In 2006 a Chipotle Mexican Grill franchise in Dayton, Ohio, sponsored an essay competition inviting contestants to declare their passion for the menu. The winner, Catholic college student Joe Melendrez, composed and performed a clever rap extolling the virtues of the burrito. Melendrez’s submission, entitled “Gotta Get It Now,” reflected upon the role of this “supreme being wrapped in silver” to address the perennial student affliction of writer’s block. In what his school, the University of Dayton, describes as a “modern-day fish and loaves story,” Melendrez put his prize of three daily burritos for a year plus four twenty-burrito parties in service to the Marianist mission that grounds his academic community. It is estimated that over the course of the year he will feed more than 800 people: classmates and strangers, homeless neighbors and those who are open to engage in dinner conversations about “faith, life, service work, solidarity with the poor and equality, all of which are backbones of UD’s mission” (University of Dayton).

Nestled at the intersection of fast-food nation and translation nation, this slice of life contains elements that intrigue scholars who explore the relationships between religion and popular culture. There is the medium of expression, the controversial yet ubiquitous rap music. The market presence of a globalizing corporate giant cannot be ignored, since Chipotle is McDonald’s foray into ethnic, healthier, fresh-ingredient fast food. Then there are the subtexts of the growing “Latinization” or “Hispanization” of U.S. culture and of the engagement with faith in a public manner. The means that allows this particular expression to transcend its local is the Internet, where one can view and interact with Melendrez and his self-posted music video on YouTube.

Christ and Culture

Theological reflection on the engagement of religion and culture is not new. In Christ and Culture, Richard Niebuhr employed a method of typology with the hope of “calling to attention the continuity and significance of the great motifs that appear and reappear in the long wrestling of Christians with their enduring problem . . . to gain

orientation as we seek in our own time to answer the question of Christ and culture” (44). However, reflection on popular culture in religious scholarship remains fairly recent and the definitions of popular culture are elastic. As Ilan Stavans has noted, “the border—la linea—dividing high and pop culture is becoming increasingly difficult to trace. The United States has a fluid approach to culture, one often following a dialectical path: what is considered low (jazz and pulp fiction, for instance) is eventually co-opted by the cultural elite” (Augenbrawn and Stavans, xix).

In their book Religion and Popular Culture in America, editors Bruce Forbes and Jeffrey Mahan identify four distinct relationships between religion and popular culture: religion in popular culture, popular culture in religion, popular culture as religion, and religion and popular culture in dialogue. Those who approach the relationship from the perspective of seeking religion in popular culture attend to “the use of religious themes, language, images, characters and subjects” in film or music, sport or television (Mahan). For example, the evangelization efforts of Chicago priest and theologian Robert Barron draw inspiration from the Catholic tradition as well as the classics of rock from the Rolling Stones to Bob Dylan. Barron observed: “The Rolling Stones seemed to be singing what it’s all about, right there. ‘I can’t get no satisfaction.’ It’s something we’re all feeling. It’s a deep Augustinian impulse” (Ramirez).

Popular Culture as Religion

In considering popular culture as religion, attention is paid to functionality in the lives of the faithful. In other words, how does a particular expression of popular culture create meaning, build community, communicate values, and impart a sense of belonging and identity? What are its foundational narratives? How is participation ritualized? Is there an ethical code? Take a look at what the film Bull Durham refers to as the “church of baseball.” With its roots in the baseball creation myth of Abner Doubleday and with pilgrimage sites that include the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown and the soon-to-be-replaced Yankee Stadium, baseball is imbued with tradition. There are saints like Roberto Clemente Walker, canonized after his premature death, and immortalized via the annual community service award that bears his name. There are sinners like Pete Rose and the 1919 Chicago White Sox, and suspected sinners like Barry Bonds, accused of violating a long-standing ethical code that views gambling and cheating as mortal...
sins. Thanks to technology and the marketplace, fan participation significantly exceeds the role of mere spectator. One’s belonging is branded as clothing; household products and even credit cards declare affiliation. Being a part of Red Sox Nation implies a connection to something greater than oneself and is interactive as support for the hometown is manifest through online voting for local favorites for the All-Star game. Meaning is conveyed through countless game-related clichés that provide direction for daily living, and time is measured in cycles: spring training, regular season, post-season, and even winter ball.

**Religion and Popular Culture in Dialogue**

Exploring the relationship as *religion and popular culture in dialogue* predicates a mutual accountability between influential forces and a degree of mutual critique. Though reality TV is more redacted entertainment than ordinary, it provides both a window into and mirror of our daily interactions. The behavior of the judges on *American Idol* instigates a conversation on civility, and our fascination with the self-destruction of the talent-challenged entrants invites reflection on what exactly constitutes respect for human dignity. While some may aspire to Donald Trump’s power and wealth, others resonate with being on the receiving end of a bullying boss. *The Apprentice* challenges us to look at our own employment practices and workplace behavior and to explore the role of corporate responsibility in conversation with our Catholic social teachings. The fashion industry skills the contestants in *Project Runway* navigate are not unlike those needed for ministry: creativity, collaborative leadership, and ability to function effectively with limited resources. Of course the show-related weblog of Tim Gunn, contestant mentor and chair of the department of fashion design at Parsons The New School for Design, provides the informed insider perspective needed to explore these connections between seemingly unrelated worlds. Dividing teams in *Survivor* on the basis of ethnicity and race touches a nerve precisely because these issues remain tense and unresolved in national and ecclesial discourse and practice.

**Product and Process**

Categories and typologies are useful tools for analyzing complex relationships; however, reification of the distinctions can distract us from the reality that the intersection of popular culture and religion is not easily distinguishable. It is impossible, without distortion, to separate the intertwined strands that are the context within which we minister. Attempts to separate the strands of religion and popular culture can lead to postures of demonization or dismissal whereby each is perceived as an exaggerated foil for the other, or worse, not worthy of attention.

Popular culture is both product and process. It involves originating communities of creation and communities of reception, interpretation, and adaptation. Participation occurs through production, consumption, and promulgation, and yet the ethical questions of power, agency, resistance, and co-optation are too often avoided or overlooked. Ignoring the ethical questions can result in a domestication that removes the critical and sometimes prophetic edge each partner brings to the relationship.

Celebrating the liturgy in the vernacular of hip-hop, an ecclesial movement born in Trinity Episcopal Church in the Bronx, New York, can be both evangelizing and empowering, especially for members of communities who often find themselves on church margins. However, it can also be perceived as a liturgical taming of a disconcerting presence or a sanitizing of a medium that graphically depicts social conditions demanding prophetic response. As Imani
Perry observes, expressions of rage, violence, pain, criminal activity, and relational dysfunction are features that distinguish hip-hop, making it “an uncomfortable music to listen to, yet it also allows for brilliant insights into human relationships and into existence in a society mired in difficult race and gender politics and often economically exploitative and exclusive” (8).

The intersection of popular culture and religion reminds us to attend to the daily and invites us to rethink our conceptualization of the local in our globalizing, interconnected, and interactive age.

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