**Faith in Focus: Examining the Relationship Between Religion and Pop Culture**

Debut Student Paper

Central States Communication Association Conference

January 10, 2025

Religion is a fundamental part of cultural life, shaping beliefs, traditions, values, and norms across societies. Beyond its spiritual dimensions, it can be a source of power, influence, and control. Religion *is* popular culture- deeply embedded in both historical and contemporary social structures. To fully understand impact and role of religion today, religion must be examined through the lens of popular culture, how we define that, how religion continues to reinforce power dynamics and systems, and how it shapes the repetition and reproduction of ideas. Analyzing the impact of religion will help us better understand the ideas of John Fiske and Walter Benjamin, which will illuminate (1) how religion influences social change or inequality, (2) the existence or elimination of “aura”, and (3) how religion subjects or liberates those under such dominion.

This essay will explore key ideas from the works of John Fiske and Walter Benjamin. John Fiske, a prominent media scholar and cultural theorist, served as a professor of Communication Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for over a decade. Known for his significant contributions to media and cultural studies, Fiske remains a figure in the field of Communication. Walter Benjamin, a German philosopher, media theorist, and cultural critic, is best known for his influential work *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. In this text, Benjamin examines the impact of mechanical reproduction on art, particularly the diminishing “aura” of unique artistic works. The insights of both scholars will provide a deeper understanding of the intricate connections between popular culture and religion.

Religion is a dominant force in popular culture. To understand the relationship between popular culture and religion, we must understand how we define popular culture. In this paper, I will adopt John Fiske’s definition, stating that “popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry. Above all else, [popular culture must be] relevant to the immediate social situation of the people” (Fiske, 2011, pp.22-25). Popular culture is dynamic- a process in which power structures and “the people” engage in a constant negotiation of meaning, values, and identities. Audiences are not passive dupes, but play an active role in shaping culture by interpreting, resisting, and reimagining cultural products to align with their own needs and identities, which Fiske defines as a “struggle” (Fiske, 2011, p.28). Similarly, Stuart Hall explains, “What is essential to the definition of popular culture is the relations which define ‘popular culture’ in a continuing tension (relationship, influence, and antagonism) to the dominant culture… [and] the process by which these relations of dominance and subordination are articulated… by means of which some things are actively preferred so that others can be dethroned.” Popular culture only exists when the power “struggle” exists. In this essay, this is the lens that I will analyze the relationship between pop culture and religion through.

Religious organizations are no stranger to power dynamics and control. Certainly, no stranger to this power and cultural “struggle”. Throughout history, religion has dominated culture and social structures. According to Brent Nongbri, “The formation of ancient religions as objects of study coincided with the formation of religion itself as a concept of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” (Nongbri, 2013). Religion is both widely accepted and contested, serving as a means for people to make sense of the world and their own existence. At its core, religion is not only a system of belief but also a structure rooted in historical power dynamics. Built upon previous power systems, it continues to reinforce and replicate moral and social codes that often align with the interests of the bourgeois-those in positions of authority or privilege within society. These codes shape cultural norms and dictate acceptable behavior, often leaving little room for deviation or dissent. So, when there is deviation, certain ideas or movements are perceived as “threats” (in the eyes of mainstream religion) to their authority and control over societal norms.

Topics such as gay marriage and relationships, feminism, gender theory and challenges to gender roles or norms, and sex and promiscuity, all are seen as direct “threats” to the “reality” or moral framework established by many religious organizations. These “threats” question the Church’s monopoly on “truth” and disrupt its narrative of what is natural, moral, or divinely ordained. Because religious organizations cannot risk doubt among the devout and faithful, resistance then, in turn, drives power structures to enact punishment or regulation. This resistance to power reminds the powerful of this constant negotiation of meaning. Further Fiske (2011) argues,

The signs of the subordinate out of control terrify the forces of order… for they constitute a constant reminder of how both fragile social control is, and how it is resented; they demonstrate how escaping social control, even momentarily, produces a sense of freedom…That this freedom is often expressed in excessive ‘irresponsible’ behavior is evidence both of the vitality of these disruptive popular forces, and the extent of their repression in everyday life (p. 69).

