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PREFACE

American popular culture produces fakes, not only things that are made up and invented, but also people who are frauds and charlatans. Often, these fakes are religious fakes, because they involve artificial or fraudulent religious claims about transcendence, the sacred, or ultimate human concerns. In this book, I argue that despite their fraudulence, these religious fakes still do authentic religious work in and through the play of American popular culture. As a matter of urgency, in order to recover the religious, creative, and imaginative capacity of America, we need to understand and appreciate the religious work and religious play of "authentic fakes" in American popular culture.

This book explores religious dimensions and dynamics of popular culture. What is religion? There is no single, substantial definition. On the one hand, academics in the study of religion have defined their key term in many ways, some of which we will consider. We will test these academic definitions of religion against the evidence of popular culture to see how that culture might count as religion. On the other hand, in popular, ordinary language usage of the term, people have defined religion in many ways, which we will also consider. We will test popular usage of the term *religion* in American popular culture to see the different meanings that people give to the term.

Although we will consider all these possibilities, I do have a working definition of religion: Religion is a generic term for "ways of being a human person in a human place." I define religion as discourses and practices that negotiate what it is

to be a human person both in relation to the superhuman and in relation to whatever might be treated as subhuman. Since being a person also requires being in a place, religion entails discourses and practices for creating sacred space, as a zone of inclusion but also as a boundary for excluding others. Accordingly, religion, in my definition, is the activity of being human in relation to superhuman transcendence and sacred inclusion, which inevitably involves dehumanization and exclusion. Religion, therefore, contains an inherent ambiguity. Although I have no intention of moralizing, religion does raise the moral problem of doing harm. As a humanizing, inclusive activity, religion protects people from harm. As a force of dehumanization and exclusion, religion does harm. Moralizing, while it might do no harm, also does no one any good, so I will not moralize. Instead, I will use the term *religion* as a point of entry into the meaning, power, and values at work in the production and consumption of authentic fakes in American popular culture.

This book is all about fakes. It deals with fakes from start to finish. I consider cultural activities that are not formally or legally recognized as religious institutions but nevertheless look like religion. For example, participants in popular culture have described the sport of baseball, the consumer product of Coca-Cola, and the musical genre of rock 'n' roll as if they were religions (chapter 2). Certain things that are plastic and fluid in their transformations have been described by enthusiasts as if they were religions, such as Tupperware and the Human Genome Project (chapter 3). None of these things are religions, of course. Except: people say they are; they fit "classic" academic definitions; and they do authentic religious work by negotiating what it means to be a human person in relation to transcendence, the sacred, or ultimate human concerns. As a kind of religious activity in American popular culture, these are all authentic fakes, doing real religious work in forging a community, focusing desire, and facilitating exchange in ways that look just like religion.

If we want to get real, touching, not seeing, is believing, but American popular culture has drawn upon the sense of touch in political rhetoric, firewalking, alien abductions, faith healing, and other forms of religion under pressure (chapter 4). Ultimately, the religious and political rhetoric of America calls upon the supreme visceral commitment, sacrificing one's life, as the ultimate test of authenticity, as illustrated by a "fake" religious leader, Jim Jones, and a simulated or media-generated political leader, Ronald Reagan, who revitalized an ideology of redemptive sacrifice for America (chapter 5). In the end, the really real in America, money, hard cold cash, the bedrock of values, is also an arena of trickery, fraud, and deception, even when money speaks the language of religion, "In God We Trust"

(chapter 6). Again, as a kind of religious activity in American popular culture, these discourses and practices of life, death, and ultimate values are all authentic fakes, simultaneously simulations and the real thing.

Going global, we see that American popular culture, with its authentic fakery, is not confined to the territorial boundaries of the United States. Acting like missionary religions, Coca-Cola raises problems of intercultural translation, McDonald's raises problems of intercultural rationalization, and Disney raises problems of intercultural imagination, all of which are doing a kind of globalizing religious work in the world (chapter 7). This global exchange, however, goes both ways, since Africans—from the American movement in central and southern Africa of the 1920s to the criminal gang known as the Americans in Cape Town of the 1990s—have claimed to know the real meaning of America (chapters 6 and 8). In the midst of these transatlantic exchanges, where the authenticity of religious, cultural, and social practices is at stake, we find a genuine fake, the Zulu shaman Credo Mutwa, described in his own country as a "fake, fraud, and a charlatan" but celebrated in the United States as an authentic spiritual leader who is doing real, authentic religious work, like Coca-Cola, McDonald's, and Disney, by enabling people to reimagine what it is to be a human person in a rapidly globalizing human place (chapter 9).

As the most blatant, shameless illustrations of religious fakery, the virtual religions on the Internet have to be considered; these invented, transparently fake religions include such remarkable organizations as the Discordians, the Church of the SubGenius, the Wauists, the Church of the Covert Cosmos, the Church of Elvis, the Church of the Almighty Dollar, and over 150 others (chapter 10). Here are fake religions, as I will argue, doing real, authentic religious work in cyberspace by negotiating what it means to be a human person in a human place.

In conclusion, a review of what can be learned from considering authentic fakes in American culture—popular culture, consumer culture, political culture, and global culture—highlights how authentic fakes can generate power and creativity in American religion.

Raising the question of authenticity, this book shows that the term *religion* puts that question at stake in its most urgent formulation: What is it to be a human being? Some commentators have decried the inauthenticity of popular culture; others have celebrated its authenticity; and some have tried to finesse the question, such as cultural analyst Lawrence Grossberg, in an ironic mode, by referring to its "authentic inauthenticity." I will address the question of authenticity as the central problem of religion in American popular culture.

Although I live outside the United States, I have a deep attachment to America, not only because I was born there, but also because I have family, friends, colleagues, and collaborators living there. On a recent visit, one of my colleagues, who is also a collaborator, phoned me at 7 A.M. and woke me up, saying: "Man, you've got to check this out. Turn on channel 18. They've got an infomercial selling something called Super Blue Stuff." So, in a very blurry condition, I tuned into the television program advertising this product, which, according to the testimonials of many satisfied, even ecstatic, customers, was able to relieve otherwise unbelievable pain. Following all the personal testimonials about the life-transforming power of Super Blue Stuff, a brief disclaimer came up on the screen, which read, to the best of my recollection, something like: "Super Blue Stuff should not be used for the treatment, alleviation, or cure of any medical condition." In other words, if I understood the point of this disclaimer, truth in advertising required the makers of the product to admit that Super Blue Stuff did absolutely nothing. Nevertheless, while I was still trying to assimilate this admission that the product was useless, the inventor of Super Blue Stuff suddenly appeared on the screen, smiling, to declare, "It's a miracle!"

As seen on TV, this miracle of Super Blue Stuff, I could not help thinking, resonates with many other miracles of the United States of America, with all of the Super Red, White, and Blue Stuff that has made America such a mystery in the world. Like this healing product that doesn't work but is still a miracle, America is a mystery. By exploring American popular culture, in its mystery and mystification, in its media and miracles, I hope to outline a popular history of the American present, informed by a sense of the past, which is poised on the edge of a future, full of fear and terror, perhaps, but also pregnant with the possibility of new kinds of authenticity.

I can acknowledge here only a few of my debts incurred in the process of making this book. With friends in America, I have been able to test out quite a lot of the material in this book at festive academic occasions across the length and breadth of the United States. Over the past few years, I have spoken about popular culture; baseball, Coca-Cola, and rock 'n' roll; the sense of touch; blood and money; globalization; neoshamanism; Internet religions; and other things in this book at academic gatherings and invited lectures in Philadelphia, Boston, Princeton, Syracuse, Poughkeepsie, Richmond, Nashville, Gainesville, and Santa Barbara. All right, I admit that I stuck pretty much to the East for these events, but only because it is closer to Cape Town. I also tested some of this material in Cape Town, South

Africa; Toronto, Canada; Tsukuba, Japan; Hamburg and Hannover, Germany; and Stirling, Scotland.

I conducted my most intensive testing, however, at the annual meeting of the Farmington Institute—University of Maine, Farmington—where Professor Jennifer Reid has mobilized (and organized) a congenial group of colleagues and students for in-depth and sustained consultations on religion, materiality, and modernity. I thank Jennifer Reid and her family for providing this home for the study of religion.

In the process of making this book, I have been helped by the research assistance of Thomas Alberts, a collaborator in the study of religious authenticity, and other colleagues in the Institute for Comparative Religion in Southern Africa. I have benefited from critical and constructive readings by Edward T. Linenthal, Bruce Forbes, and anonymous reviewers. At the University of California Press, my editor, Reed Malcolm, has been an extraordinary colleague, a friend, and a collaborator in the work of authenticity. I have drawn inspiration from his ongoing commitment to infusing authenticity not only into books but also into his role as Paul McCartney in his Beatles tribute band. Fake? No, not at all. Entirely authentic. I also thank my wife, Careen, and the Board of Directors, as always.

So, we have a book. It was written under the working title *Holy Shit*, but obviously the book would never have been published under such a title by a reputable academic press. It would never have been able to go out into the world and do whatever good work it might do. I thank everyone at the University of California Press, in every capacity, for letting this book out into the world.

Although I have reworked and revised everything for this book, I have incorporated material from some of my discussions of religion and American popular culture that have appeared elsewhere. I thank other presses for giving permission to use material they have already let out into the world:

By permission of Lexington Books, I have used material from "Crosscultural Religious Business: Cocacolonization, McDonaldization, Disneyization, Tupperization, and Other Local Dilemmas of Global Signification," in Jennifer I. M. Reid, ed., *Religion and Global Culture: New Terrain in the Study of Religion and the Work of Charles H. Long* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Press, 2003), 145–66.

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Theoretical Models for the Study of Religion in American Popular Culture," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64 (1996): 743–65.

By permission of Indiana University Press, I have used material from "A Big Wind Blew Up during the Night": America as Sacred Space in South Africa," in David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, eds., *American Sacred Space* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 262–312.

And by permission of University of California Press, which has graciously granted permission to itself in this instance, I have used material from "Saving the Children by Killing Them: Redemptive Sacrifice in the Ideologies of Jim Jones and Ronald Reagan," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 1 (1991): 177–201, ©1997 by The Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture.

Although this is my first book with the University of California Press, I feel as if I am coming home. As a graduate student, I was trained and taught to think at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Every day I am aware of my enduring connection to the people of that place.

Many years ago in conversations, an editor for the University of California Press and I planned a book about values in American society that are not solely or accurately determined by the market. People value their lives, their families, their integrity, and their authenticity in ways that could never be determined by the pricing mechanisms of the capitalist market. For that book, we came up with a great title, *Not For Sale*. But that was the end of the project. Not a bad title, you might think, because our authenticity, as human beings, is certainly not for sale. But imagine a book, in a bookstore, sitting on the shelf or displayed in the window, advertising itself as "not for sale." No one would buy it. Who would buy a book that is not for sale?

Many years later, appearing under a different title, this book does pretty much what we wanted to do. This book is about values. Real values. We trust that you, the reader, will see all of the religious fakery in this volume as an occasion for thinking about authenticity.

Introduction

The Web site Adherents.com, which compiles statistics on the membership of religious groups, includes entries for the religions of television, sports, Disney, McDonald's, Coca-Cola, and Elvis worship. What is going on? They cannot possibly be serious.

Religion is serious. According to the great psychologist of religion William James, religion "signifies always a *serious* state of mind."¹ Popular culture, by contrast, is not serious. Or is it? In this book, I posit that it certainly is. Through the idea of religion, I will engage the compelling political, social, and economic realities of America, at home and abroad, as expressed in American popular culture.

Situated between the state and the market, between political power and economic exchange, religion is an arena of human activity marked by the concerns of the transcendent, the sacred, the ultimate—concerns that enable people to experiment with what it means to be human. Religious ways of being human engage the transcendent—that which rises above and beyond the ordinary. They engage the sacred—that which is set apart from the ordinary. And they engage the ultimate—that which defines the final, unavoidable limit of all our ordinary concerns.

Popular culture, for its part, encompasses the ordinary—the pleasures of our lives, which we may even take for granted, such as the creative and performing arts, sports, and leisure activities. If we want to think about the relationship between religion and popular culture, we have to ask: How does the serious work of religion, which engages the transcendent, the sacred, and the ultimate meaning

and the
ordinary

of human life in the face of death, relate to the comparatively frivolous play of popular culture?

From the most intimate embodiment of personal subjectivity to the most public institutions of social collectivity, what I call religion is at work and at play. It is at work in the disciplines of the body, the regulation of one's conduct, and the legitimization of political, social, or economic power. It is at play in the creative improvisations, innovations, transformations, and transgressions of all that serious religious work. Of course, sometimes work can seem like play, so this initial opposition between religious work and religious play will blur.

In this book, I dwell in detail on the ways in which religion animates popular culture. Thus I concentrate less on how specific religious groups deal with popular culture than on how popular culture works in characteristically religious ways. Without denying the importance of organized religions or their relations with popular culture, I want to highlight the ways in which the production, circulation, and consumption of popular culture can operate like religion.

COMMUNITIES, OBJECTS, AND EXCHANGES

What difference does it make to call any cultural activity "religion"? As we will see, *religion* can be a useful term for understanding the ways in which transcendence, the sacred, and the ultimate are inevitably drawn into doing some very important things that happen in and through popular culture: forming a human community, focusing human desire, and entering into human relations of exchange.

Social cohesion, in forming a sense of community, is reinforced by religious resources. Rising above the everyday course of life, traces of transcendence seem necessary for instilling a sense of continuity with the past. Set apart from the ordinary world, traces of the sacred seem necessary for establishing a sense of uniformity in the present. In the play of popular culture, religious techniques for creating sacred time and sacred space have generated a sense of community within a diverse array of cultural enterprises, such as the church of baseball, the pilgrimage to Graceland, the devotion to Star Trek, and the proliferation of invented religions on the Internet. Originating in the United States, these sacred communities often assume a global significance, as witnessed by the frequent claims that something in American popular culture has established a new "mecca." According to its Web site, the Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum in Cooperstown, New York, is the "Mecca of baseball." The Coca-Cola Company's museum in Atlanta has been described as

the "Mecca of Coca-Cola." Various claimants, including the cities of Memphis, New York, Los Angeles, and Cleveland, home of the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame, have vied for recognition as the "Mecca of Rock 'n' Roll." Examples of the "mechanization" of American popular culture abound. All suggest that popular culture adopts religious resources not only for forming a sense of community but also for expanding that sense of community like a transnational, missionizing religion.

