blesses us as we become comfortable, wealthy, and successful. Our altars provide places where we find blessing in a community of like-minded seekers. Americans are practical people, who want a pragmatic faith. The objects of our attention have become our God, and fulfilling our desires has become our religion.

This book attempts to describe religion as we find it in the United States. The central question for *The Altars Where We Worship* is not *whether* Americans are religious but *how* we are religious. Put another way, if we are going to go to the trouble to be faithful, the object of our devotion needs to be useful to us. This is something peculiarly North American, something that seems to affect or infect all of us, no matter what our social location—black or white, gay or straight, religious or atheist, liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat. Though we claim to serve things that are sacred, in actuality we deem sacred those things that serve us. On the one hand, we recognize that if everything is religious, nothing is religious. But we also know that the way we respond to things (perhaps by acting with a devotion that attributes ultimacy) can make something religious that is not meant to be religious at all.

Statistics reveal a startling gap between confession and practice in American religion. Slightly more than 70 percent of Americans in 2014 considered themselves Christian (a drop of nearly 8 percent since 2007). Comparatively few actually show up at religious services in any given week.³ When Gallup asks the question annually, the survey reports about 35 percent of Americans claimed to attend every week or almost every week, compared with 41 percent in 2007.⁴ These claims by Americans are exaggerated. A serious study of church attendance by sociologists of religion, published in 1993 (the year before Gallup reported 45 percent attending weekly or almost every week), taking a congregation by congregation count, found that, though 35.8 percent of the Protestants in the area they studied *said* they attended church weekly, on any given Sunday only about 19.6 percent *actually* showed up.⁵ Some are more honest than others about their habits; in 2015, 50 percent of Americans answered that they attended only “seldom,” or “never.” Though Americans claim a strong religious identity, the commitment to attend religious services is simply not very high among them.⁶

Where are Americans finding meaning within their lives, if not in the practices and contexts provided by traditional religions? Where are Americans making meaning for their lives, if not in those places? *The Altars Where We Worship* seeks to answer these provocative questions.

Within the last several decades, survey and poll data have revealed a fascinating tension within the American religious experience. Some 80 percent of Americans state that religion is either very important (58 percent) or

somewhat important (22 percent) to them. In 2015, however, 22.8 percent of Americans, especially younger Americans, claimed to be “religiously unaffiliated.”⁷ As of 2012, for example, 15 percent of those born between 1946 and 1964 (baby boomers) are unaffiliated. But 34 percent of those born between 1990 and 1994 (younger millennials) are unaffiliated.⁸

For those who are affiliated, most treat religion in an eclectic fashion. They are comfortable mixing and matching beliefs and practices traditionally at odds with one another. As early as 1992, one study described how Americans had found “substitute faiths” through their memberships in Common Cause, Sierra Club, or the nearest yoga, ballet, or martial-arts classes. Others had found spirituality through various avenues enabling “self-awareness,” whether through “Self-Realization Fellowships,” self-help books, paranormal experiences, or the practice of witchcraft.⁹ In addition, these consumers tend to blend Christian backgrounds with other ideologies, like astrology, reincarnation, popular psychology.¹⁰ Christian Americans consult astrological charts and dabble in telekinesis, even though their religious communities condemn these practices and scientists argue that no scientific evidence supports them.¹¹ These trends are not found simply among the younger generation. During the 1980s, President Reagan and his spouse, Nancy, both traditional Christians, depended upon horoscopes to change their White House calendars and appearances.¹²

People are taking control of religion in their own lives, making it a home-based commodity where sacred altars can be privatized. In the American consciousness, religion and spirituality are increasingly divorced from one another. Tom Smith, who directed a major sociological study on the question, estimated that a quarter of Americans think of themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” The same study showed decreasing support for organized religion and increasing support for the privatization of religious belief. A sizable number of Americans approach religion as if it were a large salad bar, where one can pick and choose goodies from a seemingly infinite variety of bowls and mix up their own favorite combinations.¹³

Commitment to religious freedom and a suspicion of traditional institutions and authorities have always been prominent features of American life, but contemporary Americans have turned them into an art form. American popular culture celebrates our ability to break with tradition and indulge ourselves by satisfying religious and spiritual needs in untraditional ways. In our culture these days, it’s hip to be spiritual, but square to be a Methodist. It’s no wonder that the mainline churches are turning to commercials to try to get their groove back. The problems for the traditional church obviously began several decades ago. In his 1998 study of religion’s role in the lives of members of Generation X, whose oldest members are in their early fifties today, Tom

