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Mediating the Sacred: Popular Culture as Liturgical Icon in a Secular Age

Abstract

This presentation explores how popular culture and the new forms of technology that mediate it function as a "cultural liturgy" within the immanent frame of secularity. Poetic and symbolic expressions that mediate the sacred within the lived experience of young people will be shared. Icons within the secular experience of young people in the West can be seen positively by Christians. This paper draws from research conducted for a forthcoming book on the relationship between Heavy Metal music and Theology.

Keywords

youth ministry, Birdman, faith, knowledge, reality

Disciplines

American Popular Culture | Christianity

Comments

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Mediating the Sacred: Popular Culture as Liturgical Icon in a Secular Age
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“And what did you want?”
“To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on this earth.”
Raymond Carver, Late Fragment

The film *Birdman* tells the story about a washed up superhero actor trying for one last attempt at respectability by directing a Broadway play—an adaptation of Raymond Carver’s *What we Talk about When we Talk About Love*. Creatively shot to look like as if it was done in one continuous take, the film is an onslaught of dialogue and drum riffs that moves in and out of conversations so quickly it is easy to miss what’s being said. There are multiple interpretations of the film—some dismiss it as an insider story about acting, while others see it as an indictment of the technological media drive obsession with the spectacle. There is, however, an way of interpreting the film that suggests it isn’t about what’s being said at all.

In the middle of the action, right in the middle of the “sound and furry signifying nothing” (which is actually quoted in the film) there appears a small sign in the corner of Riggan Thomson’s mirror that reads: “A thing is a thing not what is said about a thing.” The sign is right there in plain sight, but it’s easy to miss. No one draws attention to it, the phrase does not make it into the dialogue, and yet it frames the entire film. Every character has a scene in which they give a speech that names or explains what’s happening. Every character has something to say about what Riggan Thomson is doing; everyone has something to say about his career and the meaning of the play he’s directing. It’s easy to get caught up in the words and rhetoric. And yet, if we miss the

sign on the mirror then we miss the point: it is not what is said about a thing that matters, it is the thing itself.

Birdman provides a fitting metaphor for the contemporary experience of young people living in the West. They are used to being named; there are a number of social and institutional voices that work very hard to inscribe the identity of young people with its own discourse. New forms of technology and social media have created platforms that allow young people to manage their identity construction with words and images that become a type of brand, even as they inscribe young people with the truth about what it means to be a human being and the norms that mark progress (success and failure) as they make something out of their lives.

In the Christian community the church, and youth ministry in particular, has become one more voice competing to name young people. Whether it is moral, doctrinal, or experiential language, the church is engaged in a competition with every other cultural narrative and ideology for the hearts (meaning the identity) of young people. Fueled by the current research suggesting a dramatic shift in the way young people experience religious belief, the Christian community frantically tries to name what is happening. In youth ministry this has led to an emphasis upon practical and actionable ways for congregations and families to keep young people in “the faith”. This includes strengthening various forms of practice that mediate the content of Christian faith through dogma, doctrine, and the bible, which amounts to a Christian way of speaking or naming what something or someone “is”. The risk of this approach is that theology becomes a way of establishing a metaphysical reality in which God is the guarantee of a particular identity and way of life.

This raises important questions about the nature of faith. Jean Luc Marion, in his *God Without Being*, frames the theological task within the poles of the “icon” and the “idol”. The idol is a concept, image, or way of speaking upon which the gaze of the subject stops. The idol represents an object or a person being taken into the conceptual framework of the subject, forming a mirror that reflects the gaze back upon the one who looks. Instead of seeing the object, the subject sees his or her own self—his or her own worldview. In the idol the subject constructs the object in the subject’s own image. In contrast, the icon allows the gaze of the subject to pass through it, opening up the possibility of an experience of the object it signifies. Instead of control, the icon is marked by “given-ness”, which for Marion means the “thing” or “person” gives itself to the subject through the icon in a way that blows open every concept or worldview the subject uses to comprehend. In the end, the given-ness of the “thing” or “person” in the icon reconstitutes the subject, creating the possibility of experiencing it in all of its complexity and irreducibility.

