

Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, and Mark G. Toulouse. *The Altars Where We Worship: The Religious Significance of Popular Culture*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016. 230 pages. \$21.25.

Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, and Mark G. Toulouse in *The Altars Where We Worship: The Religious Significance of Popular Culture* attempt to describe religion as it exists within popular culture. In such culture traditional religion as a central institution appears to have fallen victim to the effects of post-modernity. Even as the authors describe a culture where they believe “religion is in crisis” (x), they also clearly state personal faith within the same culture has persevered. Of course, a void now exists. To fill the void the authors assert that people of faith, already thoroughly immersed and invested in popular culture, seek fulfillment in familiar places within culture. There they find sustenance and meaning (13). The Floyd-Thomases and Toulouse name these places “alternative altars” (ix).

Alternative altars are cultural places of worship, located beyond the boundaries of the traditional religion, where worshippers are formed, sustained, and find meaning (13). In this text, the authors analyze the following alternative altars: “body and sex, entertainment, sports, politics, big business, and science and technology” (4). These six areas of popular culture, which are also the chapters in the book, are by no means an exhaustive list. Instead, they provide a narrow opening through which we enter for deeper reflection on popular culture, religion, and how we worship.

To frame their analysis, the authors adapted Ninian Smart’s sevenfold typology to analyze and understand how the alternative altars function within popular culture. The elements of Smart’s typology are:

1) a *mythic narrative* which aids in addressing matters of sacred meaning and holy significance; 2) a system of *doctrines* that outline appropriate relationships and offer guidance concerning how followers should orient themselves within the world; 3) a set of *ethical codes* that define key values, principles or precepts, and rules or laws; 4) an *organization or institution* that aids in perpetuating religious ideals and imbedding them in the fabric of society; 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 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 (7).

As an interpretative guide Smart’s typology provides a framework for understanding the culture (altar) and “the fabric of religion operating in it” (13).

Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, and Mark G. Toulouse in this intelligent and provocative text, challenge our notion of altars. Not limited to distinctly ecclesial spaces, the authors open our eyes, using the lens of worship, to reveal the alternative altars built in plain sight. Like traditional religion, these new altars are formative, provide a sense of community, identity, and meaning. Unfortunately, the “altari-zation” (188) of some aspects of American culture can be viewed as an indictment against organized religion. While culture shifted due to the impact and demands of post-modernity, it appears as though religion, in many ways, stood still by extolling the virtues of its traditions. In doing so, worshippers were left with

unmet needs and desires and a religion out of step with culture. This is precisely where popular culture stepped in.

Although not a preaching text, this book provides valuable information for homiletical reflection. In a culture where religion is now described as being in crisis, this text helps the preacher understand the needs of the worshipper at a fundamental level. It calls the preacher to introspection, not only about preaching, but also about engagement with and understandings of the larger culture. It questions the preacher about ways in which their worship and theology of worship have kept pace with changes in culture. More importantly, it informs the preacher of the ways in which culture is responding to the needs of worshipper and the ways in which religion has failed to do so. While this is a fairly easy read, the level of reflection beckons the reader to wade in deep water. This is a timely and necessary text if we dare to respond to the question: What then of traditional religion?

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