In a globalizing world, human identity and community, as celebrated in American popular culture, have been focused on material objects, the powerful commodities of a market economy. Directing attention toward the consumer product as the ultimate object of human desire is an important part of the religious work of American popular culture. Invested with transcendent power and sacred significance, the consumer product has emerged as the modern fetish, the object of religious desire in a capitalist economy. The fetish of Coca-Cola, for example, has been placed within arm's reach of desire all over the world, registering as an animated object of global religious attention. American popular culture has brought many inanimate objects to life, not only as commodities, but also as religious relics, icons, and even deities. In the global expansion of Disney and McDonald's, as cultural analyst Andrew Ross has observed, "the Mouse and the Golden Arches are almost as ubiquitous on the earth's crust as the Christian cross or the Muslim crescent."² On the Internet, "virtual" religions have deified any number of consumer products—we find the Church of the Twinkie, the Church of Volkswagenism, and the First Church of the Fisher-Price Record Player, for example. With regard to American popular culture, Karl Marx's "fetishism of commodities" seems to be a redundant phrase. The commodity is the fetish.

Although the notion of the fetish calls attention to an important religious activity—the formation and focusing of human desire—the term itself has a problematic pedigree. Long before the word *fetish* was applied to a consumer product such as Coke, European explorers, traders, and merchants in West Africa used it to denigrate African religions for their lack of any "authenticity" that might provide a stable system of values. In the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, the great African American sociologist, political activist, and, as I hope to show, historian of religions, the fetish posed a crucial problem for understanding the role of religion in American culture. Initially, Du Bois tried to rehabilitate African fetishism from its European denigration, but eventually he realized that the very notion of fetishism was a European invention. Accusing Africans of worshipping objects, Europeans masked the actual workings of slavery, which turned living human beings into objects, into commodities, for the transatlantic slave trade.

Like Du Bois, other theorists of modernity, following the lead of Karl Marx or Sigmund Freud, have turned the critique of African fetishism back on the West and its obsessions with material objects. While tracking such Western obsessions, however, we must avoid the denigrating, prejudicial dismissal of the religious interest in objects as fetishism. Lively objects, as focal points of desire, can create meaningful religious worlds.

In the life of material objects, human beings must participate by engaging in rituals of exchange, which bear traces of religious practices and performances. This suggests another important religious aspect of American popular culture. When compared with the buying, selling, and speculating done in the productive economy, the economic exchanges in religious rituals seem nonproductive.

To adopt a phrase coined by the unconventional sociologist Georges Bataille, popular culture celebrates ritualized expenditure in nonproductive economic activity. Not for profit, as Bataille argued, expenditure is economic activity in which the loss must be as great as possible in order to certify a claim on ultimate meaning. Ritual expenditure occurs in a gift, a display, or a performance of wealth. But expenditure also takes place in the waste, the destruction, or the irrecoverable loss of valued objects, including the highly valued "object" of human life. In many contexts, such as the performance of rock 'n' roll or the mystery of the global economy, we will see ritual expenditure, in Bataille's sense, operating within religion and American popular culture.

Money, of course, makes the world go around. But money is not what it used to be. Although economics textbooks still define it rather austere as a medium of exchange, a unit of accounting, and a store of value, money has taken on a life—and religious proportions—of its own. As a system of symbols, money might be regarded as a religion, even as the "religion of the market"; it also has inspired a range of religious initiatives in American popular culture. For example, economic exchange has been transformed into the gospel of prosperity by religio-economic corporations such as Amway; the gospel of money by television ministries, which appeal to their viewers for funding, promising miraculous financial returns to the donors; and even the religious devotion to money in the online Church of the Profit\$, which claims to be the only honest, authentic religion in America because it openly admits that it is only in it for the money.

Raising the stakes in these religio-economic exchanges, money and blood have become interchangeable within the calculations of the state and the market in American life and culture. Like money, human blood, in the symbolic economy of culture, is exchanged as a payment (colonizers shed it to authorize their claims on

America), as a waste (we squander it in wars), or as a debt that can never be paid (we owe a sacrificial debt to our country whose ultimate payment would require our own life). Clearly, after the devastation of September 11, 2001, this sacred economy of blood and money was revitalized in the United States, but it has had a long, sustained life in American history, one with a deep religious undercurrent.

These, then, are three reasons for investigating religion in American popular culture: religious activity is at work in forming community, focusing desire, and facilitating exchange.

RELIGION AND POPULAR CULTURE IN EMBODIED, NATIONAL, AND GLOBAL SPHERES

By exploring case studies in some depth and detail, I hope to present more than a survey. Perhaps the cases I consider will seem arbitrary. Still, the locations of these case studies are important, because I want to focus attention on religion and American popular culture as embodied, as national, and as global. These three spheres overlap in producing religious significance for America.

As a religion of the body, the religion of American popular culture involves the most basic, visceral engagements with the world. Sex, drugs, and the pulsating rhythms of rock 'n' roll embrace the body in an immediacy, an intensity, although the mind and soul might subsequently follow. Mediated through the senses, especially through the physical sense of touch, the embodied character of religion in American popular culture appears in the binding, burning, moving, and handling of religious meaning and power, but it also registers as religion under pressure, as a pervasive sense of anxiety, distraction, and stress in a world that seems to be spinning out of control.

Although I take the human body as the basic ground of religion, it also is important to recognize that much of the creativity of popular culture involves changing or leaving the body. Many ways of modifying the body—piercing and tattooing, plastic surgery and liposuction, cross-dressing and transsexual surgery—have increasingly become part of the American way of life. At the same time, Americans have sought to leave their bodies, flying out of this ordinary world into cyberspace, or virtual reality, unencumbered by the physical pull of planetary gravity or the physical weight of human embodiment. In these efforts, echoes of shamanism, the archaic "techniques of ecstasy," reverberate.

In religious trance, divine possession, or sacred ecstasy, the shaman can leave the body. I discuss shamans such as the African shaman Credo Murwa, the Ameri-

can shaman Jim Perkins, and the divinely inspired electric shaman of rock 'n' roll, Jim Morrison. I also consider the possibility that the most important shaman in American popular culture, with his roots in ancient traditions of Siberian shamanism, might actually turn out to be not Jim Morrison but Santa Claus. In any event, this substratum of shamanic religion in American popular culture evokes a transcendence of space, place, and embodiment that has had a powerful appeal. Focusing on the body, therefore, calls for attention to the plastic, shape-shifting, and ecstatic attempts to transcend the body in American popular culture.

Within the United States, popular culture might be generalized as a kind of public religion. In the 1960s, sociologist Robert Bellah argued that the United States was animated by a collective, public, or civil religion, an understanding of the nation's historical destiny in the light of transcendence, which served as a religious warrant for American nationalism. Although civil religion, as Bellah defined it, still operates in America, these national religious impulses have thoroughly diffused through popular culture. As a result, Americans assimilate their civil religion less through the constitutional arms of the U.S. government—the executive, legislative, or judicial branches—than through the productions of film, television, radio, and other media of popular culture.

Nevertheless, as Bellah proposed, the presidents of the United States have played a central role in the formation of an American civil, public, or popular religion. Endowed with transcendent, sacred, and perhaps even ultimate power, American presidents have assumed authoritative roles not only in the public sphere but also in popular culture. In the chapters of this book, their exhortations have punctuated my explorations in American popular culture. With a definite historical interest, I have tried to situate cultural creativity within the horizon of political necessity evoked by presidents of the United States.

Starting with President Ronald Reagan, who revitalized the American ideology of redemptive sacrifice, American presidents have operated in a potent symbolic economy of blood and money that is mediated through the popular cultural outlets of film, television, and radio. As an actor, Reagan was already adept at the studied simulations required for such media transmissions and cultural transactions in America. His successors, however, forced to simulate his simulations, have only further entrenched the U.S. presidency in the media of popular culture. As a result, whether they have liked it or not, all subsequent presidents of the United States have had to operate in Ronald Reagan's world. Despite never having been movie stars, all subsequent presidents have been required to act as authentic, true-to-life replicas of American presidents on film.

In this book, I discuss U.S. presidents who have invoked civil religion, perhaps, but have also tried to establish the political horizon, the terms and limits, that might contain the proliferation of religious meanings in American popular culture. They have failed. Although Ronald Reagan revitalized a sacrificial ideology for America, celebrating the sacrifice of human lives for the social collectivity, his initiative was shadowed by Jim Jones, who led his following into mass death for the sake of a community.

Described by foreign journalists as the most powerful man in the world, President George Bush, who during his administration declared the dawn of the New World Order, became the primary suspect of conspiracy theorists during the 1990s. He was believed not only to be participating in a global conspiracy to rule the world but also to be performing human sacrifices and drinking human blood as a shape-shifting reptile, the offspring of reptilian extraterrestrials.

President Bill Clinton, who was included in this global conspiracy, tried to reinvigorate American popular culture by invoking the New Covenant for America, entering into a new transatlantic partnership with Africa, and announcing the opening of a new scientific frontier with the completion of the Human Genome Project, which he touted as holding enormous religious significance because it enables humans to learn God's language of creation.

Finally, President George W. Bush has also drawn the attention of conspiracy theorists, from his initiation into the Skull and Bones Society to his subsequent global agenda for U.S. military, economic, and cultural power in a war against terrorism.

Although the discussion of these U.S. presidents does not unfold in chronological order, their appearance in this book has a kind of coherence, because each represents the central religious commitment to redemptive sacrifice that animates American nationalism.

As an imaginative, imaginary realm, American popular culture is preoccupied with death, dying, and the dead, especially with heroic, redemptive sacrifice, which is a recurring motif of popular films, television, and other media. Clearly, death pervades American popular culture; from blockbuster entertainment to the nightly news, the body count is high. As a "cult of death," American popular culture, like American religious nationalism, seeks redemption in sacrificial death, so a consideration of death must be part of our exploration of religion and American popular culture.

All over the world, American popular culture has been disseminated and diffused into a vast array of local settings. Globalization, which is more than just a

transnational mode of economic production, also expands the scope of the production and consumption of cultural forms. Clearly, America stands at the center and extends to the periphery of this globalizing network. Although critics of globalization decry the Americanization of global culture, pointing to the homogenizing effects of the Cocacolonization, McDonaldization, or Disneyization of the world, which seem inevitably to lead to the destruction of local legacies of human diversity, people all over the world seem to like it. From the perspective of consumers, who often find creative ways to localize American popular culture, its productions are not necessarily perceived as alien. Yet, even if the globalizing extensions of American popular culture are often experienced as "glocal"—both global and local—this process of cultural expansion has nevertheless reinforced certain economic, social, and political relations that entrench American power. Touching briefly on several foreign locations of American popular culture, including Russia, India, and Argentina, I focus more directly on developments in Japan and South Africa.

In the science of intercultural business communication, especially as it was designed to assist Americans in conducting global business, Japan emerged as a typical "type B" culture, according to a manual on intercultural negotiation, the opposite of the "type A" culture of America. Operating like transnational religions, Coca-Cola, McDonald's, and Disney have entered the Japanese markets on a mission to make conversions. However, despite the cultural imperialism of these quasi-religious missions, Japanese cultural entrepreneurs, as well as consumers, have found ways to convert these enterprises to suit their own interests.

The idea that the Japanese have converted these businesses instead of being converted by them recalls the argument advanced by W. E. B. Du Bois: that Africans, especially those enslaved in America, did not convert to Christianity but converted Christianity to the basic themes, rhythms, and interests of African religion. Important features of American popular culture, especially pop music, can be traced back to Africa. However, the transatlantic cultural exchanges in both religion and popular culture have been ongoing in relations between America and Africa.

I discuss several specific and crucial transatlantic exchanges between the United States and South Africa, for instance, America's popular interest in a South African political leader, Nelson Mandela, who was enthusiastically received on his visit to the States during 1990 as if he were a religious figure of mythic proportions, variously proclaimed as an African messiah, Moses, a pope, or a hero-of-a-thousand-faces. In counterpoint to Nelson Mandela, I also consider a South African religious

leader, the Zulu shaman Credo Mutwa, who has gained a following in the United States among enthusiasts of New Age spirituality, representing the indigenous authenticity of African religion. According to one of his American supporters, Mutwa's religious vision supplemented Mandela's political leadership, "filling out and complementing Mandela's political journey with Mutwa's mythology."¹ At the very least, this interest in Mandela and Mutwa suggests the vitality of ongoing exchanges between America and Africa in the field of religion and popular culture.

In South Africa, powerful cultural images of America have assumed religious proportions. Nelson Mandela warned on several occasions during the 1950s that American imperialism was most dangerous because it came to Africa "elaborately disguised" not only as diplomacy and foreign aid but also as religion and popular culture.² However, visions of America have promised redemption as well. The American movement, with its expectation that the arrival of Americans would bring about a liberating apocalypse, emerged during the 1920s and 1930s as a popular African religious movement focusing on America as the hope of salvation. A different social movement, the criminal gang known as the Americans, which has been interpreted locally as if it were a religion, has located the meaning and power of America within the impoverished townships of Cape Town, South Africa. Coming to prominence in the 1990s, the Americans gang has advanced an alternative reading of the meaning and power of America as the sacred truth of blood and money in a globalizing world. In reviewing these transatlantic exchanges, I join the American movement and the Americans gang in South Africa in asking, "Where is America?"

Throughout this book, I confront the problem of authenticity. Although the productions of popular culture might in many ways look, sound, smell, taste, and feel like religion, there is a distinct possibility that they are not actually religious. Baseball is not a religion; Coca-Cola is not a religion; and rock 'n' roll is not a religion. But then all kinds of religious activity have been denied the status of religion, including indigenous religions labeled as superstition and alternative religious movements labeled as cults. What counts as religion, therefore, is the focus of the problem of authenticity in religion and American popular culture. Making the problem worse, some religious activity appears transparently fake, including the proliferation of invented religions on the Internet, but even fake religions can be doing a kind of symbolic, cultural, and religious work that is real.