Beaudoin contended that young Americans have grown skeptical about traditional faith due to corruption and scandal among sacred and secular leaders of the nation.¹⁴ In the past twenty years, nothing much has changed this picture for the generations following. As Beaudoin wrote, “I was awash in popular culture and alienated from official religion. Despite all this, I still considered myself unmistakably ‘spiritual.’ By this, I meant I thought about religion, I thought there was more to life than materialism, and I pieced together a set of beliefs from whatever traditions I was exposed to at the time.”¹⁵

Who can blame these last few generations? The last forty years have seen their share of sex scandals, whether in the White House or the church house. Presidential leadership has given us Vietnam, Watergate, the Iran-Contra scandal, and the debacles in Iraq and Afghanistan. Acts of terror and acts of nature, from 9/11 to Hurricane Katrina, have shaken our faith in the ability of authorities to handle crises appropriately. We are a nation of skeptics desperately looking for hope. President Obama’s quick rise to leader of the free world likely owes something to these sentiments. Whether entirely accurate or not, the perceived hypocrisy and myopia of organized religion has given Americans license to meet their spiritual needs in any way that works.

We are not arguing this is the first generation of Americans that has experienced such disappointment and disillusionment with traditional religion. But we do believe this is a watershed moment. Traditional religion is being fundamentally challenged in ways previous generations would never have dared to imagine. Americans secure order for their lives, find moral guidance, and uncover life’s meaning in cultural locations their grandparents most likely tried to avoid. An older meaning associated with religion was “faith seeking understanding”; today’s meaning is more likely “pleasure seeking opportunity.”

Nor are we contending that traditional religions in the United States are dying. Nothing could be further from the truth. We do believe that mainline American religions have lost their standing as core entities entrusted by most Americans with constructing, maintaining, and perpetuating shared notions of morality, meaning, and community for modern society. In their places, Americans have constructed “altars” from the stuff of popular culture—namely, body and sex, entertainment, sports, politics, big business, and science and technology—to supplement or supplant the role once occupied by traditional faith. Whether consciously or not, many Americans have discovered they can meet their basic religious impulses and spiritual needs in overtly nonreligious endeavors that end up serving them, ironically, in markedly religious ways. This book seeks to demonstrate how this is the case.

There’s a new “sacred” in town. As Paul Tillich, Peter Berger, Sigmund Freud, and Karl Marx remind us in differing contexts (theology, sociology, psychology, and economics), this notion of the sacred is not defined concretely

by religious commitments, but rather by how those things associated with the sacred operate in concretely religious ways. In this instance, religion is no longer about the normative rhetoric and practices attached to communities of faith and related institutions, and how we derive meaning from them. Rather, it is about “meaning making” and our preferences for those places where we enjoy a greater sense of our own fulfillment. Consequently, Americans often derive more meaning from altars found in the supposedly secular arena than in traditionally sacred locations. But this schism between secular and sacred actually marks a key fallacy in contemporary parlance. We have created a dichotomy between the sacred and the secular to our own detriment. The distinction between the two is not as evident as it first appears.

Religion and popular culture are hot topics when considered separately, but when they are brought together, the result can be explosive. This kind of analysis is timely because it seeks to understand the way people actually live, not the way, perhaps in their better moments, they think they should live. Most books on popular culture that touch on religion attempt to understand popular culture as something distinct from the religion that surrounds it, or attempts to influence it, or is influenced by it. This book examines how popular culture itself is religious. In his analysis of fetishism in contemporary American culture and society, David Chidester has suggested that “the study of religion in popular culture is faced with the challenge of exploring and explicating the ways in which such ‘artificial’ religious constructions can generate genuine enthusiasms and produce real effects in the world.”¹⁶ Whereas Chidester’s perspective is equally incisive and astute, his phraseology “‘artificial’ religious constructions” has a troubling connotation: if someone holds a particular object or belief as sacred, what makes it more or less artificial than any other? The designation of what is authentic as opposed to artificial becomes untenable if one realizes that all things religious are created and perpetuated by humans.