This resistance and disruption to power can be seen throughout history, as well as in the modern world today. For example, in the rise of Christianity in Europe, antisemitism grew considerably. This was not only due to difference in belief, but also due to the fact that Christians had been falsely accusing Jews of being linked to the devil, the black death, and of the blood libel. The blood libel accused Jews of using the blood of murdered Christian children to use in their religion ceremonies. More specifically, Jews were accused of killing children to acquire blood for Passover ceremonies and rituals. This was also tied to the narrative spread that Jews were responsible for the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ. These false accusations that Christians spread led to heavy persecution of the Jewish people, including the murder of many (The Wiener Holocaust Library, 2023). Though this is not the only example in which religion has been used as a way to maintain power and control over a group of people.

Religion has also been used in modern times to exert power and influence over groups of people who seem undesirable or, as John Fiske refers to it “dirty”. He states, “dirt is disorder, is threatening and undisciplined” (Fiske, 2011, p.99). The LGBTQ+ community has long been targeted by religion and those in power for being “deviant or perverted.” Homosexual relationships have been seen as a threat to traditional families, undermining procreation, and sinful. To try to prevent queer individuals from being a “threat”, religious leaders and systems have labeled queerness as opposition to God, “an abomination” in certain interpretations of the Bible (Leviticus 18:22), and immoral. While some religious groups have taken steps to be more inclusive towards queer people, others have not, and have maintained their stance on the bounds of marriage and sexual relationships. Stances which often suppress the identities of queer people, by labeling homosexual relations as wrong or sinful. This doesn’t mean though, that there isn’t progress happening. The United States Presbyterian church, for example, voted to allow same sex marriages on June 19th, 2014. Leaders made this ruling allowing pastors to perform these marriages where legally recognized (which now includes all 50 states.) This change has allowed queer Presbyterians in the US to receive more acceptance from family and their religious community- and feel affirmed in their identity.

On the contrary, as religious groups have doubled down on their doctrine, policies, and views- those who are marginalized have resisted and advocated for themselves. For example, in recent years, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS Church) has experienced frequent controversy for their views on the LGBTQIA+ community. Brigham Young University (BYU), which is owned and operated by the LDS Church, was under fire after updating their Honor Code as it related to queer students. The Honor Code is a code of conduct BYU students, faculty, and staff, must agree to and follow while attending or employed by BYU. This Honor Code is established by the Church Educational System, which is sponsored by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. CES (Church Educational System) is guided by the Church Board of Education and Board of Trustees. According to the Church, the goal of CES is “to develop disciples of Jesus Christ who are leaders in their homes, the Church, and their communities.” BYU policy states, “The CES [Church Educational System] Honor Code helps to accomplish the CES mission to build disciples of Jesus Christ. As faculty, administration, staff, and students voluntarily commit to conduct their lives in accordance with the principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ, they strive to maintain the highest standards in their personal conduct regarding honor, integrity, morality, and consideration of others.” Such standards include (1) “maintaining an ecclesiastical endorsement”, (2) abstaining from alcohol, coffee, tobacco, marijuana, and tea, (3) “respect[ing] others, including the avoidance of profane and vulgar language”, (4) obeying the law, (5) attending church services regularly, and (6) “[living] a chaste and virtuous life”, which prohibits sexual relations outside of marriage between and man and a woman, as well as “same-sex romantic behavior” (Church Educational System Honor Code, 2024). In 2007, BYU updated their Honor code, stating that “Brigham Young University will respond to student behavior rather than to feelings or orientation… Advocacy of a homosexual lifestyle (whether implied or explicit) or any behaviors that indicate homosexual conduct, including those not sexual in nature, are inappropriate and violate the Honor Code” (Lyon, 2007). This alteration was seen as a win by many queer people and allies at the time. A step in the right direction. And in 2011, BYU removed prohibiting “advocacy” from the Honor Code. Driving hope for change among queer students. Though, despite this change, in 2021, BYU fired 2 instructors after they had expressed concerns around queer students, and the Church’s teachings around LGBTQ+ people (Kemsley, 2022). This shows the constant tension between the bourgeois and the proletariat. Between those in power and the people, and this constant negotiation happening in this space. Because the Church needs to have some sort of progressiveness (but not radical change (Fiske, 2011, p.21)), to appeal to members and remain profitable off of tithing-because commodities can be cultural, not just material (Fiske, 2011, p.11), there needs to be some sort of give and take here. Queer members ask for acceptance and inclusivity, and the Church allows queer people to identify as queer, without allowing romantic and sexual behavior of queer students (Iati, 2020). But the Church must also continue to uphold its views on same-sex relationships. So, when people speak out against those in power, and in support of “the people”, it threatens the bourgeois (in this case, the Church), which leads to termination for those employed. Sometimes, those who speak out may even face Church discipline or be excommunicated and removed from the Church, displaying the discomfort those in power hold with the proletariat. This tension then, “arise(s) from the social allegiances formed by subordinated people, they are bottom-up and thus must exist in some relationship of opposition to power (social, moral, textual, aesthetic, and so on) that attempts to discipline and control them” (Fiske, 2011, p.49). This "struggle" as Fiske defines it, ties a clear connection between religion and pop culture, particularly when considering the role of membership within religious organizations. The LDS Church relies heavily on its members not only for participation but also for financial support through tithing. Without a strong and engaged membership base, the Church’s ability to function effectively is significantly weakened. This dependency then, creates a situation in which the Church must navigate evolving societal norms, particularly regarding LGBTQ+ identities, as well as independence among women and feminist theories, as younger generations increasingly advocate for inclusion and acceptance.