The risk for youth ministry, particularly in the context of the current issue of young people leaving the church, is a tendency toward idolatry. In trying to help young people believe in Christianity or remaining a part of the church the community youth ministry runs the risk of a conceptual idolatry grounded in the beliefs and practices of the particular community. When this happens Christian faith is reduced to concepts, names, and dogmas that keep God’s word managed and under control. Similarly, by focusing on morality and ethics that mirror the social, cultural, and norms of a particular community, young people are cut off from the revelation of what it means to be human in Jesus Christ.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the possibility for an approach to youth ministry that is grounded in the icon, creating the space for the revelation of God's love for the world in Jesus Christ. Using the work of Jean Luc Marion I will make the claim that the current movement of young people away from the church presents a significant opportunity for a new iconic paradigm in youth ministry. As young people and emergent adults continue to embrace secularity they are engaging in new ways of experiencing the world. Instead of seeing this as a competition with Christian faith, these experiences hold the possibility of providing a foundation for the witness of the Christian community to the saturated phenomenon of everyday existence. To be more specific, young people and emergent adults are seeking experiences of transcendence, not in some otherworldly spirituality, but in the "peak experiences" of this life. Thus, by moving with young people and emergent adults out into their experiences of the world, youth ministry can bear witness to the gospel and a new way of receiving the world in love.

To support this claim this paper will provide a brief engagement of the "saturated phenomenon" within Marion's work, placing it within his distinction between the "idol" and "icon". This will lead to an articulation of the task of youth ministry as "witness" in the context of the lived experience of young people and emergent adults. Instead of trying to keep them (or take them) in the church, youth ministry as "witness" in the context of the saturated phenomenon represents an outward movement into the "peak experiences" of the secular world. Finally, I will provide examples of how popular culture can serve an important iconic function of clearing the necessary space for the "other" to give itself in ways that saturate intuition and break open our conceptual idolatries. This provides the

foundation for the witness of the Christian community to the revelation of God's love for the world revealed in Jesus Christ.

The Saturated Phenomenon: The Way of the Icon

In his essay "The Saturated Phenomenon" Jean Luc Marion addresses the possibility of nonobjective phenomenon, or experiences of the world that transgress the conditions of possibility. Grounded in the phenomenological work of Husserl and Heidegger, Marion explores the significance of human consciousness in the relationship between a subject and an object. As the subject moves to comprehend an object (intention), knowledge is possible when intuition (how the object is present to the subject) and the concept (the idea by which we make meaning out of intuition) come into proper relationship (adequation). This approach to knowledge and experience provides the foundation for objectivity in which intuition and the conceptual come into proper alignment.

What concerns Marion is that this way of knowing does not leave room for experiences that fall outside of the criteria of possibility, meaning the formal conditions of possibility end up privileging the concept or ideal. Knowledge, in this context, is primarily rational. Any discrepancy that occurs is understood to be a lack or failure of intuition as it is unable to present the phenomenon to the conceptual framework of the thinking subject. This means that knowledge of phenomena is grounded in a form of objectivity that privileges the rational concept used by the subject to make sense of the world. It is this privileging of the concept that Marion challenges.

Marion argues that the primacy of the concept or the ideal does not lead to objective knowledge of a thing; instead, it represents the imposition of the subject, and

the conceptual world of the subject, upon the object. This, according to Marion, is idolatry. In *God without Being* Marion refers to the idol as that which halts the gaze of the subject, reflecting it back like a mirror. This creates a feedback loop in which the “thing” is caught within the conceptual framework of the subject. Instead of encountering or knowing the “thing”, the subject instead imposes upon it a conceptual framework that inscribes itself. Instead of encountering the “thing” that is intended, the subject reconstructs it in its own image by taking it into its own conceptual orbit. At the center of idolatry is the exercise of power over the thing that conforms it to the conceptual reality imposed by the subject.

This is precisely the message of the film *Birdman*. Every character has an agenda, a word that is spoken about Riggan Thomason’s play, his character, and his motives as a director. Each of the main characters gives a speech that establishes an interpretation as the decisive conceptual framework. Instead of hearing or experiencing the thing itself (Riggan Thomson or the play), they inscribe their way of seeing the world upon his work. One of the more powerful scenes is when his daughter confronts him with a speech about what makes something “meaningful” or “real”—the reality of social media. She argues that if something is not on Facebook, Twitter, or Youtube, then it does not have an existence—it is not real. Later in the film a Broadway reviewer gives a scathing indictment of Thompson’s work based solely upon his past life as a superhero actor and her own prejudice about of what constitutes true art. The case can also be made that we, who are watching the film are guilty of importing our own plausibility structures on the story, especially the episodes where Riggan Thomson talks to his former superhero personality. (Is it mental illness? Is it real?) All of this provides a metaphor for Marion’s

take on idolatry—to imprison reality (the other) within the conceptual world of our own possibility structures.