At work and at play, human authenticity is at stake in American religion and popular culture. Religion is the real thing, but, as we already know from the world of advertising, Coca-Cola is also the real thing. Baseball and rock 'n' roll, McDonald's

and Disney, Tupperware and Nike, along with all the other permutations of the popular, have artificially produced a real world. Religion, mediated through popular culture as ordinary leisure and entertainment but also as human possibility and experimentation, has appeared in the traces of transcendence, the sacred, and the ultimate in these cultural formations.

CHAPTER ONE • Planet Hollywood

On August 25, 1998, at 7:20 P.M., an electronically triggered pipe bomb ripped through the American restaurant Planet Hollywood in the popular Waterfront shopping mall of Cape Town, South Africa, killing two people and seriously injuring twenty-six. Through the medium of talk radio, responsibility for the bombing was initially claimed that night by a self-professed member of the group Muslims against Global Oppression (MAGO) as an act of retaliation—fighting “fire with fire,” he said—against the United States for its missile attacks the previous week on alleged terrorist installations in Afghanistan and Sudan. Although the leadership of MAGO subsequently disowned responsibility for the bombing, media speculation continued to focus on the possible motives for local Muslim retaliation against the United States.

During the second half of the 1990s in South Africa, several militant Muslim organizations emerged—MAGO, Muslims against Illegitimate Leaders (MAIL), and People against Gangsterism and Drugs (PAGAD)—that generally perceived the United States as a worldwide religious problem. As an icon of the American entertainment industry and, by extension, of the United States, Planet Hollywood seemed a fitting symbolic target. Earlier that year in the streets outside Parliament, in protest of President Bill Clinton’s visit to South Africa, MAGO had staged a peaceful demonstration that featured the ceremonial burning of American flags. Burning the American flag, blowing up Planet Hollywood—these acts seemed to be part of a consistent pattern of religiously motivated opposition to the United States.

Like many people, I suppose I developed a heightened sensibility for danger in the wake of the bombing, even when I was not wondering whether I myself constituted a suitable American target. Sometime after the bombing, when I was walking through the Waterfront mall, I was startled by a rolling, thundering noise, like the sound of roaring waters. "Oh no, another bomb," I thought. "We're all going to die." Seconds later, however, as a swirling, screaming mass of humanity swept by me, I realized that it was not a bomb after all but only the American entertainer Michael Jackson, surrounded by an entourage of about twenty-five uniformed sailors from the South African Navy and chased by excited fans.

A regular visitor to South Africa, Michael Jackson had just been a special guest at Nelson Mandela's eightieth birthday celebration on July 18, 1998. The previous year he had toured the country, performing sold-out concerts, with proceeds going to his Heal the World Foundation. In every city he played during that tour, a huge inflatable statue was set up, reminding South Africans that Jackson is bigger than life. The frenzy I witnessed showed that the charismatic superstar certainly had an enthusiastic following in Cape Town. Despite widespread opposition to U.S. global politics, people of the city could still be devoted to this idol of American popular culture.

Jackson's artistry has drawn on the resources of religious symbols, myths, and rituals. According to cultural analyst Michael Eric Dyson, Jackson's performances are a "festive choreography of religious reality" that "communicates powerful religious truths and moral themes." In songs such as "We Are the World" (1985), "Heal the World" (1991), and "The Lost Children" (2001), Jackson's music has held out a mythic promise of redemption from human suffering. In the drama of his concerts, as Dyson notes, Jackson has turned the stage into a "world-extending sanctuary" in which audiences can ritually participate in this drama of redemption.¹ Devotion to Jackson, despite allegations of child abuse, suggests that many fans have a faith in the superstar that borders on religious faith.

In this chapter, I take Planet Hollywood and Michael Jackson as only points of departure for exploring our basic terms—*religion*, *the popular*, and *popular culture*. Charting a preliminary map, I set out different ways for understanding religion, for analyzing the popular, and for locating popular culture between the coercion of the state and the demands of the market. I touch on some of the key religious themes, from the religion of the body to the religious significance of globalization, which will be developed in greater detail in subsequent chapters. Everything will depend, of course, on what we mean by *religion*.

RELIGION

Religion is a difficult term to define, because everyone already "knows" what it means. What passes for common knowledge about religion tends to be organized according to binary oppositions: people know their own religion (as opposed to other religions), true religion (as opposed to false religion), or real religion (as opposed to fake religion). In *exploring religion and American popular culture*, we need to develop a more complex sense of what we mean by the term *religion*. Without belaboring the issue of definition, we are confronted with the ambiguity of a word that can be used in a conventional sense as a generic term for distinct religious traditions, communities, institutions, or movements, or in an analytical sense as a generic term for any kind of activity engaged with the transcendent, the sacred, or the ultimate concerns of human life. Both of these senses are important for exploring religion and popular culture. The first focuses our attention on specific religious groups in relation to popular culture; the second directs our attention to potent religious symbols, myths, and rituals that might animate cultural formations.

Fitting the conventional sense of the term, the Muslim organizations in Cape Town, as voluntary religious associations, form part of the rich, complex fabric of Islam in South Africa. Like any religion, Islam embraces a diversity of political positions—progressive, reactionary, and everything in between—in relation to the local social environment. In a globalizing world, it also reflects political positions that its adherents adopt in relation to the pervasive presence and power of the United States. Mobilizing in the mosques, some Muslim organizations have taken their religious interests to the streets in opposition to U.S. foreign policy. One of these organizations allegedly bombed Planet Hollywood, a symbol not only of American popular culture but also of a kind of global religion that has generated powerful symbols, myths, and rituals that seem to operate throughout the world like a religious mission. The franchise of Planet Hollywood, which has been described in tourist literature as "the Mecca of movie memorabilia," has restaurants in London and Paris, Jakarta and Tokyo, Dubai and Riyadh, Acapulco and Cancun, and, until 1998, in Cape Town, South Africa, occupying all the major zones of the clashing civilizations identified by political scientist Samuel Huntington as the fractures of conflict in a globalizing world. The bombing in Cape Town appeared to be another violent clash between Muslims and the West, or at least between Muslims and the West that could be imagined as centered in America, a religiously motivated attack on American sacred symbols.²

In the aftermath, however, Muslim leaders in Cape Town denounced the bombing. On behalf of the Muslim Judicial Council, Sheikh Achmed Seddik, while acknowledging that Muslims in Cape Town held "heavy anti-American sentiments," strongly condemned the bombing as terrorism. Likewise, a spokesman for Muslims against Global Oppression distanced his organization from the bombing, saying, "This is an act of terror."¹ Although the event was presented in the local and global media as an anti-American act, these Muslim leaders in Cape Town insisted that such an act of terror should also be understood as an anti-Muslim act, since terrorism is inconsistent with the basic religious values of Islam. Nevertheless, while the crime remained unsolved in South Africa, the U.S. State Department placed Muslims against Global Oppression on its list of terrorist organizations.

Back in the United States, meanwhile, religious controversy was generated by the representation of Muslims in Hollywood films. Anticipating the opening of *The Siege* (1998), which depicts a Muslim terrorist group planning bombings in New York, American Muslim groups protested the negative stereotypes about Islam, Muslims, and Arabs that are consistently perpetuated by Hollywood. A prominent Arab American, the disk jockey Casey Kasem, who for decades kept America tuned in to the latest hits in popular music on his radio show *American Top 40*, condemned Hollywood's tradition of vilifying Muslims. A film like *The Siege*, Kasem argued, "will leave the audience with the idea that Arabs and Muslims are terrorists and the enemies of the United States."²

Coincidentally, *The Siege* stars Bruce Willis, one of the owners of Planet Hollywood. In a thoughtful essay entitled "Bruce Willis versus Bin Laden," published in the Cairo weekly *Al-Ahram* in November 1998, Tarek Atia argued as a Muslim against the extremes represented by both men. In a world saturated by global media, he wrote, "Bruce Willis and Bin Laden have come, more than any other two people alive, to represent the extremes of human existence, pitted against each other. They are, in many ways, the most accessible archetypes of religious and secular extremism." Rejecting both of these extremes, Atia situated his struggle as an effort to lead a moral, spiritual life that is defined by neither fundamentalism nor secularism.³

According to Atia, Hollywood is not religiously neutral in this struggle. On the one hand, he argued, specific religious interests, including anti-Muslim interests, are being advanced by the "Jews who invented and remain in charge of Hollywood." Featuring in many conspiracy theories about the secret rulers of the world, Jewish control of Hollywood seems, at first glance, confirmed by history, since four out of five heads of the major film studios founded in the 1920s were from Jewish back-

grounds. However, they tended to identify themselves less with Judaism than with Christianity and American nationalism. Louis B. Mayer, head of MGM, changed his birthday to the Fourth of July and attended a Catholic church that was also attended by Harry Cohn, head of Columbia Pictures. Asked to donate money to a Jewish relief fund, Cohn reportedly exclaimed: "Relief for the Jews? How about relief from the Jews? All the trouble in this world has been caused by Jews and Irishmen."⁴ Although they exerted a powerful influence on the imagery of religion, race, and America, these Hollywood moguls were not advancing Jewish interests.

On the other hand, Atia maintained, secularist extremism, as embodied in an action hero such as Bruce Willis, can be regarded as a kind of secular religion promoted by Hollywood. Although he identified Willis as an archetype of secularism, Atia recalled sufficient evidence from Willis's popular films to suggest that the actor plays a quasi-religious role in American popular culture as the country's "savior" from criminals, gangsters, terrorists, and even asteroids. In *The Siege*, he seems to be saving America from Muslims.

Although entertainment is certainly an industry, it has produced superstars such as Bruce Willis and Michael Jackson, who display transcendent or sacred qualities in American popular culture. Following the sociologist Max Weber's definition of charisma, we might recognize these superstars as embodying that "certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman and at least specifically exceptional powers and qualities."⁵ Although we might want to draw other conclusions about them, we can at least recognize traces of religion—superhuman transcendence, the sacred as set apart from the ordinary—that seem to cling to the charismatic superstars of American popular culture.

In Michael Jackson's case, such traces of religion seem to be consciously mobilized, not only in maintaining his aura of mystery, but also in advancing promises of redemption. Saving the children, healing the world—these are redemptive promises that elevated Jackson to at least quasi-religious status in American popular culture. Still, we need to ask: Does it make sense to call any of this religion? Most important, does it make any difference to call any of this religion?

RELIGIOUS WORK

How does religion work? Classic definitions of religion have focused on its importance as a way of thinking, as a way of feeling, and as a way of being human in relation to other human beings in a community. As a way of thinking, according

to E. B. Tylor's minimal definition, religion depends upon "belief in supernatural beings." More recently, Melford Spiro qualified this definition by stipulating that religion involves "culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings." By this account, religion deals with the supernatural, which by definition cannot be confirmed or disconfirmed by ordinary sensory perception or scientific experimentation. According to this classic definition, religion works to identify certain persons as supernatural, superhuman, or at least as greater in power than ordinary humans. By this account, religion generates beliefs and practices for engaging transcendence.⁸

As a way of feeling, religion cultivates a range of intense emotions, from holy fear to sacred intimacy, which have also received attention in its classic definitions. Following Friedrich Schleiermacher's contention that religion is not a way of thinking but a way of feeling, specifically a feeling of absolute dependence upon a Supreme Being, F. Max Müller, the putative founder of the study of religion, defined it as an essentially emotional, even romantic "faculty of apprehending the Infinite." Similarly, focusing on personal feeling, Rudolf Otto defined religion as a feeling of holy awe, combining avoidance and attraction, before a mystery; William James defined religion as a personal response, in solitude, to whatever might be regarded as divine; and Paul Tillich defined it as a person's "ultimate concern" in the face of death.⁹

As a way of being in society, religion is more than merely a matter of personal thoughts and feelings. Religion involves beliefs and practices, but always in the context of social relations. In fact, as Émile Durkheim argued, religion might very well be central to the formation of society. Accordingly, Durkheim defined religion as beliefs and practices in relation to the sacred, with the "sacred" defined simply as that which is set apart from the ordinary, but in such a way that it serves to unify people who adhere to those beliefs and practices into a single moral community. Religious thinking and feeling, action and experience, in Durkheim's formulation, realize their function in the construction of any human society around the sacred.¹⁰

Social cohesion, according to Durkheim, depends on shared beliefs, practices, experiences, and interactions that can usefully be defined as religious. Generally, most scholars of religion have followed Durkheim in seeing religion as multi-dimensional, as a complex system of mythic and doctrinal belief, of ritual and ethical action, of personal and social experience.¹¹ Religion has been defined by Clifford Geertz as a "symbolic system" that generates powerful moods and motivations and clothes those dispositions in an aura of factuality so that they seem uniquely real in forming personal subjectivity and social solidarity.¹²

All of these classic definitions of religion percolate through this book. In part, I want to test them against the evidence of the beliefs and practices, the personal experiences and social interchanges that are actually going on in popular culture. In other words, I want to see if these "classic" definitions of religion actually matter.

But it's all religion.

At the same time, the meaning of the term *religion* is determined by usage. As the great linguist Émile Benveniste taught us, religion has been used as a highly charged marker of difference, defined precisely by its opposition to "superstition." Whatever the word might have meant in ancient Greco-Roman discourse, the term *religio* was consistently used to refer to an authentic human activity in opposition to *superstitio*, an inauthentic, alien, or even less than fully human activity that was allegedly based on ignorance, fear, or fraud.¹³

In the past I have focused on this oppositional character of the term *religion* in the cult controversies of modern America and the denial of indigenous religions of Africa under colonial conditions. I have tried to show how the term raises the stakes of human recognition, since it is inevitably used as a crucial marker in struggles over human recognition and denial. In the cult controversies, a religious movement such as the Peoples Temple of Jim Jones was denied the status of religion by being stigmatized as a cult. In European explorations of Africa, indigenous religious life was denied the status of religion by being denigrated as superstition.¹⁴ As a marker of difference, in these cases *religion* was used as an instrument of denial.

