Terry Ray Clark and Dan W. Clanton Jr., eds, *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture: Theories, Themes, Products and Practices* **(London; New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 216. £19.99**

This themed collection of essays, edited by Terry Ray Clark and Dan W. Clanton Jr., begins with an enthusiastic 'Welcome to the exciting and rapidly evolving field of study of Religion and Popular Culture!' (1). Designed as an 'entry point' for students, each chapter concludes with a bullet-point summary, a glossary of technical terms, five or six discussion questions, and suggested further reading. Most chapters follow a similar pedagogical structure, beginning with an introduction to theory and method, moving to case studies, and finishing with analysis.

The engaging tone of the Introduction is matched by the choice of highly contemporary subject matters: the thirteen essays cover such diverse topics as horror films, advertising, cop shows, sport, pop music, and video games. This hodgepodge of ideas is represented by an excitable front cover, whose design work, it must be said, is far from attractive. Within the pages, however, what holds this diversity together is a serious attempt to engage with the place of religion in contemporary Western culture.

Given that this is a review for a theological journal, we should note that, with *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture*, we are operating in the less familiar field of Religious Studies. Usually categorised as a social science, the discipline of Religious Studies prides itself on a neutral, dispassionate examination of phenomena. There is therefore no Christian apologetic in this book: indeed, the student reader is invited first to recognise, and then lay aside for the time being, any faith bias they might have. The first essay, "Saved by Satire", is well placed in this regard. Here, Terry Ray Clark acknowledges the challenge religious satire poses to people of faith. He recounts how one of his Christian students had requested permission not to view certain episodes of *The Simpsons*, with the reasoning that 'I really don't want to fill my head with that kind of stuff' (14). However, as Clark suggests, the problem with this refusal to engage is that the Christian student remains a naïve and uncritical consumer of

popular culture, oddly more vulnerable to cultural manipulation than the more worldly-wise reader.

To the Christian and theologian, therefore, this volume of essays presents quite a challenge. However, it is a readable and entertaining challenge. Moreover, even though the essays may be theologically uncommitted, they are in the main theologically literate. One which best exemplifies this twin literacy, in theology and in culture, is "Lord of the Lembas: A Study of What's Cooking in Popular Culture", by Jonathan Sands Wise. Wise begins by providing a quick explanation of Augustinian hermeneutics, where the 'spiritual sense' of a story lies alongside the literal sense of 'what happened'. So Augustine, in recounting how, as a youth, he stole some pears, associates that story with the eating of the apple in Eden, and thereby imbues his youthful folly with an allegorical and moral significance far beyond its real-life importance. Wise then moves with ease to a thoroughly theological analysis of the film trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, wherein the Ring of Power is equated to the eating of the apple in Eden: 'The Ring has the same effects as the "original" fruit, giving knowledge and enhanced vision of a sort (Genesis 3:7), but only at a great and terrible price for the bearer, for all its added knowledge is ultimately skewed such that the bearer sees only the evil of the world, never its full reality' (179 f.). Thus the analysis in this essay works in two directions: a theology of the Fall is essential to a full understanding of *The Lord of the Rings*, whereas our theological and biblical imaginations are enhanced by the films' dramatic portrayal.

Three of the thirteen essays focus primarily on films, and three primarily on television shows. Particular attention – whole sections or even whole chapters – is given to *The Lord of the Rings* (Ch. 11), the *Star Wars* trilogy (Ch. 7), *Saved!* (a comic religious satire, Ch. 1), the films of Quentin Tarantino (Ch. 5), and various classic horror films (Ch. 4). In television, the *Star Trek* franchise (Ch. 3), the animated series *South Park* (Ch. 1) and the cop drama *NYPD Blue* (Ch. 6) receive a detailed analysis.

However, 'popular culture' has a wider definition here than simply visual media. Popular music is considered, both in its overtly Christian manifestations (Ch. 10), and in a broader religious sense, as typified by

the 'prophetic' songs of Bob Dylan (Ch. 13). A rather vague chapter on "Religion and Ecology in Popular Culture" by Dell Dechant illustrates its own admission, that this is an 'underexplored and only sketchily-mapped subfield within the field of religion and popular culture' (28). Meanwhile, Rachel Wagner's chapter on "Religion and Video Games" is so concerned with educating the student-reader in philosophical and analytical categories, that she seems to have little to say about actual video games themselves. Disappointingly, only *Resistance: Fall of Man* – controversially set in a facsimile of Manchester Cathedral – receives any real attention.

Much stronger is the chapter, "On the Sacred Power of Violence in Popular Culture" (Ch. 5), by Eric Bain-Selbo. Challengingly, Bain-Selbo points out that contemporary Religious Studies theory sees violence as actually 'constitutive of religion', despite all pleas of theologians to the contrary. 'Religions […] are institutions that are inherently violent', he writes, '[…] Religion and violence are intertwined' (72). In Christianity, Bain-Selbo refers us to 'God's brutal sacrifice of his own son', although he even-handedly points out the violence of God in the Jewish, Hindu, and Islamic traditions. While these illustrations lack theological subtlety (to say the least), they still offer an uncomfortable critique. Bain-Selbo then defines for us the categories developed by the sociological study of religious violence: categories which he reapplies convincingly to the analysis of violence in popular culture. As it turns out, typically religious themes such as a 'them and us' mentality, justice, order, vengeance, and sacrifice, prove disturbingly useful in his consideration of the violence associated with the game of American Football.

More positively, Christian readers will find much food for thought in the chapter by Jeffrey Scholes on "The Coca-Cola Brand and Religion". Scholes entertainingly dissects what is 'religious' about the branding and marketing of Coca-Cola, including its instantly recognisable logo, the values it conveys of happiness, patriotism, and global community, and indeed, its combination of a ubiquitous – even transcendent – presence with a satisfyingly material product. To the theologian, this may not look much like God, but it might look alarmingly like some modern manifestations of church. However,

we should not be too alarmed by Coca-Cola itself. Rather, Scholes suggests that we should treat such 'inauthentic' spiritualities 'with a kind of equanimity' (146), for our ultimate dissatisfaction with such imitation religions may still 'carry us towards the truth' (145).

That this volume of essays is such a mixed bag is unsurprising, given the breadth of the remit. The appeal of a particular chapter will inevitably be conditioned by the reader's more general interests: I confess to enjoying the sections on film much more than the others. Nevertheless, as an introductory text to the comparative study of religion and popular culture, this book serves its purpose admirably, and deserves to reach a wider readership than its intended student audience. With some adaptation, there is even potential for use in a church study group. Furthermore, there is much to ponder from a missional perspective, as churches continue to make connections between faith and modern culture. And finally, it will do us Christians no harm at all to learn the tools of sociological analysis, and then to turn such analysis back upon ourselves wherever we suspect that churches have bought rather too much into popular culture.

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J. Todd Billings, *Union With Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* **(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2011), pp. 442. £12.99**

J. Todd Billings' recently published book *Union With Christ* is an excellent addition to the ever-growing field of 'theologies of retrieval' in general, and re-readings of the Reformer John Calvin in particular. Billings' book is a return to and recovery of Calvin for the contemporary theological and ministerial context. Billings uses Calvin not only as a point of departure but as an informant for the current Christian climate. The main argument of the book is that central to Calvin's theology is the notion of 'union with Christ'. Billings returns to Calvin's concept of union with Christ and explores