Today’s media, since at least the presidency of Jimmy Carter and the “Year of the Evangelical,” have understood religion as something completely distinct from popular culture. The media routinely address the religious nature of “values voters” who purportedly derive their social concerns from traditional religious expressions. They have tended to use the term “evangelical Christians,” a traditional religious classification, for what more appropriately should be called “the religious right,” itself a cultural phenomenon. These days, to make matters worse, some in the media, especially the more conservative news outlets, uncritically parrot the political right by using the phrase “radical Islam” as a synonym for global terrorism. In other words, media are generally confused, even when they are discussing the traditional religious communities. Mainstream media have virtually no understanding of the way

religion operates outside these parameters. In our setting, the more significant power of religion is found outside the influences of traditional religion's ability to transform culture.

Today the power of religion rests in the way culture operates religiously in people's lives to sustain values and beliefs that have little to do with traditional faith expressions. Yet few are talking about it. People are passionate about the prevalence of religion and the power of culture, but few realize the two are becoming one. American constitutional law has even seen fit to protect culture from overbearing religion, and religion from overbearing state control. But there is little understanding that culture itself can take on religious characteristics unrecognized by most Americans, but operating in an extraordinarily powerful and effective manner. *The Altars Where We Worship* seeks to expose the wizard behind the curtain to reveal just how America is shaped by this largely unexplored phenomenon.

Americans nowadays are more clearly aware that religion participates within a larger marketplace of ideas and experiences. We are hesitant, however, to take the next steps to examine just how the marketplace of ideas and experiences is itself religious. The construction of these "altars" as alternative religious enterprises culled from various dimensions of popular culture appears at first glance to be a blasphemous, narcissistic, and manipulative sham fomented by the worldly and secular. Yet their very existence in American culture indicates a twofold paradox.

First, inherent within their structure, and due to the function and relevance they readily provide for the lives of millions of Americans, these altars combine aspects of religiosity that people experience as transformative, prescriptive, and inspiring. Through them true believers find meaning for their lives that they deem comparable to the meaning others claim to find through more overtly religious settings. Second, and even more interesting, however, is the fact that most Americans live with the both/and in this equation. They attest to being religious and/or spiritual in conventional ways while, at the same time, in actual practice, they find meaning in altars found in popular culture. These folk are able to find gratification and sustenance at these altars, and are able to offer adoration and reverence before them, all without experiencing even the slightest twinge of cognitive dissonance or pang of disloyalty where traditional religious associations are concerned.

For better or worse, we are faced with the reality that human experiences before these altars contain religious characteristics in common with experiences before more traditional altars. Such a discovery, at the very least, requires us to broaden our notions of the American religious experience. Without passing judgment over the worshipers at these altars, many of the core issues and themes found there—differentiating insider/outsider identity,

constructing moral and ethical codes of living, providing a mythological as well as epistemological framework for understanding human existence, and asserting some rationale for transcendence and ultimate meaning—are common concerns within the history of religion writ large. Rather than trying to debunk these altars in any fashion, we believe it is important to recognize that these altars naturally connect with our human desire to locate the religious impulse in something we perceive to be greater than ourselves. Clearly, within these spheres of popular culture, Americans have been able to discover religious elements that had once been understood to be the sole province of the world's great faiths.

Our method for examining these altars will adapt the seven dimensions of religion outlined by Ninian Smart in his seminal volume *The Religious Experience of Mankind*. His sevenfold framework offers a useful device for deriving a more complete picture of the religiosity associated with each altar.¹⁷ Like more formal religions, each of these altars provides followers with (1) a *mythic narrative* to aid in addressing matters of sacred meaning and holy significance, sometimes in epic fashion; (2) a system of *doctrines* that outlines appropriate relationships and offers guidance concerning how followers should orient themselves within the world; (3) a set of *ethical codes* defining key values, principles or precepts, and rules or laws; (4) an *organization or institution* to aid in perpetuating religious ideas and imbedding them in the societal fabric; (5) a *ritualistic dimension* within which the faithful engage in acts that define meaning for life and merge belief with exercises of experience and practice; (6) an *experiential dimension* that enables followers to express their feelings and experience extraordinary meaning; and (7) a *material dimension* with concrete and tangible expressions of the sacred that enliven the five senses of touch, smell, sight, hearing, and taste.

Using Smart's typology to analyze what to most observers is merely secular culture enlarges our understanding not only of American culture, but also of the fabric of religion now operating within it. It allows us a means of examining the internal logic found within these cultural contexts ("altars"), in order to demonstrate what precisely, in religious terms, is happening for those who find meaning there. The typology enables a comparison with more traditional expressions of religion.