Here I am interested not in the denial of religion but in the performative extensions of the term to the production, consumption, and artifacts of popular culture. In an essay I wrote in the mid-1990s on the church of baseball, the fetish of Coca-Cola, and the potlatch of rock 'n' roll, which I have integrated into this book, I was willing to consider these activities as religious, not because I said they were, but because participants, real people, characterized their own involvement in these enterprises as religious. Baseball players, Coca-Cola executives, and rock 'n' rollers testified that what they were doing was a kind of religion.¹⁵ In counterpoint to the classic definitions of religion, I am interested in how the term has actually been used by people to make sense out of their lives. What did they mean when they used the term *religion* to describe their attachment to a sport, a consumer product, or an entertainment industry?

Designating popular culture as religion does not always mean accepting its religious legitimacy. Conventional religious institutions, especially conservative coalitions, have sometimes identified a competing cultural formation as religion to raise the stakes in the cultural contest. In recent years, conservative Christian groups have argued that humanism, secularism, and the scientific theory of evolu-

tion should all count as religions and therefore should be excluded from public schools. If the Christian religion cannot be established in public institutions, they have argued, then these other "religions" should also be removed in accordance with the First Amendment prohibition of any government-established religion.

Even Walt Disney productions have been subjected to such a strategic definition of religion. On June 18, 1997, the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution to boycott the Walt Disney Company. Arguing that the company had abandoned "its previous philosophy of producing enriching family entertainment," the convention accused Disney of promoting "immoral ideologies such as homosexuality, infidelity, and adultery." In launching a crusade against Disney, the Southern Baptist Convention argued that Disney was not merely a cultural force working against conservative Christian beliefs, values, and sexual ethics; it was also actually promoting an alternative religion, an earth-based, pagan, and pantheistic religiosity as celebrated in animated features such as *The Lion King* and *Pocahontas*, which represented a religious threat to Christianity. The Southern Baptist Convention boycotted Disney, not only because it presented a secular alternative to religion, but also because the corporation was allegedly advancing a religion of its own, in competition with Christianity.¹⁶

As this religious crusade against Disney suggests, popular culture can appear from different perspectives as religion. As I maneuver between classic academic definitions and actual popular uses of the term *religion*, I must admit that I do have a working definition of my own. In my view, something is doing religious work if it is engaged in negotiating what it is to be human. Classification, orientation, and negotiation—these are the processes that I look for when I study religion and religions: the processes of classifying persons into superhuman, human, and subhuman; the processes of orienting persons in time and space; and the contested negotiations over the ownership of those classifications and orientations.

In the world of Walt Disney, these patterns and processes of religious work are certainly evident. Although Disney's animated films evoke supernatural persons, such as fairies and genies, ancestral spirits and celestial kings, their religious work concentrates on playing with conventional distinctions among humans, animals, and machines. Religious classifications of persons put these distinctions at stake: What is it to be a human being, not only in relation to superhuman powers, but also in relation to beings classified as less than human? Consistently, Disney engages in a kind of religious work by trying to clarify these classifications.

At the same time, religious orientations in time and space serve to situate persons in place. In films, television, theme parks, and consumer products, the Walt

Disney Company has advanced a temporal orientation based on a poignant nostalgia for a bygone era and an unbounded optimism in scientific progress. Anchoring this temporal orientation, Disney theme parks have provided multiple sacred sites for ritual pilgrimage to the heart of a symbolic, cultural, and arguably religious sense of orientation in the world.

Classification and orientation, person and place, are inevitably negotiated in religion and popular culture. By negotiation, I refer to the relational, situational, and contested character of the production of religious meaning and power in popular culture. Negotiating the sacred does not occur in a vacuum. These struggles over the production, significance, and ownership of sacred symbols take place within a political economy of the sacred.

By using the phrase "political economy of the sacred," I want to focus attention on the ways in which the sacred is produced, circulated, engaged, and consumed in popular culture. Not merely a given, the sacred is produced through the religious labor of interpretation and ritualization. As I explore the political economy of the sacred, I want to highlight three things: First, I want to focus on the means, modes, and forces involved in the production of sacred values through religious labor. By definition, the sacred might be "set apart," but it is set apart, as Karen Fields has observed, "by doing."¹⁷ In the political economy of the sacred, this sacred doing, or doing of the sacred, is not merely religious practice, symbolic performance, or social drama. It is a kind of religious work.

Second, I want to focus on the transformations of scarcity into surplus, the processes by which scarce resources, including symbolic capital, are transformed through religious work into sacred surpluses, especially the surplus of meaning generated through the religious work of interpretation.

Third, I want to focus on the struggles over legitimate ownership of sacred symbols, symbols made meaningful through the ongoing work of interpretation but also made powerful through appropriation, through the inevitably contested claims that are made on their ownership.

So this is what I mean by the "political economy of the sacred"—the terrain and resources, the strategies and tactics, in and through which the sacred is negotiated.¹⁸

THE POPULAR

According to a quantitative definition, popular culture is popular because it is mass produced, widely distributed, and regularly consumed by a large number of people.¹⁹ Demographically, the popular might be simply understood as a measure of

popularity. A cultural form is popular, in this sense, because many people like it. Implicit in this quantitative definition of the popular is a distinction between "high" culture, maintained by a numerically small social elite, and "low" culture, supported by the majority of people in a society. As a result, the popular, whether in popular culture or popular religion, has tended to be located among the laity rather than the clergy and among rural folk rather than city dwellers or among urban lower classes rather than urban elites.²⁰ In cultural studies, however, the popular has come to refer to a much more complex range of social positions within the production and consumption of culture.

The mass *production* of popular culture calls attention to what critical theorist Theodor Adorno called the "culture industry," the machinery of mass cultural production in a capitalist economy. Instead of assuming that popular culture is mass-produced because many people like it, Adorno argued that people like it because they basically have no choice. Effectively, the culture industry beats them into submission. Readily available and immediately accessible, mass-produced popular culture emerges as the only option within capitalist relations of production. As cultural production becomes an industry, artwork is transformed into a commodity that is created and exchanged for profit. In the process, the distinction between high culture and popular culture dissolves, since both "bear the stigmata of capitalism."²¹

The culture industry produces two basic effects in popular culture: uniformity and utility. Rather than meeting the diversity of popular desires for leisure or entertainment, the culture industry creates a new uniformity of desire. "Culture now impresses the same stamp on everything," Adorno and his colleague Max Horkheimer complained. "Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part." Within the capitalist system of cultural production, leisure is integrated into the cycle of productive labor. Leisure, entertainment, and amusement are extensions of work, employments of "free" time that are organized by the same principle of utility that governs the capitalist system of production. As an integral part of the capitalist economy, the culture industry provides popular cultural diversions that the masses seek "as an escape from the mechanized work process, and to recruit strength in order to be able to cope with it again." In this production-oriented model, therefore, popular culture serves the interests of capital—profitability, uniformity, and utility—by entangling people in a culture industry in which a character such as "Donald Duck in the cartoons . . . gets his beating so that the viewers can get used to the same treatment."²²

The popular reception, or *consumption*, of cultural forms, styles, and content calls

attention to the many different ways people actually find to make mass-produced culture their own. Following the critical theorist Walter Benjamin, many cultural analysts argue that the reception of popular culture involves not passive submission but creative activity. Although recognizing the capitalist control of mass-produced culture, Benjamin nevertheless found that people develop new perceptual and interpretive capacities that enable them to transform private hopes and fears into "figures of the collective dream such as the globe-orbiting Mickey Mouse."²³

Where Adorno insisted that the productions of the culture industry are oppressive, Benjamin looked for the therapeutic effects, such as the healing potential of collective laughter and even the redemptive possibilities in the reception of popular culture. In the case of Mickey Mouse, for example, Benjamin suggested that audiences are able to think through basic cultural categories—machines, animals, and humans—by participating in a popular form of entertainment that scrambles them. As Benjamin observed, Mickey Mouse cartoons are "full of miracles that not only surpass those of technology but make fun of them." Against the laws of nature and technology, these "miracles" of transformation—changing shape, defying gravity—occur spontaneously "from the body of Mickey Mouse, his partisans and pursuers." For an audience "grown tired of the endless complications of the everyday," Benjamin concluded, these miracles promise a kind of "redemption" in an extraordinary world.²⁴

Without necessarily subscribing to the proposition of a therapeutic capacity or a redemptive potential of popular culture, cultural analysts adopting the reception-oriented model have concentrated on the creative activity of interpretation as itself a means of cultural production that takes place in the process of cultural consumption. As people actively decode cultural content through interpretation, they also participate in rituals of consumption, rituals of exchange, ownership, and care, through which the arts and artifacts of popular culture are personalized.²⁵

In between cultural production and consumption, the space of popular culture is a contested terrain in which people occupy vastly different and often multiple subject positions grounded in race, ethnicity, social class, occupation, region, gender, sexual orientation, and so on. As the cultural theorist Stuart Hall has established, popular culture is a site of struggle in which various alternative cultural projects contend with the hegemony of the dominant culture. Subcultures develop oppositional positions, perhaps even methods of "cultural resistance," thereby creating alternative cultural formations, which social elites work to appropriate and assimilate into the larger society. Not a stable system of production and consumption, popular culture is a battlefield of contending strategies, tactics, and

maneuvers in struggles over the legitimate ownership of highly charged cultural symbols of meaning and power.²⁶

BETWEEN STATE AND MARKET

For the most part, recent research on religion and popular culture has focused on leisure pursuits. Analysts examining film, television, music, sports, and recreation for traces of religion have discovered religious symbols, myths, and rituals operating in all of these forms of popular culture. They have found myths of apocalypse in the movies of Stanley Kubrick and myths of a promised land in the music of Bruce Springsteen; rituals of confession in the courtroom television show of Judge Judy and rituals of pilgrimage at the theme parks of Walt Disney; powerful religious symbols of communal solidarity in the mainstream sports of baseball and football as well as in countercultural events such as the annual Burning Man celebration in the Nevada desert, a festival dedicated to the "creative power of ritual" in forming a temporary sacred community. All of these readings have helped us to see how religion is at play in American popular culture.

Participation in popular culture, as in a religious community, can be located between the power of the state and the demands of the market. From the perspective of the consumer, enjoying popular culture is different from paying taxes or working for wages. Beyond any rationale of the state or necessity of the market, popular culture appears to belong to a realm of desire, the space of leisure, enjoyment, and fun. All of this cultural play, however, is directly related to the serious work of the state and the market. In practice, the three spheres of state, market, and popular culture blur into each other. Paying attention to religion, I argue, helps in understanding the mixing and merging of political, economic, and cultural interests in American popular culture.

As Max Weber proposed, the state, by definition, is the organized exercise of violence over a territory. The state is a concentration of force asserting a privileged monopoly on the exercise of "legitimate" violence, whether overt or subtly coercive, through its military, legislative, policing, and tax-collecting institutions within the geography of a particular social space. But the legitimacy of the violence exercised by any state cannot simply be assumed. Inevitably, legitimacy is underwritten by a civil religion, a political religion, or a religious nationalism that confers a transcendent, sacred, or ultimate aura of necessity upon the state's exercise of violence. In these terms, any state, including a superstate such as the United

States, draws upon religious symbols, myths, and rituals in support of its ultimate claims on the exclusive exercise of violence over a territory.²⁷

Also according to the insights of Weber, the capitalist market has not been merely an economic arena of competition in which individuals seek to maximize profits and minimize losses. In the history of the emergence of capitalism, religious interests were also at stake. If a capitalist economy was going to develop in the Christian West, the sin of usury had to be transformed into the virtue of capital investment. Without rehearsing the whole history of this religious transformation, we can still recognize that the emergence of capitalism as an economic order required certain religious dispositions of self-discipline (in productive labor) and self-denial (in postponing enjoyment of the fruits of labor by investing any accumulated resources in capital markets). By positioning the religious dynamics of American popular culture between the inherent violence of the state and the insistent demands of the market, we can track both the play of meaning and the work of power within the same political economy of the sacred.

Exploring religion and American popular culture can be fun. We enjoy watching baseball, drinking Coca-Cola, and listening to rock 'n' roll. For real excitement, we participate in firewalking rituals, go on guided tourist pilgrimages in Japan, Russia, and Africa, and are abducted by aliens from outer space. In the new frontiers of science, technology, and communication at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are amazed at the instruction manual that God used to create the world, as mapped and sequenced by the Human Genome Project, and we are delighted by our apparently unlimited capacity to create new religions in cyberspace—the Discordians and the Church of the SubGenius, the Church of Elvis and the Church of the Almighty Dollar, the Church of the Bunny and the Church of Virus, not to mention the Kick-Ass Post-Apocalyptic Domsday Cult of Love.

Seriously, however, the religious dynamics of American popular culture are not all fun and games. At stake in all this play is a profound question: How does personal subjectivity intersect with a social collectivity? In other words, how are we supposed to be human beings in relation to other human beings? How do our lives, but also our deaths, make sense?

REDEMPTIVE SACRIFICE

Religion, I argue, provides media for bridging the personal and the social, for connecting individual subjects with larger social collectives, such as clans, communi-

ties, and nations. Religious symbols, myths, and rituals are resources for merging the first person singular into a first person plural, for transforming any particular "I" into a collective "Us."

In the history of religions, the most ancient and widely distributed religious ritual is sacrifice—the consecration, offering, display, and consumption of a sacrificial victim. However, sacrifice is also a modern ritual. As the philosopher Slavoj Žižek has recently argued, sacrifice is the essence of a Christian legacy worthy of preserving in the modern West. As the highest expression of Christian love, or *agape*, sacrifice is the destruction of a loved object, according to Žižek. Under normal conditions, the ritual of sacrifice offers that loved object to God. In situations of violent conflict, however, sacrifice occurs for a different reason: now the loved object is sacrificed to avoid capture by an enemy.

