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This book could not be more central to the issues and questions raised by Implicit Religion. It examines the relationship between religion and the everyday culture which people experience, especially through the media. How is religion now understood within contemporary culture, and how is religion itself changed when its proponents seek to harness the resources of popular culture? Equally, has modern mass media—a symbolic universe shaped by consumption and celebrity—taken upon itself a religious significance?

Two chapters stand out. Elaine Graham writes about “What we make of the world.”

As institutional religion recedes, how far does popular culture fill the gap by providing archetypes, myths, heroic figures and soteriologies for people seeking moral or existential bearings? She applies Niebuhr’s classic categories of how religion relates to culture, opting, herself, for a “responsible engagement” strategy between popular culture and the Christian narratives, symbols and meanings. She also draws attention—as does Pete Ward, in his chapter on the Eucharist—to the difference between a more logic-centred definition of meanings, and what people actually do and perceive in their lived experience.

Second, the editor, Gordon Lynch provides a chapter which will be of particular interest to readers of this Journal, starting with the definition of “religion” itself and whether this should be Substantive, Phenomenological or Functional. While he accepts that those who adopt the more Substantive approach may be missing how people negotiate issues of identity, meaning and value, outside institutional religion, he is also critical of religious scholars who claim too much of human cultures as their territory. Is Implicit Religion guilty of such “disciplinary imperialism”? Is it “theoretical reductionism” to make too close a connection between the charismatic experience of the Holy Spirit and seeing your football team score the winning goal? Lynch wants to be more cautious, and comes up with the intriguing use of “stickiness” as what makes the sacred distinctive.
He describes this as what binds people into particular kinds of identities, communities and ways of living, which are experienced as not simply of their own free choice, but as compelled or inspired by what they perceive as sacred.

Many of the contributors touch on aspects of film, television and music (some of them from the perspective of race), but this is more a book about the theory and the literature rather than about what may be found and evaluated within popular culture itself. Nor does it deal with the more theological questions which Christians and others might raise: is transcendance due to the existence of God, and our seeking of the sacred, a part of how this God has created us? But for those who can deal with post-modern questioning, not to mention its over-technical language, this is a useful summary, of what is a growing field of research.