

SECULAR ROCK AND SACRED THEOLOGY

- Topic: Secular Rock and Sacred Theology? Listening Past the Stalemate
Convener: Tom Beaudoin, Fordham University
Moderator: Cara Anthony, University of St. Thomas
Presenter: Brian Robinette, St. Louis University
Presenter: Christopher Ruddy, University of St. Thomas
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This session explored moving beyond the impasse between theology and popular media culture characterized by reiteration and indifference. On the one hand, reiterations of three positions: liberal models of correlation that seek to bridge Christianity and popular culture; postliberal emphases on Christian particularity that seek to draw incommensurabilities between contemporary society and Christian identity; and liberationist positions that interpret popular culture as an ideological phenomenon in need of the therapy and politics of Christian faith. On the other hand, general indifference toward popular media culture in Catholic theology that gives the impression of a presumption of impasse. If popular media culture constitutes a significant part of the symbolic order in relation to which Catholic life, especially among younger generations, must take place, these forms of impasse are unacceptable for the future of our theology. The papers addressing this inquiry represent a moment in a larger research project on rock and theology, sponsored by Liturgical Press, in which theologians with experience in rock culture come together to reflect on how Christian theology and popular culture intersect in the domains of rock.

Brian D. Robinette's paper, "Can Rock n Roll Save the World? Theological Reflections in the Key of E Minor," explored the boundaries and relationships between "structure" and "anti-structure" in rock music to argue that in it may be found real, if partial instances of eschatological aspiration. Seeking to move beyond the apparent impasse of "high" and "low" forms of artistic expression available for theological analysis, the paper argued that many of the characteristic features of rock music manifest and enact a yearning for a "visceral transcendence" -- a phrase intended to indicate a desire for connectivity, wholeness, and release in ways that include the full range of our shared corporeality. Drawing upon philosophical and cultural anthropological studies, including those by Charles Taylor, Victor Turner, and Mikhail Bakhtin, the paper attempted to show how rock music affords "liminal manifestations" for many in our increasingly secular age, e.g., the unloosing of the "buffered self" that modernity tends to produce; momentary suspensions and intensifications of time that allow for theatrical enactments of celebration and protest; and the "leveling" of hierarchical distinctions (social, economic, religious, etc.) through laughter and parody. The paper concluded by stressing the need for theologians to take seriously (yet critically) the music and culture of rock music as contemporary forms of the carnivalesque that anticipate "the future festival of the world" (Karl Rahner).

Christopher Ruddy's paper, "Highway to Hell, Stairway to Heaven: Rock Music as Idol and as Icon," investigated the ways in which rock music both opens

and blocks access to true worship and leisure. In its tendencies to celebration and ecstasy, rock can overcome a world of sterile functionality, but can also lead to self-consuming rebellion and prolonged emotional adolescence. This paper proposes ways past this impasse, so as to articulate a contemporary yet ancient theology of liturgy and leisure. Jean-Luc Marion's distinction between the idol and the icon provides the paper's conceptual framework, while Joseph Ratzinger and James Alison offer resources for a liturgical, contemplative encounter with the divine. Finally, if rock at its idolatrous worst fosters immaturity and self-annihilation, it can be iconic in opening a window to the leisure, festivity, and worship for which we are originally and ultimately made. Rock, in this sense, is less a highway to hell or a stairway to heaven, than it is a long and winding road.

Tom Beaudoin's paper, "Give It Up/For Jesus: Askeses of Dispossession in Rock and Christianity," argued that relating rock to theology involves the mutual comprehension of two conceptually distinct but ascetically overlapping cultures. The distinctions and overlaps can be understood by thinking these cultures as constellations of practices that work up subjects of theology (theologians) and subject of rock (musicians, fans). Cultural studies of rock and praxis-based theologies are the major theoretical touchpoints. Due to both rock and theological cultures' being caught up in colonial investments yet manifesting postcolonial possibilities, a correlation of the powers of subject-formation will helpfully frame any interaction between rock and theology. Particularly for the theologian who sees their task as the development of a sane theology with respect to popular cultures, the importance of privileging the possibilities of dispossession to be had in both rock and theology becomes an ethical imperative. The theological task becomes one of identifying powers of departure that overlap in both cultures, without reducing rock or theology to each other.

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