According to Žižek, under such conditions, destroying the beloved object might be regarded as redemptive for two reasons. First, the loved one who is sacrificed might be saved from a fate worse than death. In this regard, a sacrificial death can be better than an unacceptable life. Second, the sacrificer, in killing the loved object, gives up his stake in the world that tied him to the social order. By sacrificing what is most precious, the sacrificer "changes the co-ordinates of the situation in which [he] finds himself; by cutting himself loose from the precious object through whose possession the enemy kept him in check, the subject gains the space of free action."²⁴

This horrible calculation of killing and being killed, underwritten by a religious promise of redemptive sacrifice, moves through the political, economic, and cultural spheres of America. This same calculation of redemptive sacrifice occurs not only in the Christian nationalism of a U.S. president such as Ronald Reagan but also in the countercultural, communist strategies of Jim Jones, who led his community into a mass suicide in the interest of keeping their perceived U.S. enemy in check and gaining a free space for a fully human identity. Strikingly, ritualized sacrifice has registered as a recurring theme in the formation of states, markets, and popular culture.

In the late nineteenth century, in the midst of European nation building, Ernest Renan asked, "What is a nation?" A nation, he suggested, is formed out of a spiritual quality, a spirit, a soul, a collective soul, which is continuous with the past and uniform in the present. Continuity and uniformity, as Renan recognized, might be established on the tenuous basis of national ignorance, prejudice, and xenophobia, thereby defining a nation as a group of people who misunderstand their own history and hate their neighbors. Regardless of that, sacrifice, according to Renan, is

the essential unifying feature of a nation. Whatever people might understand (or misunderstand) about their past or think about their neighbors, they have participated in a shared, collective national identity by virtue of sacrifice. According to Renan, a nation is "a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those one is prepared to make in the future."²⁵ Past, present, and future, in this view, become a national collectivity—continuous with the past, uniform in the present, open to the future—only because individuals are prepared to perform sacrifices before the altar of the nation.

Critics of the capitalist market economy have emphasized the sacrificial nature of its economic activity: the sacrifice of any immediate gratification of personal desires for self-discipline in productive labor and for self-denial in the deferment of present rewards in the hope of future profits. Many critics of capitalism—Karl Marx and Georges Bataille, Jim Jones and David Icke—for all their differences, agree that the basic, underlying function of the capitalist economy is to sacrifice human beings and suck their blood for financial gain. This interchange between blood and money is a recurring theme in controversies over the meaning of capitalism.

As a ritual, sacrifice attends to the body; it involves setting apart the physical body of a victim, consecrating it, killing it, and consuming it. The human body, therefore, is important in explorations of religion and popular culture that also bring in the state, the market, and the ideology of redemptive sacrifice. Other accounts of religion and American popular culture have paid attention to the senses of seeing and hearing, especially as they are employed in the audiovisual media of film, television, and even the Internet. Embodied human beings, however, have the capacity for engaging a richer sensory field than merely sight and sound. We are enveloped in a sensory world that is intimately tactile, drawing on the sense of touch as a register of contact and caress, binding and heat, motion and manipulation, tangibly involving our personal subjectivity within a larger world of contact. Accordingly, the sensory dynamics of tactility, the intimacy of human contacts, caresses, and shocks, require examination within the scope of religion and American popular culture.

RELIGION OF THE BODY

Although the human body might be vulnerable to being sacrificed in the interests of the state or the market, it can also be enjoyed as a personal domain of sensory, intimate, and desirable experiences. As material site, malleable substance, and shifting field of relations, the body is situated at the center of the production and

consumption of religion and popular culture. As William R. LaFleur has observed, the body "has become a critical term for religious studies whereas 'mysticism,' for instance, has largely dropped out."¹⁰ Displacing earlier concerns with religious beliefs and doctrines, with inner experience and spirituality, this interest in the body signals a new engagement with materiality—perhaps a new materialism—in the study of religion and popular culture.

Certainly, the body provides sensory media—seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching—that make both religion and popular culture possible. Nothing enters the human mind, culture, or religion, as the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle insisted, unless it first passes through the embodied senses.

Although Aristotle regarded the sense of touch as the lowest human sense, as the most material, animal, and servile, tactility provides an excellent avenue into the embodied sensibility of popular culture. Basically, popular culture is regarded as good if it feels good, if it provides pleasurable sensations along the tactile register of the body. Tactility involves three things: the feelings of the flesh, the movements of the body, and the handling of objects by the body, especially the hands, in any sensory, perceptual, cultural, or religious environment. If we want to understand religion and popular culture, we need to pay close attention to these tactile engagements with the binding, burning, moving, and handling of the world that are simultaneously human, cultural, and religious.

The human body is a sensory field, sensing what is present and also what is absent. Introducing a series of essays, *About Religion*, theologian Mark C. Taylor observes—poetically, enigmatically—that religion is "about a certain about" that inevitably eludes our conceptual grasp. According to Taylor, it is "impossible to grasp what religion is about—unless, perhaps, what we grasp is the impossibility of grasping." Neither quite there nor exactly not there, religion is "always slipping away."¹¹ However, even this slippage that signals the impossibility of touching, holding, or conceptually grasping religion forces us back to the body, to its sensory media and metaphors and the kinds of knowledge that can be gained only by the body. Given the centrality of the body in human life, we might ask: What do the hands know about grasping that scholars of religion and culture do not know? This book examines the sense of touch as an avenue for entering the embodied, visceral, and material field of religion and popular culture.

Out of the sensory, sensual resources of the body, desire emerges as a driving force in religion and popular culture. Desire, it must be noted, is an essentially religious problem. Every religion has its own logic of desire. In the Christian universe outlined by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*, desire is a force that has to be directed

away from the world and toward God. In the Buddhist universe outlined in the Bardo Thödol, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, desire is a force that has to be eliminated, thereby extinguishing all personal attachments to the world in order to enter the spiritual liberation known as Nirvana. As these brief allusions to Christian and Buddhist logics of desire can only suggest, religious traditions have wrestled with desire as the fundamental human dilemma.¹²

However, human desire also poses a problem in the popular culture of mass media, entertainment, and advertising. Modern American advertising, which has been characterized as "Adcult USA," conveniently solves that problem by creating an imaginary world in which people get what they want because they want what they get, that is, by persuading people to desire all kinds of things they do not actually need.

As the body is sensory, so is it gendered. Males, females, and other gendered possibilities are drawn into popular culture as consumers but also as subjects of representation. Women, characteristically, have been subjects of representation in advertising, cast as objects of desire but not always as personal subjects possessing an agency of their own.

Sexuality as well is at play in popular culture, but it is also at stake in the formation of states and markets. The public affairs of state are inevitably entangled in the most intimate affairs of gender and sexuality. Religious fundamentalists, shoring up boundaries they perceive to be threatened, inevitably focus on sex. But they also focus on money, trying to limit the promiscuous flows of capital across national boundaries. Sex and money, as highly charged symbolic forms, drawing upon embodied human desires, coalesce in contemporary struggles over the meaning, power, and control of the modern state in a globalizing world.¹³

AMERICA IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD

Recently, scholars have argued that the terms *religion* and *religions* are so damaged by their colonial, imperial, and globalizing legacy that they should be abandoned in cultural analysis.¹⁴ At the same time, other scholars have employed conventional sociological models of religion and religions in the context of globalization.¹⁵

Neither of these approaches is satisfactory. In the first instance, we require rigorous conceptual terms for analyzing authoritative discourses and practices that transact with the transcendent, the sacred, or the ultimate in all areas of human life. For better or worse, the terms *religion* and *religions* can be useful in highlighting these meaningful and powerful human formations.

However, conventional models of religion fail to account for the dynamic transformations of religious resources and strategies in the making, unmaking, and remaking of religious worlds. By isolating religion as a separate, distinct, and differentiated social institution, conventional models cannot effectively track its dispersions and diffusions throughout the complex field of globalizing social, political, economic, and cultural relations.

To illustrate this problem, we can refer to the simple distinction that Peter Berger, director of the Institute for the Study of Economic Culture at Boston University, made among four processes of cultural globalization—the economic integration of Davos culture, the human-rights initiatives of faculty club culture, the Americanization of global popular culture, and the worldwide expansion of evangelical Protestantism.⁹ The last cultural process explicitly registers as religion, suggesting for Berger the salience of an ongoing relation between a certain kind of religious orientation and economic development, a globalizing of the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism in which “Max Weber is alive and well and living in Guatemala.” However, all four of these global cultural processes bear strong traces of religious patterns and processes.¹⁰

The globalizing economy has been portrayed as the “religion of the market,” driven by a “theology of the market,” in the service of “‘the market’ as the modern god,” and, in South African president Thabo Mbeki’s observation, as “a supernatural phenomenon to whose dictates everything human must bow in a spirit of powerlessness.” In the same vein, multinational corporations have been analyzed as missionizing religions, with globalization invoked as a mythic charter for opening up new markets all over the world. In a recent discussion of religious missions in Africa, analysts of Christian proselytization observed that “the Coca-Cola executive, committed to a profit margin for Atlanta, is no less a missionary than the American Baptist who teaches science in a high school in Nigeria.”¹¹

Transnational social movements for human rights have been analyzed as inevitably entangled with religion, whether human rights discourse is regarded as irreducibly religious, in conflict with religious loyalties, or in productive counterpoint to religious commitments. In drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, delegates debated the role of religion. One delegate advocated reference to God in the preamble, arguing that nonbelievers could simply ignore that section, but most agreed that no part of the text should be ignored by anyone, arguing against such reference. Accordingly, this foundational document of the human rights movement is not religious, although it might still be regarded as bearing traces of religion, even operating as a “secular religion,” in its appeal to

transcendent norms and values, its assumptions about the sacred, inviolable character of every human being, and its status as the ultimate standard of personal rights and collective responsibility in the world.¹²

Likewise, globalizing popular culture, especially in its Americanizing expansion, has been analyzed as both displacement and reconfiguration of religious impulses. Popular culture has a lot to do with how Americans in the United States think about America, but it has also been dispersed and diffused throughout the world to make America a template for imagining human possibility in ways that bear traces of religion.¹³

Clearly, we need new intellectual resources for dealing with this complex, shifting terrain for the analysis of religion and religions in a globalizing world. Because the notion of “religion” can be stretched so far as to lose any analytical usefulness, especially if we think we can use it to refer to anything and everything, our understanding of religion requires critical and creative reworking in response to new challenges posed by globalization.

All over the world, people have sought to mold American popular culture to serve their own religious interests. In this process, local cultural formations are also molded in American style, but not necessarily in ways that are controlled by corporate headquarters in the United States. Within the United States, new forces and discourses beyond any centralized control have shaped cultural formations on frontiers, in the borderlands, and through processes of creolization; at the same time, much of what is regarded as distinctively “American” culture can be traced in origin to Africa, Asia, Europe, or elsewhere.¹⁴

In all of these cultural exchanges, the term *religion* identifies a layer, dimension, strand, or thread of culture that bestows a certain degree of urgency upon questions of human identity. In the constellation of discourses and forces shaping America at the beginning of the twenty-first century, popular culture operates at the intersection of new technologies of cultural production, new modes of cultural consumption, and new strategies for imagining human possibility. These new elements have made a dramatic difference in the ways that popular cultural formations overlap with religion, not only in the United States, but also in the world. At the center and the periphery of these formations, the United States—as Planet Hollywood, as Planet America—has assumed a popular cultural presence of religious proportions. In the chapters that follow, I explore the multiple meanings of *religion* in American popular culture.

Whether defined as a specialized social institution dealing in the supernatural or as a symbolic system revolving around the sacred, religion represents resources and strategies for being human. The conventional view of religion defines it as a separate, distinct type of social institution that maintains traditional beliefs and practices in a community. According to this definition, three basic relationships have been established between religion and popular culture: religion appears in popular culture; popular culture is integrated into religion; and religion is sometimes in conflict with the production and consumption of popular culture.

First, we frequently encounter representations of religion in the productions of popular culture. During the twentieth century, the explosion of electronic media expanded the scope of religious representations through radio, film, television, and the Internet. On December 24, 1906, the first wireless radio broadcast in the United States consisted of a religious program of devotional music and Bible reading.¹ Although electronic media have certainly been exploited by religious groups for their own interests, the culture industry has also been actively involved in representing religious themes.

In American popular culture, the secular and commercial productions of Hollywood films have played a powerful role in shaping public perceptions of religion. Some representations of religion can be explicit. For instance, popular films depict recognizable religious characters—priests and nuns, evangelists and rabbis, gurus and lamas—in developing their narratives, which can be drawn from the

story lines of religious traditions, especially from the Bible. Often other representations of religion in film are implicit. According to many cultural analysts, basic religious motifs of sin, sacrifice, and redemption, for example, can structure the plots of ostensibly secular films.²

Second, we observe the integration of popular culture into the practices of conventional religions. Successful religious groups generally adopt the material culture, the visual media, the musical styles, and other features of popular culture.³ In American culture, the prominence of religious broadcasting on television has demonstrated the success of Christian evangelicals in appropriating an advanced communication technology in the service of the “great mandate” to preach their gospel to all nations. More recently, religious groups have established their presence on the Internet, exploring the potential of cyberspace for religious mobilization.

Drawn into the service of transmitting religion, the media of popular culture present both new possibilities and new limits for the practice of religion. In the entire range of electronic media, the transmission of religion is exclusively visual and auditory, developing new forms of visual piety and new styles of preaching, praying, and singing. But electronic media religion is devoid of all the smells, tastes, and physical contacts that feature in conventional religious ritual and religious life.

While converting popular culture to religious purposes, religious groups are also converted by the pervasive culture of consumerism in American society. As a prominent if not defining feature of American popular culture, consumerism has resulted in “selling God,” transforming religious holy days into “consumer rites,” and even fostering “religio-economic corporations,” such as Amway, Herbalife, and Mary Kay Cosmetics, which merge business, family, and a Christian gospel of prosperity into a “charismatic capitalism.”⁴

Third, we often find tensions between religious groups and the productions of popular culture. Frequently, conservative Christians complain about the moral relativism and spiritual corruption of American popular culture in general. With particular intensity, they single out rock, rap, and other forms of popular recorded music as being dangerously immoral, antisocial, and antireligious. Religious campaigns to censor, label, or otherwise influence popular music are periodically waged by conservative Christian activists and organizations. Going beyond the music and lyrics, these critics attack the imagery, values, and lifestyles associated with these popular art forms.