Finally, we believe the application of Smart's typology effectively expands our understanding of religion and acknowledges more accurately the actual practices associated with the complexity of religious faith as it exists within contemporary American society. We hope that the chapters that follow will help draw each reader into this process of interpretation and allow personal and meaningful reflection about the complex interaction between religion and culture within American society.

In addition to this framework of interpretation, we believe it might be helpful to readers if we share the impetus behind this analysis. At present, the academic study of religion is about understanding religion, not about either proselytizing or naming the heretical. Put another way, it is about perceiving and not prescribing about what is religious in our daily lives. This is especially true in this era, marked by religious pluralism on one side and globalization on the other. The scholarly analysis of religion is also filled with jargon and academic rigmarole (i.e., what seems for many to be confused and meaningless talk). Even though much of it offers helpful analysis about the religious, one has to care passionately enough about it, and labor long to understand it, before receiving much benefit from it. This is too bad, since acquaintance with some conclusions of the scholarly study of religion could actually help people who are religious understand and appreciate religion in new and vital ways. Further, they might find that greater knowledge of religion in general could help them plumb the depths of their own beliefs and to become more tolerant of, and conversant with, religious difference.

Even given the enormous production of scholarship in religious studies and theological education, the average citizen has little access to, or interest in, the content found within it. Consequently, few Americans, in spite of the self-confessed importance of religion for their lives, reflect critically or analytically about how they might be caught off guard by the power of religious experiences and expressions that actually appear, on the face of things, to be something other than religious. No matter what the cultural context for a person's life might be, no matter what a person's line of work, and no matter how thoroughly socialized within congregation or temple or mosque, there is nearly always a considerable chasm between how Americans *profess* their respective faiths and how they *practice* them. We believe a consideration of how popular culture operates in religious ways might offer Americans who are intentionally religious in traditional ways an opportunity to reflect about this gap between profession and practice in their own expressions of religious piety, belief, and experience, perhaps even to work to close it if they so choose.

If existing formulations of religious studies accomplish little in furthering general understandings of religion, the same is true of scholarly tendencies to compartmentalize the distribution of knowledge into departments and academic fields. Simply put, the examination of these modern-day cultural altars offers a multilayered and multidisciplinary approach to knowledge about religion. Such a look requires a multidisciplinary gaze that is able to draw from anthropology, sociology, psychology, history, political science, economics, linguistics, and the natural sciences, among other fields, to provide insights into the innermost workings of religion as a part of daily life in contemporary America. This sort of intellectual hybridity (or mixture) is increasingly

important, because our existences in contemporary society gravitate toward being gestalt affairs rather than piecemeal endeavors. To put it more colloquially, the thoughts and experiences of most Americans, when considered as a whole package, nearly always amount to more than the sum of their parts. To understand the whole, we need somehow to make sense of more than just the individual experiences that contribute to the whole.

Therefore, even though we are affected by the dynamics of the natural environment, we must remember that the principles associated with ecology and biology constitute only one facet of our human existence. We are all political citizens subject to mandates defined by governmental authority as a fact of our lives. As consumers and producers, we exist under the dictates of the market. Countless other forces affect our daily existence as Americans, among them religion. As religious beings, Americans yearn to orient themselves within the world and find meaning in and for life that is transcendent to mundane experiences.

Though some would claim otherwise, we believe human beings are essentially religious: all human beings seek meaning and purpose for life. Of course, there are some who deny seeking meaning and purpose, but who actually find their meaning and purpose for life in denying their need to seek it. When one recognizes that humans naturally seek meaning, and that this quest is essentially religious, then one is able also to see that the “religious” is capable of attaching itself to any number of seemingly “nonreligious” forms.

The altars we examine here operate religiously for people, especially in cases where the heart might experience what the mind has not yet fully understood. That is why they can operate religiously, without any sense of contradiction, and create community simultaneously between persons as different from one another as the fundamentalist Christian and the secular humanist. The religious dimensions of these cultural altars can gather to worship together an amazingly divergent group of persons who otherwise have very little in common, especially considering traditional religious commitments. And yet they contribute meaningfully—perhaps more so than traditional religious altars—to how Americans define their lives, how they interact with others on a regular basis, and ultimately how they make sense of the world around them.