The LDS Church is then faced with a critical decision: either it maintains its current conservative stance, risking a loss of members and the associated financial support, or it adapts to societal pressures and redefines its standards to align with the values of a more progressive population. However, any such change is unlikely to occur radically, rapidly or without resistance. The Church, much like other religious institutions rooted in tradition, must carefully navigate its approach, while it must maintain its appeal to more conservative members who support the existing doctrines- while also considering the growing demand for inclusivity and equality among younger, more progressive members (who are the future of the Church-for that matter.) This balance of keeping more conservative demographics happy, while also working to stay relevant to younger, more progressive members, underscores the tension between tradition and modernity. The Church must work to uphold its foundational beliefs while also remaining relevant in a rapidly changing culture. The Church needs to keep enough members engaged and satisfied to ensure their survival, while also addressing the moral and ethical concerns of an increasingly diverse and vocal membership. Ultimately, this “struggle” Fiske (2011) speaks of, (navigating power and meaning between power systems and the people) highlight the complexities between the expectations of the proletariat (the members) and the interests of the bourgeois (the Church leadership).

Religion and its ties to pop culture can also be seen when looking at the replication and reproduction of ideas that are “popular” at the time. Benjamin (1935) is concerned with work of art, and its “aura.” He states, “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence” (Benjamin, 3, 1935). So how does this tie to religion? While viewing religious texts, there are many ways in which the reproduction of such texts may cause “aura” to be lost. There are approximately 7.5 billion copies of the Bible in print. This doesn’t even account for digital versions (Terry, 2023). Does this then, remove the Bible from its time and space? As consumers, all have the ability to extract meaning and interpretation from art (Jenkins, 23). So, the Bible is then left up for many different interpretations in what is “truth.” These interpretations stem from ambiguous verses or books, different translations, theological views and frameworks, historical context, and individual perspectives and meaning. Because of this, people can take the Bible in a context that is literal, metaphorical, and can even mold it to fit what message or meaning they want to extract from it. Thus, many different ideas, beliefs, and meanings are taken from the Bible. So, while many claim to know the one “truth,” there are many different ways that “truth” was extracted and formed.

Religious texts like the Bible provide a compelling example of how mass reproduction can impact the uniqueness and sacredness associated with a work's original presence. Because the Bible has been so widely reproduced, it’s worth viewing and discussing the similarities that may occur between texts. In the Bible, which is largely studied and revered as a holy book by Christians, the idea that God is one, in both the Old and New Testament, is mentioned often. “Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One” (Deuteronomy 6:4), “I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God” (Isaiah 45:5). Similarly, in the Quran (the holy text of Islam), the oneness of God is also apparent. “Say, “He is God, the One. God, the Absolute. He begets not, nor was He begotten. And there is none comparable to Him” (Surah Ikhlas 112:1-4). Because both books are popular, and they have been widely reproduced, have they lost their “aura?” Despite their sacred status, the extensive reproduction of these texts might seem to erode their uniqueness, and potentially challenge their “aura.” Has their widespread availability diminished the sense of sacred uniqueness they once held? Or, does the religious and cultural significance defy the loss of originality and “uniqueness?”