In this cultural conflict over popular music, evangelical Christians have created a successful commercial industry in Christian rock music—or contemporary

Christian music—which is unified less by musical style, rhythm, or performance than by the explicitly religious content of the lyrics. Conflict between a particular religious grouping and the productions of popular culture, therefore, can result in the emergence of alternative cultural movements, which can even establish a place within the culture industry.⁵

As conventional religious groups interact with popular culture in these ways—through representation in its media, adoption of its techniques, and rejection of its productions—the dividing line between religion and popular culture blurs. While popular media are telling religious stories and religious groups are appropriating popular media, culture wars engage intense religious interest. The very term *religion* becomes part of the contested terrain of popular culture. As suggested by the Southern Baptist Convention's crusade against the Walt Disney Company in accusing it of advancing an alternative pagan religion, participants in cultural struggles can engage in popular culture from different perspectives as if it were religion. Along similar lines, religious critics occasionally attack rock music for promoting the alternative religions of Satanism or pantheism. In these exchanges, it is hard to tell where religion leaves off and popular culture begins. Participants in popular culture often report that religious interests are at stake. Does it make sense to say that popular culture can operate as religion?

POPULAR CULTURE AS RELIGION

In considering popular culture as religion, everything depends, of course, on what we mean by religion. The academic study of religion draws on an intellectual legacy of competing definitions. Recall that E. B. Tylor, the founder of the anthropology of religion, defined religion as beliefs and practices relating to the supernatural, while Émile Durkheim, the founder of the sociology of religion, defined religion as beliefs and practices relating to a sacred focus that unifies people as a community.⁶ For our purposes, these academic definitions share an interest in setting religion apart from everyday or mundane aspects of human life. Religion is cast as superhuman and sacred, as transcendent and ultimate, as highly charged and extraordinary. Looking at popular culture, however, we find ordinary cultural production and consumption. How could such ordinary activity be regarded as extraordinary?

In fact, the testimony of a number of participants in popular culture includes claims about its religious character. Reflecting on baseball after a lifetime of devotion to the sport, Buck O'Neil asserted, "It is a religion." On behalf of the Coca-

Cola Company, advertising director Delony Sledge declared, "Our work is a religion rather than a business." Responding to the extraordinary popularity of the Beatles, John Lennon observed that popular music seemed to be replacing Christianity in the field of religion because the Beatles were "more popular than Jesus." Perhaps many participants in the popular culture of rock 'n' roll would subscribe to rock critic Dan Graham's statement of faith, "Rock My Religion." Still, the problem remains: What do we mean by religion? Although all of these participants in popular culture use the term *religion*, they use it in different ways. We need to understand these different constructions of religion in popular culture.

Baseball is a religion because it defines a community of allegiance, the "church of baseball." In both the past and the present, this sport has operated like a religious tradition in preserving the symbols, myths, and rituals of a sacred collectivity. Certainly, other sports provide a similar basis for sacred allegiance. As one wrestling journalist observed, a television exposé of the alleged fakery in the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) was contemptible because it tried to reveal "the 'secrets' of our sacred 'sport.'" While this journalist qualified the term *sport* with quotation marks, he did not similarly qualify the term *sacred*. Although staged, contrived, and faked as if it were a sport, WWF wrestling may still be regarded as sacred because it enacts a popular American contest of good against evil. As ritual rather than sport, WWF wrestling can be regarded as religion because it reinforces a certain kind of sacred solidarity in American popular culture.⁸

Like sports fans, the fans of Hollywood films, television shows, and popular music can participate in similar kinds of sacred solidarity, especially when that community of allegiance is focused on the extraordinary personality of a celebrity. Elvis Presley, of course, has emerged as the preeminent superhuman person in American popular culture, celebrated as an extraordinary being throughout the country, from the official sanctuary of Graceland to the unofficial Web site of the First Presleyterian Church of Elvis the Divine. Devotees collect, arrange, and display Elvis memorabilia, participate in the annual rituals of Elvis week, and go on pilgrimage to the shrine at Graceland, finding in the King not only a religious focus of attention but also a focus for mobilizing an ongoing community of sacred allegiance.⁹ Similarly, fans of the *Star Trek* television series and movies have created a community of sacred solidarity that has assumed the proportions of a popular religion, with its own myths and rituals, its special language, and regular pilgrimages.¹⁰ It is the sacred solidarity evoked in all these cases that renders the term *religion* appropriate.

Coca-Cola is a religion because it involves a sacred object, an object of global

religious attention. In addition, as a consumer product that no one needs but everyone desires, Coke is an icon of the American way of life, a way of life that is celebrated at the pilgrimage site of the World of Coca-Cola in Atlanta, Georgia, but has also been diffused throughout the world. Coke is a sacred object at the center of a cultural religion that is both American and global, within arm's reach of desire all over the world, according to former company president Roberto Goizueta. In its materiality, the religion of Coca-Cola recalls the importance of icons, relics, and other sacred objects in the history of religions.

Certainly, American popular culture enjoys a rich diversity of sacred icons, such as Disney's mouse, the McDonald's arches, Nike's swoosh, and Barbie, "the image, the ideal." As many cultural analysts have observed, these icons have been established by an advertising industry that has functioned like a religion, a religious enterprise that one critic has called Adcult USA. The sacred materiality of these icons, however, reminds us of the importance of material culture in religion. In the production and consumption of popular culture, even ordinary objects can be transformed into icons, extraordinary magnets of meaning with a religious cast. In conjunction with these objects of popular culture, the term *religion* seems appropriate because it signals a certain quality of attention, desire, and even reverence for sacred materiality.¹¹

Rock 'n' roll is a religion because it enacts an intense, ritualized performance—the "collective effervescence," as Durkheim put it—which is generated by the interaction between ritual specialists and congregants or, in this case, between artists and audiences. Recent research on religious ritual has focused on the dynamics of performance. From this perspective, ritual is sacred drama. In performance, ritual is also an interactive exchange, a dynamic process of giving and receiving. According to rock critic Dave Marsh, rock 'n' roll is religious because it involves precisely such a sacred ritual of exchange, a ritual of giving and receiving, exemplified by the break in the archetypal rock song "Louie, Louie," when the singer screeches, "Let's give it to 'em, right now!"¹² This giving is a pure gift, transcending the prevailing American value system that is based on maximizing profits and minimizing losses within an overarching system of capitalist market relations. American popular culture valorizes gift giving—at birthdays, weddings, and other ritual occasions—in ways that the market cannot value. In such rituals of giving and receiving, where value in the exchange is not determined solely by the market, popular culture preserves important aspects of traditional religious life. For these ritualized occasions of gift giving, the term *religion* seems appropriate in describing performances, practices, or events of sacred exchange.

To explore in more detail these claims that a competitive sport, a consumer product, and a type of musical entertainment might be regarded as religions, let us return to the testimonies of participants. "What has a lifetime of baseball taught you?" Buck O'Neil is asked in an interview for Ken Burns's television series on the history of the American national pastime. O'Neil, the great first baseman of the Kansas City Monarchs in the 1930s, served baseball for over six decades as player, coach, manager, and scout. "It is a religion," he responds. "For me," he adds. "You understand?"

Not exactly, of course, because we have no idea what O'Neil means by the term *religion*. As Ken Burns would have it, baseball is a religion because it operates in American culture like a church, "the church of baseball." Is that how we should understand religion in American popular culture, as an organized human activity that functions like the more familiar religious institution of the Christian church?

To complicate the matter, consider this: A religion is not a specific institution; rather, a religion is "a system of symbols." So says anthropologist Clifford Geertz; so also says author Mark Pendergrast in his account of a new religion that was founded in America but eventually achieved truly global scope, the religion of Coca-Cola. In his popular history *For God, Country, and Coca-Cola*, Pendergrast concludes that the fizzy, caramel-colored sugar water stands as a "sacred symbol" that induces "worshipful" moods that animate an "all-inclusive world view espousing perennial values such as love, peace, and universal brotherhood."¹³ According to this reading, religion is about sacred symbols and systems of sacred symbols that endow the world with meaning and value. As Pendergrast argues, Coca-Cola—the sacred name, the sacred formula, the sacred image, the sacred object—has been the fetish at the center of a popular American system of religious symbolism.

But we can complicate things even further by revisiting the line that singer Joe Ely screams before the instrumental break in the Kingsmen's 1963 rock classic, "Louie, Louie." In the midst of the clashing, crashing cacophony, with lyrics that are mostly unintelligible at any speed, we are struck by the strained screech of Ely's exhortation, "Let's give it to 'em, right now!" What kind of "gift" is this?

In his book-length history of the song, which explores "the secret" of "Louie, Louie," rock critic Dave Marsh proposes that one useful model for understanding this kind of gift giving appears in the ritualized display, presentation, and destruction of property associated with the potlatch, performed by indigenous American societies in the Pacific Northwest. This analogy with a Native American ritual, Marsh argues, can illuminate what he calls the "socioreligious" character of

"Louie, Louie" in American culture. In this sense, however, religion is not an institution; it is not a system of symbols; it is the gift.

it, this is not - but again, it's already making religion

Church, fetish, potlatch—these three terms represent different models for representing religion. By examining the recent usage of these terms in popular accounts of baseball, Coca-Cola, and rock 'n' roll, I will explore some of the consequences of using these models to locate religion in American popular culture. As we will see in greater detail, the forces of these three models, representing, respectively, the institutional formation of the church, the powerful but artificial making of the fetish, and the nonproductive expenditure of the potlatch, shape very different understandings of the character of religion. Furthermore, the play of these three models in popular culture shows, again, that the very term religion, including its definition, application, and extension, does not, in fact, belong solely to academics but is constantly at stake in the interchanges of cultural discourses and practices.

THE CHURCH OF BASEBALL

Buck O'Neil went on to clarify why baseball is a religion to him: because it is an enduring institution that is governed by established rules. "If you go by the rules," he explains, "it is right." Baseball is a religion, according to O'Neil, because "it taught [him] and it teaches everyone else to live by the rules, to abide by the rules."¹¹ This definition of religion as rule-governed behavior, however, is not sufficiently comprehensive or detailed to capture what Ken Burns presents as the religious character of baseball. The "church of baseball" involves much more than merely a rule book. It is a religious institution that maintains the continuity, uniformity, sacred space, and sacred time of American life. As the "faith of fifty million people," baseball does everything that we conventionally understand to be done by the institution of the church.¹²

well... like many things, for

First, through the forces of tradition, heritage, and collective memory, baseball ensures a sense of continuity in the midst of a constantly changing America. As Donald Hall suggests, "Baseball, because of its continuity over the space of America and the time of America, is a place where memory gathers."¹³ Certainly, this emphasis on collective memory dominates Burns's documentary on baseball. But it also seems to characterize the religious character of the sport in American culture. Like a church, Major League Baseball institutionalizes a sacred memory of the past that informs the present.

Second, baseball supports a sense of uniformity, a sense of belonging to a vast, extended American family that attends the same church. As journalist Thomas

Boswell reports in his detailed discussion of the church of baseball, his mother was devoted to baseball because "it made her feel like she was in church." Like her church, Boswell explains, baseball provided his mother with "a place where she could—by sharing a fabric of beliefs, symbols, and mutual agreements with those around her—feel calm and whole."¹⁷ Boswell draws out a series of analogies between baseball and his mother's church: both feature organs; both encourage hand clapping to their hymns; both have distinctive vestments; and in both, everyone is equal before God. Although his analogy between the base paths of a diamond and the Christian cross seems a bit strained, the rest of the essay provides sufficient justification for Boswell's assertion that his mother regarded her attendance of baseball games and church as roughly equivalent.

This is such a thing

Third, the religion of baseball represents the sacred space of home. In this respect, baseball is a religion of the domestic, of the familiar, and even of the obvious. As Boswell explains, "Baseball is a religion that worships the obvious and gives thanks that things are exactly as they seem. Instead of celebrating mysteries, baseball rejoices in the absence of mysteries and trusts that, if we watch what is laid before our eyes, down to the last detail, we will cultivate the gift of seeing things as they really are." The vision of reality that baseball affords, therefore, is a kind of normality, the ordinary viewed through a prism that only enhances its familiarity. While many religions point to a perfect world beyond this world, Boswell observes, baseball creates a "perfect universe in microcosm within the real world."¹⁸ By producing such a ritualized space within the world, baseball domesticates the sacred and gives it a home.

Fourth, the religion of baseball represents the sacred time of ritual. "Everything is high-polish ritual and full-dress procession," Boswell notes. The entire proceedings of the game are coordinated through a ritualization of time. But baseball also affords those extraordinary moments of ecstasy and enthusiasm, revelation and inspiration, that seem to stand outside the ordinary temporal flow. According to Boswell, his mother experienced such moments as "ritual epiphany" in church. "Basically," he reports, "that's how she felt about baseball, too."¹⁹ Through ritual and revelation, baseball provides an experience of sacred time that liberates its devotees from time's constraints.

In these terms, therefore, baseball is a church, a "community of believers." Certainly, the church of baseball is confronted by the presence of unbelievers within the larger society. Thomas Boswell also reports that his father failed to find his rightful place among the faithful in the church of baseball. "The appeal of baseball mystified him," Boswell explains, "just as all religions confound the inno-

cent bewildered atheist." Like any church, however, baseball has its committed faithful, its true believers. The opening speech of Annie Savoy in the film *Bull Durham* (1989) can be invoked as a passionate statement of religious devotion to baseball. "I believe in the church of baseball," she declares. She testifies that she has experimented with all other forms of religious worship, including the worship of Buddha, Allah, Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, trees, mushrooms, and Isadora Duncan, but those religions did not satisfy. Even the worship of Jesus, she confesses, did not work out, because the Christian religion involves too much guilt. The religion of baseball, however, promises a freedom beyond guilt. Although she observes the analogy between baseball and the Christian church, which is supported by the curious equivalence between 108 beads on the rosary and 108 stitches on a baseball, Annie proclaims baseball as a church in its own right. "I've tried them all, I really have," she concludes, "and the only church that truly feeds the soul, day in, day out, is the church of baseball."²⁰

"What nonsense!" an unbeliever might understandably conclude in response to all of this testimony about the church of baseball. Baseball is not a religion. It is recreation; it is entertainment; and it is big business supported by the monopoly granted to Major League Baseball. All this religious language merely mystifies the genuine character of the sport in American society.