The significance of Marion’s work is that he opens up an alternative encounter: the saturated phenomenon. Instead of privileging the concept, Marion argues that in the “saturated phenomenon” the thing gives itself to intuition in excess, overloading the rational concept and transgressing the rational conditions of possibility. Instead of a Cartesian move from the subject to the object as the basis of knowledge about the world, Marion argues for an experience grounded in “given-ness” in which the object (the world, a person, a thing) oversaturates intuition. Human finitude, in this context, is not the lack of intuition, instead finitude is inability of our rational concepts to apprehend the totality and diversity of the phenomenon as it gives itself to the subject.

This does not eliminate the categories of rational knowledge; it transforms them by opening up the possibility of a deeper experience of the world. For Marion the given-ness of the saturated phenomenon is mediated by a way of love that privileges the poetic function of the icon. The icon is a form of mediation in which the object gives itself to the subject in such a way that it amazes and bedazzles, paradoxically transgressing the empirical conditions of possibility grounded in the concept or the ideal. Marion writes, “In order to introduce the concept of the saturated phenomenon in phenomenology, I have just describes it as invisible (unforeseeable) according to quantity, unbearable according to quality, but also unconditioned (absolved from any horizon) according to relation, and irreducible to the I (incapable of being looked at) according to modality.”¹

This for Marion is not a “limit case”—it is not to be understood as an atypical mystical

¹ Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte, Second Edition* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), 45.

experience; it is instead “the most operative definition of the phenomenon: it alone truly appears as itself, of itself, and starting from itself.”² He summarizes it this way in his essay “The Banality of Saturation”:

To speak of a banal saturated phenomenon therefore does not imply that it becomes current and frequent, not, a contrario, that it must become exceptional and rare and therefore to be confined to the margins of common phenomenality, which supposedly fixes the norm. The banality of the saturated phenomenon suggests that the majority of phenomena, if not all, can undergo a saturation by the excess of intuition over the concept or signification in them. In other words, the majority of phenomena that appear at first glance to be poor in intuition could be described not only as objects but also as phenomena that intuition saturates and therefore exceed any univocal concept.³

The significance of Marion’s work is that it opens up the possibility for a different way of knowing. The icon is a way of love that privileges “given-ness” in which the thing or object gives itself in excess to the intuition of the subject. Whereas the idol conveys a sense of possession in which the “thing” the “object” or the “person” is grasped, controlled, and named, the given-ness of the saturated phenomenon opens up the subject to receive and be transformed by the gift of the other. This is a way of love, for Marion, represents a poetic fullness that manifests itself in a multiplicity of meanings. The function of the poetic, which is to say the function of the icon, is to open up the space for an encounter with the other—a space in which the other gives itself in a way that over saturates conceptual understanding. In this way the given-ness of the saturated phenomenon flips the Cartesian subject on its head: rather than the subject constituting the meaning of the object, the encounter with the object in love breaks down and reconstitutes the subject.

² Ibid.

³ Jean-Luc Marion, *The Visible and the Revealed* (Fordham Univ Press, 2009), 126.

What this Means for Youth Ministry

So what is the significance of Marion's thought for youth ministry? At one point in "The Banality of Saturation" Marion discusses what he calls common or poor phenomenon. He writes, "First, their constitution as objects requires only an empty or poor intuition, so that the difficulty in comprehending them consists most of the time only in determining the concept or concepts, not in the ordeal of the intuition."⁴ In other words, the experience of poor phenomenon requires nothing more than fitting the object into the conceptual framework. There is a lack of depth, a thin encounter that requires "empty or poor intuition."⁵ Here we discover a significant way to frame the church's response to the issue of young people and faith. The tendency is to reduce the experience of God and neighbor to a conceptual framework (doctrine or dogma), or to the assimilation of a cultural ideology. It is important for the church to consider how forms of youth ministry that focus on right belief or morality reduces the complexity of faith and human experience and cultivates poor or shallow intuition. The same holds true for forms of ministry that tries to align Christian beliefs with cultural ideology. Far from making faith relevant, the tendency is to reduce it to the cultural ideology that once again leads to a poor or empty intuition. The challenge for youth ministry is to establish iconic forms of ministry that create space in which young people might encounter the revelation (givenness) of God in Jesus Christ that opens them to receive the world and more specifically their neighbor in love and grace.

To say that youth ministry runs the risk of establishing new forms of conceptual idolatry is not meant to degrade the work of youth ministry. Marion is clear that the

⁴ Ibid., 125.

