

THE SAINTS IN POPULAR CULTURE

- Convener & Moderator: Tom Beaudoin, Fordham University
 Presenters: Michelle A. Gonzalez Maldonado, University of Miami
 Terrance Klein, Fairfield University
 Michael Iafrate, University of St. Michael's College
 Respondent: Vincent Miller, University of Dayton

This session featured three theological arguments for locating saints and saintliness in popular religion and culture, followed by a critically synthetic response.

In "Who is More Popular? Unofficial and Official Saints in Latino/a Catholicism," Michelle A. Gonzalez Maldonado argued that although much has been written by theologians, anthropologists, and ethnographers regarding the centrality of saints and Mary within Latino/a popular Catholicism, saints and images of Mary are not the only religious figures that populate the Latino/a religious imagination in ritual, literature, popular culture, and art. Maldonado explored "unofficial" saints in Latino/a popular religion, with a special emphasis on the category of sainthood that has been constructed by Latino/a and Latin American peoples. Often these figures are raised to iconic status, canonized by the people. She focused on two folk saints in particular: devotion to Maximón in Guatemala and "Saint" Lazarus among Cubans and Cuban-Americans. A central theme was the ambiguity of these unofficial saints in the face of the institutional Church: These popular saints are an expression of the lived religion of communities, and often coexist with those saints canonized by official religion; their popularity often stems from their connection to the identity and struggles of those communities that are devoted to them.

In "Holiness in Hollywood? Sanctity and the Cult of Celebrity," Terrance Klein observed that most people do not personally encounter celebrities or canonized saints. Both come to us as "spectacle," which Guy Debord, the French Marxist theorist and filmmaker, insisted is "the chief product of present day society." As spectacle, both are carved down into commodities, skeins of signifiers with something to sell. Their distribution is a function of a controlling market, state, or other locus of power. However, the meaning of saints is not exhausted by identifying them as spectacle. Their ultimate significance is conformity to Jesus Christ, God's own spectacle. Saints, like celebrities, take on different hues of meaning depending upon highly personal circumstances. Descending to us, they are always under some aegis of control. Ascending from us to God, they have a capricious quality indicative of the Holy Spirit, who can make use of icons filmed in Hollywood just as well as those fashioned in Rome.

Michael Iafrate, in "'I'm a Human, Not a Statue': Saints and Saintliness in the Church of Punk Rock," registered agreement with theologians who are noting how popular music fulfills a religious function in people's lives, giving an overview of the emergence of punk rock communities in the 1970s-80s and the various ways that punk functions "religiously" for its participants. He then analyzed the

way punk rock lifts up exemplars or “saints” who embody the diverse and often conflicting ideals of this movement, and the ways in which punk rock “saints” challenge mainstream rock’s patterns of “rock star religiosity.” Iafrate argued that this internal debate about the meaning of “saintly” figures in rock music has much to teach the Roman Catholic Church in its current debates about the meaning of saints in postmodern culture, and that it can also provide an important critique of the enthusiasm with which emerging theologies of popular music approach rock music as a “religion.”

Vincent Miller’s response argued that the papers illuminate the hagiographic dynamisms of traditional cultures, commercial mass culture, and the cultural production made possible by new forms of media. He suggested that Maldonado raised disturbing questions about the need for saints that speak to the full complexity of life. Theological engagements with popular religion face the problem of the changing nature of popular culture in a globalized context. Traditional communal mediations are being replaced by popular culture and new media. He discussed Klein’s vignette of Bing Crosby in the emergency room as demonstrating that commercial popular culture provides models for saintly action, implicitly posing the question of how to mediate the more complex accounts of ministry found in the lives of traditional saints. He found that Iafrate’s analysis of punk struggle against rock celebrity provides a trove of reflection upon aspects of ecclesial sanctity: symbols of rupture and exemplars of shared virtues and practices. Iafrate’s call for critical theological reflection on new forms of media, Miller argued, should be heeded.

The ensuing discussion focused on the relationship between religious and cultural margins and centers in the dynamics of recognizing “official” and “popular” saints; on the different popular-cultural climates in which theologians come of age; and on the varying responsibilities that theologians take up in relation to the popular cultures that produce contemporary “saints.”

TOM BEAUDOIN
Fordham University
New York, New York