

John S. McClure. *Mashup Religion: Pop Music and Theological Invention*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011. 250 pages. \$24.95.

In this provocative volume, author McClure proposes using pop music as a heuristic metaphor for doing theology. In six chapters he explores several components or constitutive elements in the production of pop music. The term “mashup” was a new one for me, although, unsurprisingly, not to my students. Yet, in some ways, the processes explored here as models for doing theology in the contemporary milieu are age-old. As a fan of folk and bluegrass music, I see all of these processes at work, albeit in more subtle ways. What has changed dramatically and qualitatively, however, are the speed at which the processes morph, the degree to which change in the processes takes place, and the nearly universal access one has to the mechanisms of producing music. Recording processes are no longer arcane practices employed by mad musicians fueled by caffeine and nicotine in dark studios enduring into the wee hours of the morning. Most anyone with a modest computer and a microphone (optional) can and does create multi-layered music for performance on social media venues. Some computers even come equipped with the necessary software as standard. Alternatively, basic software packages are available as free downloads. The process has been democratized or de-centered as never before. The music industry, of course, has suffered major setbacks, in part, because of this overall de-centering. How does it affect the doing of theology?

In Chapter One, the metaphor employed is that of songwriter. This is a helpful image, especially for preachers and teachers of preachers. While poets are often perceived as writing for themselves as their lone audience, the songwriter must balance personal creativity and expression with composing for the marketplace, often a niche market. This is where the notion of writing in and out of a theological tradition comes to play. I was able to use this image with a student even before I finished the book. A student was chafing at the idea of listener awareness because it seemed to be limiting his freedom. I suggested the image of songwriter, which he, as a musician and songwriter himself, immediately saw as relevant. Songwriters are aware of context, the context out of which the songwriter practices and to which the song is being pitched. The songwriter is aware of the participation, even the co-creation, of the song (sermon) by the hearer. We dare not be ignorant about who and what have come before. Yet we dare not be so restricted by the past that we simply imitate what has come before. Chapter Two looks at imaginatively expanding the pool of sources we draw from and even embrace even discordant elements. The notion of layering comes to play, as in four-track multi-track recording. Readers of earlier McClure works will recognize a modified Four Codes. The tracks exist independently but also play against one another in the hearing. This is the matter of intertextuality: Moving between tracks, genres and/or media inevitably alters the individual elements in ways that may not be anticipated. But that is the nature of the creative process.

Chapter Three draws on the image of the in-studio editing process of sampling and remixing; that is, blending multiple and diverse elements of music, throwing them all together to come up with something totally other than the original sources might suggest. It is musical synergy on steroids. The message is the resulting blend. This concept may be a challenge for many of us preachers who habitually start by crafting a message and then look for the means to communicate the message to a particular audience. With mashup, the message is on the far side of the mixing. It consciously cedes a great deal of control to the hearer of either the song or the sermon. Chapter Four then deals with the “musical soundscape,” the tonal value of the artifact, a subtext which both precedes and conditions the experience of the artifact itself. Chapter Five

deals with the audiences who engage the “music” created in the process. How does fandom influence both those who produce the music and those who listen to it? Chapter Six demonstrates ways of examining specific lyrics via a theological hermeneutic lens. Finally, two appendices offer examples.

McClure provides the reader with a knowledgeable foray into the realm of pop music production. He makes a convincing case for this music as a potential form for doing theology. Even if one does not choose to employ the several modes, it nevertheless reveals a way in which many of our students and assemblies are creating their own theology, with or without our input. Awareness of the role and influence of pop music becomes essential if one is to have means of meaningful engagement with its practitioners and its fans.

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