

Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor. *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture (Engaging Culture)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013. 352 pages. \$19.35.

A quick yet alarming question will serve well as a good entry point for this review: “How many times throughout the week have you listened to pop music, gone to movies, watched television, read advertisements on the roadside billboards, thought about what to wear, and seen celebrities on various magazines at the grocery pay counters?” Our answers to this prolonged question may vary depending on each. But, when we are asked another parallel question, we may find it relatively easy to answer in unison, “How many times have you opened the Bible throughout the week and read it, a verse at least?” I do not ask these two questions simply for a rhetorical purpose, but to show the sheer reality of our everyday life. Each day and throughout the year, most of us spend a considerable (or more) amount of time on listening, watching, reading, practicing, and thinking about pop culture than we do on anything related to our faith and church. Here comes another important question. What if the pop cultural surroundings pertain to significant spiritual or religious impacts and ramifications that to a great extent mold the style and content of our Christian faith? If so, how? And also if so, what should be the critical response of the people of faith? The two authors, Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, both theologically trained pop cultural gurus, embark on a fascinating task of providing an answer to that “what if and if so” question.

Their foundational premise is threefold: 1) pop culture itself is spiritual (or contains and demonstrates spiritual truths); 2) pop culture’s (Christian) spirituality and its lessons are highly compatible with those of the conventional Christian Church; and 3) pop culture is more influential and widespread than the church today when it comes to the spiritual formation of the people’s minds. For Detweiler and Taylor, the current situation is both good news and bad news. The bad news is that the people, whether Christians or not, have lost their interest in the traditional Church and its spiritual life because of the church’s irrelevance to real-life situations. The good news is that the people still have a *strong interest in spiritual life* and pop culture has satisfied their spiritual needs with its own media, such as advertising, celebrities, music, movies, television, fashion, sports, and art. Detweiler and Taylor would not say that pop cultural spirituality and its specific lessons are good enough to fully satisfy the spiritual needs of people today or that the conventional Christian Church has no room in the 21st century. Nor would they say that the spirituality diffused by pop culture is always positive for human souls. Indeed, they “cunningly” expose the degrading spiritual impacts of pop culture (yet, at the same time they ask and answer, “Is what the church teaches and imposes always sound and positive?” Nope.). What they want to achieve at the end, however, is considering pop culture the very locus of God’s revelation for today and interpreting and applying that Divine revelation for the sake of the people in and out of the church walls. They specifically urge Christians not to overlook the spiritual content and influence of pop culture out of their ignorance and narrow-minded obsession with the Church’s past or “This Is What We Have Always Done.”

The book is well-written with a vast amount of helpful information on each cultural medium and acute theological insights on pop cultural phenomena. Also, several illustrative materials at various points in the book are indispensable. Yet, the concluding chapter is a bit off track. Some content is redundant, repeating what has been said

previously, and the practical theological applications of pop cultural spirituality sound somewhat limited. Overall, the book is highly recommended for any theological and/or homiletic classes engaged in the critical conversation and possible synthesis between pop cultural spirituality and that of the Christian Church. I also recommend this book for seminary students of any age group who are considering creative and artistic ministry at the local congregation. The book will serve as a great resource.

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