Contrary to the assumptions found during the modern period of the Enlightenment, no community in today’s world, whether secular or religious, possesses a monopoly on truth. Our contemporary postmodern context means we need to recognize that everybody has a point of view. There is no exclusive or extraordinary claim on objectivity. Instead, every person is shaped by some community of assumptions. You might grow up outside the church and believe that religion has no place in public discussions because religion is not

rational. In that case, you might believe that only nonreligious people can be rational. You might even find your purpose and meaning in life making such a claim (and thus, by some definitions, be acting “religiously” in the faith you place in your commitment to nonreligion).

However, in a postmodern context, we can now recognize that this type of belief in secular assumptions is no more objective or inherently truthful than assumptions created and shared within any variety of religious communities. Every person, in a contemporary public discussion, needs to be aware that assumptions come from somewhere—that all persons are shaped by the assumptions of the community or communities that formed them. When you are aware that this is the case, you learn how to listen to others, and how to communicate with others without insisting that your way of seeing things is the only way to see things, or that your way is synonymous with the truth.

A postmodern context enables us to assess a central truth about an examination of the religious significance of these cultural altars, namely, the claim that they share modes of operation and practice that are common to major world religious traditions like Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. They operate as communities that form those who regularly inhabit their spheres of influence. In the complex features of contemporary society, rarely does one find individuals who are shaped solely by a traditional religious community (a remote Amish community might be able to make such a claim). Instead, contemporary Americans are shaped by multiple communities. Given the low attendance in most traditional religious communities even on one day per week, most Americans are more likely shaped at a fundamental level by the communities they inhabit with more frequency the other six days of the week.

In this study, we are engaged very much in an investigation of a particular time and place in human history: we are striving for the sense of what religious faith is like in the early twenty-first century in the United States. In our examination of these altars, the field known as history of religion informs an important aspect of our method. As pioneering historian of religion Mircea Eliade indicated in his classic work *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959), it is crucial that we operate with a definition of religion as dualistic concern that has a fluid dynamism at its core. In his far-ranging vision, Eliade depicted the boundary between sacred and secular as much more permeable than previous considerations had ever acknowledged. According to Eliade, “The threshold is the limit, the boundary, the frontier that distinguishes and opposes two worlds—and at the same time the paradoxical place where those worlds communicate, where passage from the profane to the sacred world becomes possible.”¹⁸ Ninian Smart suggests that “the washing away of a fundamental distinction between religion and secular worldviews enables us to ask more sensible questions about the functions of symptoms of belief.”¹⁹

Without a discipline of historical inquiry with its attention to issues of chronology, causation, context, and consequence, our grappling with the religious worldview of another individual or group—even those who might ostensibly share a belief system or faith tradition similar to our own—eventually makes no sense and becomes mired in irrelevancy. The history of religion is useful because it helps us infer how present perspectives and structures of religion—ranging from traditional organized religion to seemingly secular forms acting religiously—have emerged from the deep, messy, and complex web of human interactions and historic events over the long passage of time. In this way, the history of religion challenges us to go beyond the immediately evident and readily available forms of proof that, in turn, can also allow greater insight into the sacred heart of traditions. This heart contains such things as the lure of myth and ritual, the forcefulness of religious doctrine and values, the dynamism of pious conduct and numinous experience, and the enduring strength of communities of faith and their respective institutions. These serve to indicate to what extent faith has shaped our society and, conversely, to what extent society has molded our notions of faith.

In a similar vein, historian of religion Charles Long's *Significations* offers many provocative means of understanding religion as something that stands at the heart of what it means to be human. Human life itself is a constant search for meaning and personal definition/distinction. Most especially, Long's assessment of "cargo cults" demonstrates how a human community can develop quasi-religious preoccupations with material culture and cultural artifacts in ways that lead them to make fetishes and begin to worship them.²⁰ In another useful insight, Long invites scholars to question whether the traditional distinction in Christian theology between the "visible church" and the "invisible church" of the saved might actually represent a perpetual human search to find new locations to enable communal salvation.²¹ In other words, rather than being dismissive of nontraditional religious locations, it might be more important to explore how everything (and everyone) is linked to the grand quest for human meaning and transcendence.²²

To get a broad picture of what is actually happening in religious life, people need to look at the nontraditional locations alongside the more traditional ones. When viewed through such a prism, the interplay between religion and popular culture in our society is a richly layered and reciprocal relationship. We might see how the virtual construction of these altars is neither fixed to one place on the map nor limited to a specific moment in human time. Instead, we can begin to see the building of these altars as a process. In worshipping at these altars, Americans share experiences with other human beings across countless generations who have attempted to fulfill the very human desire to create meaning for their lives.