⁵ Ibid.

nature of human sin and depravity is, as John Calvin argues, the inescapable problem of idolatry. Individuals and communities cannot in any way will themselves out of conceptual idolatry into an iconic way of love. The way of love and the saturated phenomenon breaks into our world, jarring us into a new unthinkable possibility. We are able, however, to begin clearing space in a way that frees the gaze from remaining frozen. He writes, “This gaze never sees what other gazes, in its place, would see to the point of freezing: instead of seeing the visible, it immediately spots another part that is not filled, in the visible horizon, by the spectacle. It sees what is not presents as visible, the empty space between the visable and the visible; this gaze strictly forms an empty space before itself and around the visible; it makes an empty space of the visible and, transpiercing it or bypassing it, makes the invisible; it makes the invisible, as one makes a vacuum...”⁶ This points to the possibility of creating the conditions that allow it to move past the concept, past the idol, into a nothingness that reveal cracks in the conceptual framework, or cracks in the idol. This nothingness then becomes the conditions for the possibility of the icon, the conditions in which the way of love breaks into the world, transgressing the conditions of possibility and opening up a new way of seeing. In other words youth ministry can create the conditions for undermining the idol in such a way that opens up space for the possibility of revelation—the given-ness of God revealed in Jesus Christ and the new humanity that is grounded in his death and resurrection.

All of this leads to this question: What if the movement of young people away from traditional, organized forms, of the church is an important step in the movement of authentic faith? Philosopher Zygmunt Bauman describes a new form of spirituality within

⁶ Marion, *God Without Being*, 111–12.

the context of the imminent frame of secularity that focuses on “peak experiences” where young people seek transcendent encounters within the parameters of this material existence. Increasingly, young people are drawn to activities like base jumping, mountain climbing, international travel, humanitarian trips to take on significant issues within foreign cultures, etc. One way of making sense of this is to see it within the framework of Marion’s saturated phenomenon. These experiences lead to encounters that saturate the intuition of young people in ways that the church has failed to do. Through these experiences and encounters young people are being opened up to a way of love and a different way of experiencing the world. Obviously, the risk is that these encounters are quickly absorbed into the conceptual apparatus and therefore become one more form of idolatry, but it is important that the Christian community and youth ministry take seriously the depth and complexity that these experiences are opening up for young people.

Rather than see the task of youth ministry as a way to convey faith, or provide young people with the conceptual framework for belief and morality, or even to enter into “relationships”, Marion’s work suggests the possibility that the purpose of youth ministry is to enter into these “peak experiences” with young people. By engaging these experiences the Christian community takes part in the clearing out of the conceptual space in a way that helps the gaze of young people detect cracks and fissures within the concepts and worldviews, that leads to the “nothingness” from which the possibility of the way of love and the icon arises. Put simply, the task of youth ministry becomes the cultivation of an experience of the world that make space for the revelation of a way of

love and a saturated intuition that leads to a deep and complex experience of human existence.

Marion provides an important way of thinking about this task: bearing witness.

For Marion, a “witness” is someone who sees. Marion describes it this way:

[T]he witness sees the phenomenon, but he does not know what he sees and will not comprehend what he say. He sees it indisputably, in perfect clarity, with all requisite intuition, often with an intuitive excess that profoundly and enduringly affected him, possibly wounding him. He knows what he saw and knows it so well that he stands ready to witness it again and again, often counter to his immediate interests. Witnessing becomes for him a second nature, a job, and a social function, which can end up rendering him tiresome, if not odious to those who have to deal with his ‘obligation to remember.’ And for all that, the witness still does not every succeed in saying, comprehending, or making us comprehend what he saw.⁷

Within the framework of witness, the task of youth ministry is not to explain, describe, or name God or Christian faith so that young people believe. The task of youth ministry is also not to explain, describe, or name a particular way of being human—fitting young people into a specific cultural norm as the basis of faith. It is also important to recognize that merely replacing dogma and strong theological claims with cultural ideology—fitting the Christian language within the accepted norms of social and cultural life is just as much a form of conceptual idolatry as strong theology. The task of youth ministry is to bear witness to the saturated phenomenon that is everyday life; it means bearing witness to the excess of human experience that iconcily opens up the possibility of encountering both God and neighbor. So what might this look like? I conclude with a few examples from popular culture.

⁷ Marion, *The Visible and the Revealed*, 142–43.