Further, The Book of Mormon, which is one of the holy texts for Mormonism, also has similarities to the Bible. In the Book of Mormon, a certain verse in the Book of Moroni is nearly identical to the Bible. Stating, “charity sufferth long, and is kind, and envieth not...is not puffed up...seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil, and rejoiceth not in iniquity but rejoiceth in the truth, beareth all things...hopeth all things, endurth all things” (Moroni 7:45). This verse compares to the biblical verse stating, “Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not...is not puffed up...seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things...hopeth all things, endureth all things” (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). So, does this reproduction cause the Bible and The Book of Mormon to lose their “aura?” The near-identical language in these passages not only demonstrates a shared importance on charity but also highlights the interconnectedness of religious texts. However, it does invite one to look into the implications of such reproduction. Does the replication of this text between the Bible and The Book of Mormon dilute the uniqueness and sacred authenticity, or “aura,” of either text? Walter Benjamin’s concept of “aura” refers to the unique presence and authenticity that an original work holds, particularly as it relates to its time and place in history. When sacred texts like the Bible and The Book of Mormon are reproduced and adapted across different religious contexts, does this diminish their sense of originality and sacredness? Do the parallels unify and bond faith traditions by emphasizing shared values, or do they challenge the distinctiveness that gives each text its sacred standing? Has the mass production of these books caused millions of people to fall into mass deception, to this formula of what will be successful? (Adorno, Horkheimer, 15) If these ideas, beliefs, and actual verses, word for word, are reproduced, have holy texts lost their “aura?” Are religious followers just cultural dupes, clinging to ideas and works that have been mass reproduced and steadily “popular” in society?

Benjamin argued that mass reproduction diminishes the unique "aura" of an object by stripping away its singularity and its deep connection to tradition (1935). Sacred texts such as the Bible and the Quran, were once accessible only to limited groups, often in the form of meticulously hand-copied manuscripts. Today, these texts are widely available due to mass reproduction. This transformation might suggest a loss of “aura” associated with their material uniqueness and exclusivity, as they are no longer rare artifacts but commonplace. However, the sacredness of the Bible and Quran is not necessarily dependent on their physical form or material rarity. For those who revere these texts, their significance is derived from the divine message they convey, rather than the medium through which that message is delivered. The spiritual essence of these scriptures remains intact, even when encountered in mass-produced formats. Believers continue to approach these texts with devotion, reverence, and faith, allowing them to retain a sacred quality that transcends their physical characteristics. So, while they may lose “aura” under the definition of Benjamin (1935), the religious and cultural importance of the Bible and Quran may surpass potential loss of originality or uniqueness brought about by mass reproduction. While mass reproduction may alter their material context, it may not diminish the profound reverence with which they are regarded.

This is not to say that because these works are reproduced and may have a loss of aura, that this makes them untrue. I am not interested in debating whether or not religion or spirituality is “true” or not. The existence of the Bible does not make the Book of Mormon “untrue.” Nor does the existence of the Torah (predating the Bible) make the Bible untrue. I am not trying to say that repetition of ideas or reproduction makes any of these stories or beliefs within these texts invalid. This is not meant as an attack. I am simply viewing these religious texts through a popular culture lens.

Viewing religion through the lens of popular culture reveals its complex role in shaping society. Religion helps reinforce traditional systems of power, perpetuating dominant values and norms- as well as providing a platform for reinterpretation and adaptation and enabling communities to challenge and reshape cultural ideas. This duality highlights how religion operates as both a tool for maintaining order and a space for cultural creativity and uniqueness. By blurring the lines between sacred and secular, it reflects the ongoing struggle between conformity and change, offering insight into how beliefs and traditions continue to influence the world around us.

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