Equally germane to this exploration are the numerous insights gleaned from the field most commonly referred to as “theology of culture.” On face value, this phrase often seems to represent a paradox instead of a partnership of sorts. On the one hand, theology (understood literally as God-talk) in its pondering of the sacred, holy, and divine is not necessarily directly at odds with the realm of secular culture. On the other hand, secular culture for many people automatically assumes a sphere of existence free of God and devoid of notions of faith and spirit. When joined together in this fashion, the phrase “theology of culture” appears to be contradictory and internally divided. It is our contention, however, that nothing can be further from the truth. The notion of a radical separation between the sacred and the secular is an assumption more than an actuality. In many instances, a shared realm of human experience runs through them both. Human beings seek an escape from the mundane or a notion of transcendence in the sacred and a feeling of the presence (or immanence) of the divine in the everydayness of their lives.

Without question, theology of culture is deeply indebted to the theological reflections of Paul Tillich. In his rather ubiquitous statement that religion is the “ultimate concern” of a person, Tillich explores the religious dimensions of popular culture in terms of its ultimacy—the synergy of ultimate concern (or obsession, if taken to excess) and the pursuit of ultimate fulfillment (whether it is eternal or ephemeral).²³ Elsewhere, Tillich asserts, “Religion is the substance of culture [and] culture is the form of religion. Such a consideration definitely prevents the establishment of a dualism of religion and culture. Every religious act, not only in organized religion, but also in the most intimate movement of the soul, is culturally formed.”²⁴

In this and other meaningful ways, Tillich moves from basic considerations to concrete applications in his attempt to illustrate “the religious dimension in many special spheres of [human] cultural activity.” He analyzes the symbiotic relationship of religion to art, science, education, philosophy, and psychology among other human endeavors, as an attempt to overcome the “fateful gap between religion and culture.” Tillich makes considerable inroads in connecting theology to culture broadly conceived. He also draws heavily from various academic disciplines in order to bring theology into fuller and richer conversation with other fields of knowledge and research. For example, his seminal work on symbols helps scholars rethink the iconographic significance of theological language.

In an attempt to bring the conversation found in this introduction full circle, we would note that the rigorous exchange between Mircea Eliade and Paul Tillich (in his later years until his death) provides a critical bridge linking the history of religions with theological thinking that, since that time, has offered new vistas for imagining the world around us. An awareness of the

importance of a notion like the theology of culture can provide a vision of what religious reflection is and aid an examination of how it exists in our present context. Perhaps a study like this one, a practical exercise examining the ways Americans worship, through attention to various cultural aspects of their lives, will prove fruitful in providing a better understanding of the essential nature of religion itself as it operates in the twenty-first century.

We want to make clear that our approach is not interested in trying to define which religious experiences are true and which are not. In the chapters that follow, we examine six aspects of American culture that function essentially as “altars” where Americans gather to worship and produce meaning for their lives. At these altars, Americans reconcile themselves to a “serviceable God” who promises to meet their every desire. By examining the major players, fads, trends, movements, and events associated with each of these altars, each chapter will examine the religious inner workings of the popular cultural phenomenon associated with them.

While each of these altars offers its own justifications about the truth, our claim here is rather that all these religious experiences are simply authentically religious, whether their justifications be true, false, or somewhere in between. This work approaches each cultural altar as a place where an inhabited and quite human worldview operates authentically and religiously in forming the people who frequently seek and often find some kind of meaning and sustenance for life from it. Our study of these altars as a uniquely American form of religious expression begins with the assumption that some kind of faith exists at its point of origin. Therefore, all these experiences are authentic religious experiences. Rather than narrowly defining religion by its description (formal or functional), its origination (ordinary or extraordinary), or its direction (“this-worldly” or “otherworldly”), our approach enables us as observers to assess what associated religious practice *means* to the social and historical actors within a particular setting, as these actors attempt to make sense of themselves, their world, and what they consider to be sacred. In sum, this examination of the altars where we worship is intended to suggest a new direction in the study of American religion that would make room for a broader understanding of how religion and religious experiences hidden within American popular culture actually shape the lives of nearly all Americans. We expect that many more capable scholars will take this study much further than we do here.