For all the apparent mystification, strained analogies, and improbable statements of faith, however, the depiction of baseball as a church is highly significant in attempts to locate religion in American popular culture. In earlier anthropological accounts, especially those produced by the anthropologist-from-Mars school of cultural anthropology that gave us the "Nacirema" (*American* spelled backward) tribe, baseball registers as magic rather than religion.²¹ For example, a frequently anthologized article, "Baseball Magic," records the techniques employed by baseball players to manipulate unseen forces and control events.²² They use various kinds of amulets for good luck and engage in specific practices such as never stepping on the foul line and always spitting before entering the batter's box, which appear to be, in Freudian terms, "what are called obsessive acts in neurotics." In their magical practices, baseball players display an obsession with "little preoccupations, performances, restrictions and arrangements in certain activities of everyday life which have to be carried out always in the same or in a methodically varied way."²³ Although Freud held that such obsessive acts characterize the practice of both ritual and magic, George Gmelch, the author of "Baseball Magic," implicitly upholds the familiar analytical distinction between the two. Instead of interpreting baseball as religion, he highlights its superstitious practices as magic.

Gmelch's account of baseball as magic raises two theoretical problems. First, by so characterizing baseball, Gmelch pushes us back to the basic opposition between "religion" and "superstition," which has been crucial to the very definition of religion in Western culture. As we recall, the linguist Émile Benveniste observed that "the notion of 'religion' requires, so to speak, by opposition, that of 'superstition.'"²⁴ The ancient Latin term *religio*, indicating an authentic, careful, and faithful way of acting, was defined by its opposite *superstitio*, a kind of conduct allegedly based on ignorance, fear, or fraud. In these terms, *we* have religion; *they* have superstition. Only rarely has the oppositional character inherent in the notion of "religion" been recognized. Thomas Hobbes, for example, observed that the "fear of things invisible is the natural seed of that, which everyone in himself calleth religion; and in them that worship or fear that power otherwise than they do, superstition."²⁵ Baseball magic, in this view, is not religion. It is a repertoire of superstitious beliefs and practices that stand as the defining opposites of authentic religious practices. From the perspective of the anthropologist, who stands outside and observes, baseball magic is clearly something very strange that they do; it is not our religion.

Second, by focusing on baseball magic, Gmelch recalls the tension between the individual and society that has characterized academic reflections on the difference between magic and religion. In Émile Durkheim's classic formulation, magic is essentially individualistic and potentially antisocial. Unlike religious ritual, which affirms and reinforces the social solidarity of a community, magic manipulates unseen forces in the service of self-interest. As Durkheim insisted, there can be no "church of magic."²⁶ Accordingly, if baseball is magic, there can be no "church of baseball."

Ken Burns intervenes in these theoretical problems by reversing their terms. Adopting a functional definition of religion, he documents the ways in which baseball operates like a church, by meeting personal needs and reinforcing social integration. In fact, his implicit theoretical model of religion seems to be informed by the kind of functional assumptions found in J. Milton Yinger's definition of a universal church as "a religious structure that is relatively successful in supporting the integration of society, while at the same time satisfying, by its pattern of beliefs and observances, many of the personality needs of individuals on all levels of society."²⁷ Like a church, with its orthodoxy and heresies, its canonical myths and professions of faith, its rites of communion and excommunication, baseball appears in these terms as the functional religion of America.

Of course, this consideration of the church of baseball is positioned in a his-

torical moment of great public disillusionment with the professional game. Feeling betrayed by both greedy players and arrogant owners, many devotees have become apostates of the religion of baseball. In this context the phrase "church of baseball" shifts from metaphor to irony, signaling the transformation of collective memory from commemoration of an enduring tradition to nostalgia for a lost world. From this vantage point, the continuity and uniformity of the baseball tradition, the sacred time and sacred space of the baseball religion, can only be recreated in memory.

THE FETISH OF COCA-COLA

A very different theoretical model of religion is developed in Mark Pendergrast's *For God, Country, and Coca-Cola*. Drawing upon the familiar definition of religion provided by Clifford Geertz, Pendergrast proposes that Coca-Cola is a religion because it is "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions in such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."²⁸ To his credit, Pendergrast does not force his history of Coca-Cola into the mold of Geertz's definition. Rather, he allows the major actors in the drama to evoke their religious moods and motivations in their own voices. Here are the most striking examples:

From the beginning, the beverage was enveloped in a sacred aura. Its inventor, John Pemberton, referred to one of Coca-Cola's original ingredients, cocaine (which remained in the mix from 1886 until 1902), as "the greatest blessing to the human family, Nature's (God's) best gift in medicine" (page 27). During the 1890s Coca-Cola emerged as a popular tonic in the soda fountains, which a contemporary commentator described as "temples resplendent in crystal marble and silver" (page 16). Eventually, however, the blessings of Coca-Cola moved out of the temple and into the world.

The beverage elicited distinctively religious responses from company executives, advertisers, bottlers, and distributors. Asa Candler, the Atlanta entrepreneur who started the Coca-Cola empire, was described by his son as regarding the drink with "an almost mystical faith" (page 68). Candler eventually "initiated" his son "into the mysteries of the secret flavoring formula" as if he were inducting him into the "Holy of Holies" (page 61). Robert Woodruff, who became president of the company in 1923, "demonstrated a devotion to Coca-Cola which approached idolatry" (page 160). Harrison Jones, the leading bottler of the 1920s, often

referred to the beverage as "holy water" (page 146). Even the bottle itself was seen as a sacred object that could not be changed. At a 1936 bottlers convention Harrison Jones declared, "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse may charge over the earth and back again—and Coca-Cola will remain!" (page 178). Archie Lee, who assumed direction of Coke's advertising in the 1920s, complained that the "doctrines of our churches are meaningless words," speculating that "some great thinker may arise with a new religion" (page 147). Apparently, Lee, along with many other "Coca-Cola men," found that new religion in Coke.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century the Coca-Cola religion inspired a missionary fervor. At the first international convention at Atlantic City in 1948 an executive prayed, "May Providence give us the faith . . . to serve those two billion customers who are only waiting for us to bring our product to them" (page 238). Another executive later said it has "entered the lives of more people than any other product or ideology, including the Christian religion" (page 406). As the advertising director in the early 1950s, Delony Sledge, proclaimed, "Our work is a religion rather than a business" (page 261). Obviously, the Coca-Cola Company has imagined its enterprise as a religious mission.

For the consumer, however, Coke has also assumed religious significance. In the jive vocabulary of the 1930s Coca-Cola was known as "heavenly dew" (page 178). But the religious significance of Coca-Cola extended far beyond the scope of such a playful invocation. It gave America its orthodox image of Santa Claus in 1931 by presenting a fat, bearded, jolly old character dressed up in Coca-Cola red; it became the most important icon of the American way of life for U.S. soldiers during World War II; it represented an extraordinary sacred time—the "pause that refreshes"—that was redeemed from the ordinary postwar routines of work and consumption; and from the 1960s it promised to build a better world in perfect harmony. An indication of the popular devotion to it was the public outcry at the changed formula of "New Coke" in 1985, which caused one executive to exclaim, "They talk as if Coca-Cola had just killed God" (page 364). In these profoundly religious terms, as editor William Allen White observed in 1938, Coca-Cola became a potent symbol of the "sublimated essence of America" (page 198).

The religion of Coca-Cola has pervaded American society and many more. Represented in over 185 countries—more countries, Pendergrast notes, than are included in the United Nations—the Coca-Cola Company has extended its religion all over the world. As former company president Roberto Goizueta put it, "Our success will largely depend on the degree to which we make it impossible for the consumer around the globe to escape Coca-Cola" (page 397). Suggesting the

impossibility of escaping the religion of Coca-Cola, the 1980s film *The Gods Must Be Crazy* presented an absurd parable of its effect among a remote community of Bushmen in southern Africa. As Mark Pendergrast notes, the film opens as "the totemic bottle falls out of the sky onto the sands of the Kalahari Desert, where it completely transforms the lives of the innocent Bushmen as surely as Eve's apple in Eden" (page 406). Here we find Coke as a sacred sign, a sign subject to local misreading, perhaps, but nevertheless the fetish of a global religion, an icon of the West, a symbol that can mark an initiatory entry into modernity. Through massive global exchanges and specific local effects, the religion of Coca-Cola has placed its sacred fetish all over the world.

"What utter nonsense!" a skeptic might justifiably conclude after reviewing this alleged evidence for the existence of a religion of Coca-Cola. Coca-Cola is not a religion. It is a consumer product that has been successfully advertised, marketed, and distributed. In the best tradition of American advertising, the Coca-Cola Company has created the desire for a product that no one needs. Even if it has led to the "Cocacolonization" of the world, this manipulation of desire through effective advertising has nothing to do with religion.

In the study of popular culture, however, the religious character of advertising, consumerism, and commodity fetishism has often been noted. "That advertising may have become 'the new religion of modern capitalist society,'" Marshall W. Fishwick has recently observed, "has become one of the clichés of our time."²⁰ Advertising-as-religion has turned "the fetishism of commodities" into a way of life. In the symbolic system of modern capitalist society, which advertising animates, commodities are lively objects. Like the fetish, the commodity is an object of religious regard.

As a model for defining and locating religion, the fetish raises its own theoretical problems. In a series of articles, William Pietz has shown that in Western culture the term *fetish* has focused ongoing controversies over what counts as authentic making. From the Latin *facere*, "to make or to do," *fetish* has carried the semantic burden of indicating a making that is artificial, illicit, or evil, especially in the production of objects of uncertain meaning or unstable value. In this respect, the fetish is not an object; it is a subject of arguments about meaning and value in human relations.

As a modern dilemma the problem of the fetish arises in complex relations of encounter and exchange between "us" and "them." From one point of view, the fetish is something "they" make. Familiar with the notion of evil making—the *maleficium*—in black magic, Portuguese traders on the west coast of Africa in the

seventeenth century found that Africans made *fetissos*, objects beyond rational comprehension or economic valuation. Likewise, from the viewpoint of generations of anthropologists, the fetish was an object that "they" make, a sign of their "primitive" uncertainty over meaning and inability to evaluate objects. From another point of view, Marx, Freud, and their intellectual descendants have seen the fetish as something "we" make—the desired object, the objectification of desire—something that is integral to the making of modern subjectivities and social relations.²¹

Drawing upon this ambivalent genealogy of the fetish in Western culture, anthropologist Michael Taussig has emphasized the importance of "state fetishism" in both making and masking the rationality and terror of the modern political order.²² This recognition of the role of fetishism in the production and reinforcement of the state resonates with recent research on the making of those collective subjectivities—the imagined communities, the invented traditions, the political mythologies—that animate the modern world.²³ All of these things are made, not found, but they are made in the ways in which only the sacred or society can be produced.

Unlike the historical continuity and social solidarity represented by the church, therefore, instability is the inherent nature of a religion modeled around the fetish. As an object of indeterminate meaning and variable value, the fetish represents an unstable center for a shifting constellation of religious symbols. Although the fetishized object might inspire religious moods and motivations, it is constantly at risk of being unmasked as something made and therefore as an artificial focus for religious desire. The study of religion in popular culture is faced with the challenge of exploring and explicating the ways in which such "artificial" religious constructions can generate genuine enthusiasms and produce real effects in the world.

THE POTLATCH OF ROCK 'N' ROLL

As if it were not enough to bestow religious status on baseball and Coca-Cola, we now have to confront the possibility that rock 'n' roll should also count as religion. Certainly the relations between rock and religion have been ambivalent. As Jay R. Howard has observed, "Religion and rock music have long had a love/hate relationship."²⁴ On the one hand, rock has occasionally converged with religion. Rock music has sometimes embraced explicitly religious themes, serving as a vehicle for a diversity of religious interests that range from heavy-metal Satanism to contem-

porary Christian evangelism.¹⁴ On the other hand, rock has often been the target of Christian crusades against the evils that allegedly threaten religion in American society. From this perspective, rock music appears to be the antithesis of religion, not merely an offensive art form, but a blasphemous, sacrilegious, and antireligious force in society.¹⁵

Perhaps less apparent than rock's ambivalent relationship with religion is its inherently religious character. How do we theorize rock 'n' roll as religion? Attempts have been made. For example, rock 'n' roll has given rise to "a religion without beliefs"; it has given scope for the emergence of a new kind of "divinely inspired shaman"; rock has revived nineteenth-century Romantic pantheism; rock music, concerts, and videos have provided occasions for what might be called, in Durkheimian terms, "ecstasy ritual"; and a new academic discipline, "theomusicology," has included rock 'n' roll in its mission "to examine secular music for its religiosity."¹⁶ From various perspectives, therefore, rock 'n' roll has approximated some of the elementary forms of religious life.

In one of the most sustained and insightful analyses of the religious character of rock 'n' roll, Dave Marsh has undertaken a cultural analysis of the archetypal rock song "Louie, Louie" in order to explore the secret of its meaning, power, and rhythm, the "sacred *duh duh duh. duh duh.*"¹⁷ Marsh issues a daunting assessment of all previous attempts to address his topic. The "academic study of the magic and majesty of *duh duh duh. duh duh,*" as Marsh puts it bluntly, "sucks." To avoid this condemnation, we must proceed not with caution but with the recklessness that the song requires. Like its African American composer, Richard Berry, who first recorded "Louie, Louie" as a calypso tune in 1956, we must say, "Me gotta go now," and see where that going takes us.

In following the sacred rhythm of "Louie, Louie," especially as it was incarnated by the Kingsmen in 1963, Dave Marsh dismisses previous attempts to explain the secret of the song's appeal either as the result of effective marketing or as the effect of the intentional mystification produced by its unintelligible lyrics.

As an example of the first explanation, Marsh cites the commentary of Geoffrey Stokes, who authored the section on the 1960s in *Rock of Ages: The Rolling Stone History of Rock and Roll*. "It's almost embarrassing to speak of 'significance' in any discussion of 'Louie Louie,'" Stokes claimed, "for the song surely resists learned exegesis."¹⁸ Its success, he maintained, can be attributed only to aggressive marketing and efficient distribution.

