

Pete Ward. *Gods Behaving Badly: Media, Religion, and Celebrity Culture*. Baylor University Press, 2011. 160 pages. \$24.95.

The precipitating questions in this book (not, by the way, to be confused with the novel or movie with the same title) are whether or not our devotion to various celebrities actually qualifies as religion and to what degree are the media complicit in promoting and exploiting this fandom. We certainly and obviously employ the language of religion to describe our relationships with celebrities. But, of course, such casual and anecdotal conclusions never seem to be quite enough. The basic hungers we all experience can apparently be satiated to some degree by devotion to a celebrity. Fans may have all sorts of objects and souvenirs from their favorite celebrity around the house: posters, bobble-head dolls, concert tickets, autographs, all gathered and displayed in shrine-like fashion. But is it religion? Although it seems to take a while to come to the conclusion, author Ward determines that celebrity devotion is more accurately described as a para-religious phenomenon. There are elements of religious behavior evident in celebrity culture, but very few really mistake celebrities for gods. More to the point, “celebrities are sacred figures that reflect versions of our own selves, painted as divine” (6). “They are immortal but they behave badly” (6). More important than who the celebrity is or what the celebrity does to warrant devotion is what the celebrity represents to the celebrity’s fans. This may cover a wide range of responses.

In addition to the Introduction, which serves as more than a preview and could stand on its own as a compressed version of the whole book, there are five chapters. They are entitled: Celebrity Worship, Representation, Para-religion, What Kind of Gods? and Themes. Chapter One explores the nature of celebrity in an increasingly secular culture where the sacred is disconnected from specifically religious traditions and “religion is [then] found in association with nature and with culture and in particular pop culture” (19). Included are discussions about the psychological implications of celebrity worship, one aspect of which is gathering with other fans. Chapter One examines the notion of para-social relationships, those that have remote, sometimes one-way intimacy. Think Facebook. Think stalkers. Chapter Two, on representation, deals with the multivalent meanings that any one celebrity may provoke in a culture or within an individual. “Celebrity culture revolves around knowing and being known” (41). The media, of course, play an important part in this, to the point of fabricating celebrity in order to commodify the celebrity status. Ultimately, some celebrities maintain celebrity status simply because they are famous but without any particular qualities attached or attributed. They are famous because they are famous.

Chapter Three is on the concept of para-religion, the idea that fandom has religious aspects but is not religion. Various definitions of religion are examined. If anything is worshipped in celebrity culture, it is idealized humanity, in particular, what fans might want to become. Chapter Four explores the kinds of roles celebrities fill. “Celebrities are part of this process whereby the sacred is merging with popular culture. [Celebrities] make up a kind of re-enchantment of the world” (97). In celebrity worship, “ideas of the divine that are hard won in the ancient world are attributed to those who are just well known” (93). “The theological in celebrity culture represents our conflicted and complex self clothed in the metaphors of the divine and reflected back on us” (107). Finally, then, “What we do see is a reflection of ourselves – as divine” (107). Chapter Five, Themes, looks at various ways we employ or engage celebrity culture, including how we judge celebrities’ worthiness to be celebrities, the lives of celebrities and their families,

becoming instant celebrities via the reality show, fandom's curiosity about the personal lives of celebrities, our secret delight in their fall, and a few others.

In the final analysis, celebrity culture and fandom are far more about us than they are about the celebrities. Celebrities are fabricated vehicles created by media to turn our fears and desires into forms that can be momentarily satiated through some form of consumption. Ward does a thorough job of description, but upon completing my reading, I felt a bit of "So what?" He might well have explored more of the implications of this culture, perhaps with some personal anecdotes, some looks at fandom gone bad, and so on. (I suggest the reader might also look at Chapter Five in John McClure's *Mashup Religion*, Baylor, 2011.)

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