Youth ministry is presented with an opportunity to help young people engage popular culture as a poetic happening that provides a catalyst for the opening up of conceptual space, creating the conditions that make revelation possible. Within popular culture there can be found artistic representations of the world that push the viewer / reading into depth and complexity that reorients the self and the community to the world, opening up the possibility for the in-breaking of love and the given-ness of the “other”. The power of popular culture is in the way the language, imagery, sound, and overall experience have the potential to rupture the dominant way of seeing the world, opening space for a different way of seeing and being in the world.

To close I provide two examples from my work with college students. The first is the juxtaposition of two films: *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Interstellar*. Both films use imagery and sound to create an experience and to speak about what it means to be human. The first presents the Nietzschian Will to Power as the basis of human evolution and progress, while the second, with interwoven references to *2001*, argues for an entirely different way of being in the world: love. Students hated *2001* when they first watched it because they struggled with the imagery, sound, and philosophy that informed Kubrick’s choices. Even after a series of discussions and readings intended to help provide ways to interpret the film, students strongly disliked the film. A reason they gave for not liking the film is they felt discombobulated and disoriented. One young woman became physically ill during the final scene of travel through the wormhole. However, when we viewed *Interstellar*, and they recognized the many references to the film, they began to think about the film differently. Comparing and contrasting Kubrick’s vision with Christopher Nolan’s film offered students the opportunity to wrestle with significant

questions about human existence. Not every student was taken in by this discussion, but there were a number of students for whom the film opened up questions and issues they had never thought about. To use Marion's language, it provided enough of a rupture to move their gaze, revealing the trace outline of "nothing-ness" around the idol of their own ideological worldview.

This same group viewed the film *American Beauty*. Personally, I didn't expect much of a response given the film is now sixteen years old. However, the imagery and narrative of the film, which culminates in a death, and then a montage of images narrated by the character who was killed, somehow provided a number of students with a significant, almost sacred, experience. This was evoked by the montage at the end of the film that showed simple, ordinary, objects as saturated phenomenon overflowing with the excess of life and beauty. This experience provided the space for a re-examination of meaning, beauty, and the sacred within this temporal life. All of this is summed up in the closing monologue of the film:

I had always heard your entire life flashes in front of your eyes the second before you die. First of all, that one second isn't a second at all, it stretches on forever, like an ocean of time...For me, it was lying on my back at Boy Scout camp, watching falling stars... And yellow leaves, from the maple trees that lined our streets... Or my grandmother's hands, and the way her skin seemed like paper... And the first time I saw my cousin Tony's brand new Firebird.... And Janie... And Janie... And Carolyn. I guess I could be pretty pissed off about what happened to me... but it's hard to stay mad when there is so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I'm seeing it all at once, and it's too much, my heart fills up like a balloon that's about to burst...And then I remember to relax, and stop trying to hold on to it, and then it flows through me like rain and I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid life... You have no idea what I'm talking about, I'm sure. But don't worry... you will someday. (*American Beauty*)

Both of these experiences led to a biblical and theological discussion about the nature of faith and what it means to live in this world as a human being in the context of

the gospel. Students made connections with the biblical story and the ways they experience God at work in the world. Many of these insights were made possible through the viewing these films. In this way the films functioned as an icon that freed their gaze from the endless cycle of idolatry and ideology, opening them up to the possibility of a different way of being in the world. Of course there remains the possibility that even the discourse created by these films merely established a new idol inscribed by the solidified worldview of the subject. But this doesn't diminish the power of these and other films, as well as other forms of popular culture, to provide the necessary rupture that openness up the possibility of the icon and the way of love Marion describes.

The controversial ending of *Birdman* poetically represents what it means to be taken into a way of love and "given-ness". At the beginning of the film Riggan Thompson's daughter was critical of her father and his project as seen in the way her words interpret his life in a particular way. At the end, however, she is opened up to receive her father as he gives himself. She enters the way of love that allows her to receive her father as a gift, no longer trying to rationally and conceptually name him, she is open to the excess of life and given-ness that shatters her conceptual categories and way of making sense of the world. In the final scene of the film we see Riggan Thompson's daughter standing at the window looking up into the sky smiling—an image (icon) of love and given-ness grounded in an encounter with the other.

Calling for youth ministry to enter into the peak experiences of young people does not mean turning our back on the beliefs and practices of the church. It does mean, however, reorienting ourselves to them; receiving them in love and given-ness instead of clinging to them in fear and control. The practices of the church bear witness to the love

of God for the world in Jesus Christ through its own “saturated phenomenon”—the bread and the wine, the water of baptism, and the word proclaimed. Like the father in the parable of the prodigal son the church and youth ministry must be willing to run out to meet young people in the context of their own experiences so we can walk alongside them as they are welcomed back into the community.