To illustrate the second explanation, Marsh invokes the analysis of Robert B. Ray, professor of film studies at the University of Florida, who has earned his rock

credentials by serving as songwriter and singer for the band the Vulgar Boatmen. According to Ray, the Kingsmen's rendering of "Louie, Louie" revealed that they had "intuited a classic strategy of all intellectual vanguards: the use of tantalizing mystification." Like Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, for example, the Kingsmen employed terms and phrases that "remained elusive, inchoate, quasi-oral charms."¹⁹ The result—alluring but ultimately incoherent—was the strategic production of mystery.

In rejecting these economic and rhetorical explanations, Marsh advances an analysis of the secret of "Louie, Louie" in explicitly religious terms, uncovering layers of religious significance that are all associated with the gift. Although his discussion is inspired by the dramatic prelude to the instrumental break—"Let's give it to 'em, right now!"—it is directly related to the power of giving and receiving in the history of religions.

The song might be regarded as if it were a divine gift. As Marsh's colleague Greil Marcus puts it, by the 1980s "the tune was all pervasive, like a law of nature or an act of God." Marsh plays on this theme: if the song was a gift from God or the gods, he observes, "he, she, or they chose a vehicle cut from strange cloth, indeed—*deus ex cartootna.*"²⁰ However, the sacred gift of "Louie, Louie," the hierophany of incoherence, three chords, and a cloud of dust, cannot be accounted for in the conventional terms of any orthodox theology. Accordingly, Marsh turns to a passage in the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas that seems to capture the "holy heartbeat" of "Louie, Louie": "Jesus said, 'If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.'" Bringing forth all that is within them, the gnostic celebrants of "Louie, Louie" are saved, if not "eternally," as Marsh clarifies, then at least temporarily during the liberating moment in which they participate in the rhythm of the "sacred *duh duh duh. duh duh*" and the "magical incantation" of "Let's give it to 'em, right now!"²¹

Ultimately, however, the religious significance of the gift must be located in relations of exchange. Here a Native American ritual, the potlatch, provides a model for giving and receiving in which the gift assumes a sacred aura. From a Chinook term meaning simply "to give," the potlatch practiced by indigenous communities of the Pacific Northwest signifies the ritualized display, distribution, and sometimes destruction of valued objects at ceremonial occasions.²²

Although potlatch has variously been interpreted in the ethnographic literature as religious ritual, as status competition, as a kind of banking system, and even as a periodic outburst of "unabashed megalomania," Marsh focuses on three aspects:

This is a sketch of the music of 'Louie, Louie' as it is performed by the Kingsmen. It is a very simple, repetitive melody that is easy to remember and sing along to. The lyrics are also simple and repetitive, making it a popular song for many people.

First, the gift is total. The potlatch demands giving "everything you had: your food, your clothing, your house, your name, your rank and title." As a ritual occasion for giving everything away, the potlatch demonstrates an "insane exuberance of generosity." Second, the gift is competitive. In ritual relations of exchange, tribes compete with each other to move to the "next higher plane of value." Third, the sacred secret of the gift is ultimately revealed in destruction. As the ritualized exchanges of ceremonial gift giving escalate in value, the supreme value of the gift is realized by destroying valued objects, so that, as Marsh concludes, "eventually a whole village might be burned to the ground in order that the rules of the ceremony could be properly honored."¹¹

By odd coincidence, the Pacific Northwest was home to both the Native American societies that performed the potlatch and the rock 'n' roll bands of the early 1960s that played the song "Louie, Louie." In Marsh's account, both the potlatch and the song demonstrate the religious "secret" of the gift, especially as it was revealed in acts of conspicuous destruction, ritual acts that "violated every moral and legal tenet of non-Native American civilization; encumbered as it was with the even stranger socioreligious assumption that God most honored men by allowing them to accumulate possessions beyond all utility in this life, let alone the next."¹² In these "socioreligious" terms the "modern day electronic potlatch" of rock 'n' roll violates Euro-American religious commitments to capitalist production and accumulation, to property rights and propriety, by reviving the sacred secret of the gift.

In defense of the capitalist order, J. Edgar Hoover's FBI pursued a four-year investigation of "Louie, Louie" during the 1960s in search of evidence of subversion and obscenity in the song and its performers. As Marsh recalls, Hoover's mission "consisted precisely of visiting the plague of federal surveillance upon any revival of the potlatch mentality."¹³ But "Louie, Louie" survived this state-sponsored inquisition. Defying all attempts to suppress it, the song remains the archetype of the sacred gift at the religious heart of the potlatch of rock 'n' roll.

"What utter, absolute, and perverse nonsense!" anyone might conclude after being subjected to this tortuous exposition of the religion of rock music. Rock 'n' roll is not religion. Besides its major role in the entertainment industry, rock is a cultural medium in which all the "anarchistic, nihilistic impulses of perverse modernism have been grafted onto popular music." As a result, it is not a religion; it is a "cult of obscenity, brutality, and sonic abuse."¹⁴

The model of the potlatch, however, refocuses the definition of religion. As exemplified most clearly by rituals of giving and receiving, religion is a repertoire

of cultural practices and performances, of human relations and exchanges, in which people conduct symbolic negotiations over material objects and material negotiations over sacred symbols. If this theoretical model of religion as symbolic, material practice seems to blur the boundaries separating religious, social, and economic activity, then that is a function of the gift itself, which, as Marcel Mauss insists in his classic treatment, is a "total" social phenomenon, one in which "all kinds of institutions find simultaneous expression: religious, legal, moral, and economic."¹⁵ According to Mauss, the potlatch, as ritual event, social contest, and economic exchange, displays the complex symbolic and material interests that are inevitably interwoven in religion. Similar interests, as Dave Marsh and Greil Marcus argue, can be located in rock 'n' roll.

In the performance of the potlatch, Mauss observes, the contested nature of symbolic and material negotiations becomes particularly apparent; the "agonistic character of the prestation," he notes, "is pronounced."¹⁶ If contests over the ownership of sacred symbols characterize the potlatch, what is the contest that is conducted in the potlatch of rock 'n' roll? It is not merely the competition among musical groups, a competition waged in the "battle of the bands," which Marsh identifies as an important element of the history of "Louie, Louie." It is a contest with a distinctively religious character. In broad agreement with rock critics Marsh and Marcus, anthropologist Victor Turner proposes that rock 'n' roll is engaged in a contest over something as basic as what it means to be a human being in a human society. "Rock is clearly a cultural expression and instrumentality of that style of *communitas*," Turner suggests, "which has arisen as the antithesis of the 'square,' 'organization man' type of bureaucratic social structure of mid-twentieth-century America."¹⁷ By this account, rock 'n' roll, as antistructure to the dominant American social structure, achieves the human solidarity, mutuality, and spontaneity that Turner captures in the term *communitas*. It happens in religious ritual; it happens in rock 'n' roll.

This agonistic character of the potlatch of rock 'n' roll, however, is evident not only in America. As Greil Marcus has proposed, the potlatch might unlock the "secret history of the twentieth century."¹⁸ Constructing a disconnected narrative that links Dada, surrealism, litterists, situationists, and performance art, Marcus rewrites the cultural history of the twentieth century from the vantage point of the punk rock that was epitomized in 1976 by the Sex Pistols. Surprisingly, perhaps, that revised history depends heavily upon a sociology of religion that is implicitly rooted in the foundational work of Émile Durkheim and extended by Marcel Mauss's seminal essay on the gift; but it is a left-hand sociology of religion that

takes an unexpected turn through the world of the French social critic, surrealist, and student of religion Georges Bataille.

In his 1933 essay "The Notion of Expenditure," Bataille takes up the topic of the potlatch to draw a distinction between two kinds of economic activity: production and expenditure. While production represents "the minimum necessary for the continuation of life," expenditure is premised on excess and extravagance, on loss and destruction, or, in a word, on the gift. This alternative economic activity "is represented by so-called unproductive expenditures: luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (i.e., deflected from genital finality)—all these represent activities which, at least in primitive circumstances, have no end beyond themselves." While production is directed toward goals of subsistence, gain, and accumulation, expenditure is devoted to achieving dramatic, spectacular loss. In expenditure, according to Bataille, "the accent is placed on a loss that must be as great as possible in order for the activity to take on its true meaning."⁵¹ In the performance of the potlatch, especially when gift giving escalates to the destruction of property, Bataille finds a model of expenditure that informs his entire theory of religion.

As exemplified by the potlatch, religion intersects with rock 'n' roll because they are both cultural practices of expenditure. The gift, as in "Let's give it to 'em, right now," reopens the complex ritual negotiations over meaning and power, over place and position, over contested issues of value in modern American society. In this context, religion in American popular culture is not the church; nor is it a symbolic system revolving around a fetish. Beyond the constraints of any institution or the play of any desire, religion is defined by the practices, performances, relations, and exchanges that rise and fall and rise again through the ritualized giving and receiving of the gift.

RELIGION IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

So now where are we? If we have not found religion to reside in baseball, Coca-Cola, and rock 'n' roll after this long journey through their religious contours and contents, we are still left with the question: Where is religion in American popular culture? How do we answer that question? Where do we look? If we were to rely only on the standard academic definitions of religion, those definitions that have tried to identify the essence of religion, we would certainly be informed by the wisdom of classic scholarship, but we would also still be lost.

We might follow E. B. Tylor's classic definition of religion as beliefs and prac-

tices relating to spiritual, supernatural, or superhuman beings.⁵² Certainly, the assumption that religion is about belief in supernatural beings also appears in the discourse of popular culture. For example, an extraordinary athlete can easily become regarded as a superhuman being. Michael Jordan's return to basketball in 1995 was portrayed in precisely superhuman terms as his "second coming." Jordan complained, "When it is perceived as religion, that's when I'm embarrassed by it." Although *Sports Illustrated* recorded Jordan's embarrassment over this religious regard for him as superhuman, it also added that this reservation was expressed by "the holy Bull himself" about "the attention his second coming has attracted." Adding to the embarrassment, the same article quoted Brad Riggert, head of merchandising at Chicago's United Center, who celebrated Jordan's return by declaring, "The god of merchandising broke all our records for sales."⁵³ This perception of Michael Jordan as a superhuman being—the holy Bull, the god of merchandising—should satisfy Tylor's minimal definition of religion.

We might follow Émile Durkheim's classic definition of religion as beliefs and practices that revolve around a sacred focus that serves to unify a community.⁵⁴ According to this definition, religion depends on beliefs and practices that identify and maintain a distinction between the sacred and its opposite, the profane—a distinction that has also appeared in the discourse of American popular culture. For example, during the long and difficult development of a crucial new software product, Microsoft hired a project manager who undertook the task with religious conviction. According to the unofficial historian of this project, that manager "divided the world into Us and Them. This opposition echoed the profound distinction between sacred and profane: We are clean; they are dirty. We are the chosen people; they are the scorned. We will succeed; they will fail."⁵⁵ By this account, the cutting edge of religion—the radical rift between the sacred and the profane—appears at the cutting edge of American technology.

Like church, fetish, and potlatch, these classic definitions of religion—belief in supernatural beings, distinction between sacred and profane—are at play in American culture. As a result, religion is revealed, once again, not only as a cluster concept or a fuzzy set but also as a figure of speech that is subject to journalistic license, rhetorical excess, and intellectual sleight of hand.⁵⁶ For the study of religion, however, this realization bears an important lesson: the entire history of academic effort in defining religion has been subject to precisely such vagaries of metaphorical play.

The study of religion and religious diversity can be seen to have originated during the eras of exploration and colonization, with Europeans' surprising discovery

of people who were presumed to lack any trace of religion. Gradually, however, European observers found ways to recognize—by comparison, by analogy, and by metaphoric transference from the familiar to the strange—the religious character of beliefs and practices among people all over the world. This discovery did not depend on intellectual innovations in defining the essence of religion; it depended on localized European initiatives that extended familiar metaphors—those that were already associated with religion, such as the belief in God, rites of worship, and the maintenance of moral order—to the strange beliefs and practices of other human populations.⁵⁷ In the study of religion in American popular culture, I suggest, we are confronted with the same dilemma of mediating between the familiar and the strange.

The models of religion that we have considered allow some of the strangely religious forms of popular culture—baseball, Coca-Cola, and rock 'n' roll—to become refamiliarized as if they were religion. The religious models allow these cultural forms to appear as the church, the fetish, and the sacred gift of the ritual potlatch in American popular culture. Why not? Why should these cultural forms not be regarded as religion?

The determination of what counts as religion is not the sole preserve of academics. The very term *religion* is contested and at stake in the discourses and practices of popular culture. Recall, for instance, the disdain expressed by the critic who dismissed rock 'n' roll as a "cult of obscenity, brutality, and sonic abuse." In this formulation the term *cult* signifies the absence of religion. "Cult," in this regard, is the opposite of "religion." The usage of the term *cult*, however it might be intended, inevitably resonates with the discourse of an extensive and pervasive anticult campaign that has endeavored to deny the status of "religion" to a variety of new religious movements by labeling them as entrepreneurial businesses, politically subversive movements, or coercive, mind-controlling, and brainwashing cults. In that context, if we should ever speak about the "cult" of baseball, Coca-Cola, or rock 'n' roll, we could be certain about one thing: we would not be speaking about religion.

The very definition of religion, therefore, continues to be contested in American popular culture. However, the examples we have considered—baseball, Coca-Cola, and rock 'n' roll—seem to encompass a wildly diverse but somehow representative range of possibilities for what might count as religion. They evoke familiar metaphors—the religious institution of the church, the religious desires attached to the fetish, and the religious exchanges surrounding the sacred gift—that resonate with other discourses, practices, experiences, and social formations

that we are prepared to include within the ambit of religion. Why do they not count as religion? From the church of baseball, through the fetish of Coca-Cola, to the sacred and sanctifying gift giving of the potlatch of rock 'n' roll, the discourses and practices of popular culture raise problems of definition and analysis for the study of religion. In different ways, these three terms—*church*, *fetish*, and *potlatch*—signify both the problem of defining religion and the complex presence of religion in American popular culture.

of but what
is the answer
to this? Don't
know.