

Clive Marsh and Vaughan S. Roberts. *Personal Jesus: How Popular Music Shapes Our Souls*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012. 256 pages. \$22.99.

When practical theologians talk about “engaging popular culture,” they may think of combing through the available stockpile of cultural artifacts in search of a movie scene or song lyric that resonates conceptually with something in the Christian tradition. In the classroom, the practice that grows out of such engagement may take the form of a professional hermeneutical performance aimed at demonstrating that, in the right hands, culture and theology make interesting and generative conversation partners. In *Personal Jesus: How Popular Music Shapes Our Souls*, Clive Marsh and Vaughan Roberts have a different kind of engagement in mind. Rather than “treating pop culture as a set of ‘texts’ waiting to be read, like minor bibles awaiting postmodern interpreters” (Tom Beaudoin’s “Foreword,” x), Marsh and Roberts are interested in what ordinary people actually *do* with popular music. In other words, instead of offering professional theological reflection on the words of a U2 song, they want to explore the theological implications of what is happening when some persons painstakingly craft playlists that will serve as their soundtracks for the next few weeks of their lives, or finds themselves immersed in a profound sense of solidarity and wellbeing at a concert.

This focus on the practice of listening to music leads Marsh and Roberts into dialogue with a broad array of interlocutors. In its descriptive moment, their analysis includes generous engagement with disciplines as diverse as anthropology, sociology, psychology, media studies, and musicology. The goal of this ambitious project is to map the contours of what they call the “affective space” in which listeners experience popular music. “By this term we mean any practice or activity that entails significant emotional engagement, through which a person can be shown to be doing more than just enjoying the moment” (16). In the course of exploring this “space,” the authors are able to supply a nuanced account of the many overlapping influences and contexts that shape the ways people listen to and make meaning out of popular music. While resisting the temptation to make sweeping claims about music fandom as an unacknowledged religion, the authors do want to claim that some forms of deep and sustained engagement with popular music can be helpfully understood as “spiritual disciplines” that shape identity in a “religion-like way” (163).

The theological return on all this descriptive work comes in the final chapter. The authors discuss three traditional systematic loci in relation to popular music listening practices. The interchange is facilitated such that illumination and critique flow in both directions. For example, the rhythms and sounds of music are appreciated bodily, and many of the uses to which people put popular music call attention to the human body as the site of pleasure and fulfillment. While admitting that the Christian tradition has a complicated relationship to human physicality, the authors are able to show how the doctrine of the incarnation both informs the theological sense we make of embodied secular listening practices, and is in turn itself criticized by such practices. Or concerning ecclesiology, music fans may experience a sense of deep friendship and belonging that grows out of a shared search for truth and justice mediated by the music they love. Such community-forming practices call for critical reflection on the goals of Christian community, and lead the authors to a helpful discussion about the relationship between God’s boundless kingdom of love and justice, and the boundaries of the institutional church. Or again, reflection on the ritual-like dimension of certain listening practices leads to new appreciation for the way not only conceptual meaning, but holistic transformation is mediated by the Christian sacraments. At the same time, the Christian practice of the Eucharist, with its imperative to gather in harmony,

gratitude, and hope those of many and diverse backgrounds, may grant perspective on the limitations of the more homogenous communities that tend to form around popular music. The authors also gesture toward other theological topics that may speak to and be informed by their thick description of popular music listening practices.

This book strives for rigor and methodological precision; it is not for those seeking an accessible and emotionally satisfying defense of the spiritual value of popular music. More than one review on Amazon.com reflects the disappointment of a religiously inclined music-lover who felt tricked by the title. Indeed, even an academic theologian well-acquainted with the genre may wonder at times when or whether the methodological throat-clearing and the summaries of the arguments of interdisciplinary conversation partners will give way to something recognizable as theology. The payoff comes late, but is worth the wait.

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