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Popular culture was once one of the problem children of the Western academy, especially with regards to religious belief and practice. The last two decades have seen this change, thankfully, giving rise to books like *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*. Lynch’s book begins by simply setting out why theologians and religious studies scholars should study popular culture. This is an important feature of the book given its publication date, but now, in 2012, it seems somewhat old hat. This makes the reader’s encounter with Lynch and his subject matter an interesting one for the way it illustrates just how quickly the scholarship has moved on. One thinks here of authors such as Erik Davis, Graham St John, Adam Possamai, Carole M. Cusack, and Christopher Partridge who have made significant contributions to the study of various aspects of religion and popular culture. What is interesting is that few of these scholars become as bogged down in definitional exposition as Lynch does in this volume. It seems that the author, in attempting to delimit the field, has included too much meditation on what is and is not to be included. It smacks of being too careful, too scholarly, and thus generates for the reader a feeling of uncertainty with regards to the author’s purpose for the book. Much of the first 50 pages, in fact, I found superfluous; as a writer Lynch is capable and interesting, and he is rightly regarded as a leader in the field, so to spend that space wading through dry definitional discourse was disappointing. For example, the section ‘studying the religious functions of popular culture’ (pp. 27-33) is interesting enough, to be sure, but is neither given enough space to serve as a central methodological theme within the book, nor short enough to be an intellectual amuse bouche that whets the appetite for the chapters to come. The overall result is that the first two chapters of the book talk about talking about the subject almost without actually talking about it. The subject itself is not broached until Chapter 3, with the end of the second chapter seeing the author still describing to the reader what the book will give to them. As a literary device this just does not work.

A further criticism I have is with the distinction in the book between “relig-
gious studies” and “theology,” which is less than clear. Indeed, at many points the two seem to overlap quite significantly for Lynch. This makes me, as a scholar in the field of religious studies (one that seems to be increasingly under threat), shift uncomfortably in my seat. The two fields have such divergent goals that to treat them as working within similar frames of logic and reason seems odd at best, and reductive at worst. This, I suspect, may be the result of the academic culture of the United Kingdom, where Lynch is based, in which the specialised study of religion most often takes place in schools of divinity and/or theology. Nonetheless, it is one that troubles, for not only does it automatically privilege Jewish-Christian monotheisms by association, it also tends to downgrade the rest of the religious palette of humanity to the category “other.” This is not to detract from the work of Lynch himself, per se, but to highlight a potential problem with the approach and assumptions that underlie this particular volume and its use for non-theologians in any field of study. Further, the section ‘what is theology’ does not occur until page 94; an oddly late inclusion given the way the book spends its first 50 pages engaged in definition and delimitation. That there is no ‘what is religious studies’ section further solidifies my unease with the author’s assumptions about what those two fields are. This is, as the title clearly states, a book on theology and popular culture. Indeed, the type of theological input Lynch gives the academy has wide-ranging uses. I question, however, the apparently inevitable link between it and religious studies.

To Lynch’s great credit, despite being a book that looks like something useful only to theologians it is, in fact, much more. Scholars from a range of fields that incorporate analysis of popular culture will benefit from Lynch’s well researched monograph. It now (in 2012) feels dated, but this I think is not sufficient to render it irrelevant. Theologians, I suspect, will gain significantly from looking to Lynch’s treatment of popular culture, which is commendable, but those interested more broadly in the phenomena of popular culture will find it particularly useful as a reference work. Since the book has been published a number of pop culture and religion fields that Lynch felt were under-researched have opened up; gaming being a notable example. One of the great benefits of studying religion and popular culture is the perspective it gives of religions in the everyday. Lynch agrees, and it is on this line of argument that I think the book makes a solid contribution. Popular culture offers access to the resources of everyday life, Lynch argues (13). This presumes some level of bricolage, but I think it is safe to say this seems normal in the modern West. As Lynch argues, in so far as theology is concerned with “issues of truth, goodness, evil, suffering, redemption, and beauty” (37) then it becomes clear

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that popular culture, as it is engaged with similar themes, is an important field of investigation for theologians, and thus for anyone interested in the study of religions.