Negotiating Popular Culture and Public Theology in the Indonesian Context

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Abstract

This study relates theology to popular culture. As a platform for expressing the experiences of present-day life, popular culture is theologically challenging. Scientific discourses on popular culture have revealed the significance of popular culture in society and its characteristics as a "translocal" cultural pattern. Using the approach of public theology, this study explores meeting points of theology and popular culture in the context of the Indonesian public sphere. The findings suggest that contextual encounters between theology and popular culture should take the form of negotiations rather than adaptations or confrontations.

Keywords

popular culture, glocalization, contextualization, public theology, translocality

Until the early 2000s, theological studies on culture in Asia highlighted the context of traditional societies. This tendency is in accordance with the contextual theological movement, which carries the postcolonial spirit by promoting an appreciative approach to locality. Attempts are made to match the modern, global, and elitist image inherited from the colonial-era church with the new face of Christianity expressed through symbols of local ethnic culture. In Indonesia, the effort resulted in typical local Christian religious art forms such as *wayang wahyu* (the revelation puppet), *tongkonan* (traditional design of a Toraja house) church architecture, and various spiritual ethnic songs. Contextual theology has strongly called for an end to the suspicion and humiliation of local customs that marked the cultural position of colonial Christianity. In the realm of academic theology, there is a great passion for understanding the concerns and virtues

embodied in folk beliefs and local wisdom, which are now seen as valuable resources rather than objects of Christian mission.

The contextualization movement that is sympathetic to local culture is worth supporting, not only as a postcolonial practice but also as an effort to be more consistent with the nature of the gospel as good news for all nations. Nonetheless, as Filipino feminist theologian Agnes Brazal realizes, all theologies contain both particular and universal dimensions. Brazal observes that the distinction between the local and the universal or global is increasingly blurred. For her, such a situation is an opportunity for different theological traditions to synergize and empower each other.[1] A contextual theology, then, should not be understood solely as exclusively local and irrelevant to broader contexts. Correspondingly, Craig Ott has affirmed the need for contextual theologies to renew their approaches. Understanding and responding to the rapid social changes resulting from globalization must take precedence over the "traditional culture of the past." For Ott, such a change in the direction of contextualization is necessary as a theological responsibility to stakeholders, who must take a stand in the face of the torrent of changes in ideas, values, technologies, and lifestyles.[2]

Cultural development in Asian societies demonstrates that culture is never singular nor static. In fact, culture undergoes continuous changes because of encounters with other cultures and the development of economic, political, scientific, and technological sectors. Observation of the daily life of today's Indonesian people would produce the impression that most people are influenced not only by the culture of their ancestors but also by translocal and transethnic cultural phenomena known as "popular culture."

Many have written about the magnitude of popular culture. Indonesian scholar Hikmat Budiman, for example, echoing Benjamin Burber, likens popular culture to a black hole that sucks everything into it. In this case, popular culture, driven by economic, ecological, and technological motives, is the opposite of the "tribalism" and "anti-globalization" movements linked to religious fundamentalism.[3] Research by Nissim Otmazgin and Eyal Ben-Ari states that products of popular culture in various forms – from films to fashion magazines – have flooded Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, since the 1980s, with distribution from "multidirectional" and "multiple centers." This has resulted in

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[1] Agnes M. Brazal, *A Theology of Southeast Asia: Liberation-Postcolonial Ethics in the Philippines* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2019), loc. 99 of 3626.

[2] Craig Ott, "Globalization and Contextualization: Reframing the Task of Contextualization in the Twenty-First Century," *Missiology: An International Review* 43 (1 January 2015), 51, https://doi.org/10.1177/0091829614552026.

[3] Hikmat Budiman, *Lubang Hitam Kebudayaan* (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Kanisius, 2002), 34–35.

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mixed lifestyles that are hard to associate with a particular local culture.[4] David Morgan cautions that ignoring popular culture is tantamount to ignoring "fundamental aspects of religious behavior" because popular culture, as daily practices, inevitably intertwines with most religious practices.[5] Nonetheless, popular culture has not received enough attention, let alone sympathy, in the discourse of Asian contextual theology. This study is an attempt to fill that void by specifying popular culture as a theological context.

Methodology

This study is intended as a contribution to the field of public theology. Unlike dogmatic theology, which makes Christian doctrines its starting point, public theology starts from the public sphere by first mapping out actual public issues and discourses about them. Armed with inherited theological resources and shared experiences of the faith community as an element of society, public theology takes part in interdisciplinary and intercultural conversations in the public sphere.[6] The expected results are two-directional: on the one hand, theological reflection contributes to the betterment of public life; on the other hand, interdisciplinary and intercultural learning in the public sphere entails an evaluation of the theological process.

What Is Popular Culture? Definition and Controversy

There is no unanimous agreement on the definition of popular culture. The proposed definitions usually explain this phenomenon by comparing it with other cultural phenomena. For example, one definition describes popular culture as a type of culture that is inferior and of no quality compared to so-called high culture or the avant-garde.[7] The latter is reflected in the works of art favoured by the elite and the lifestyle of the nobility. There are also those who associate popular culture with folk culture, which is an expression of lower-class society in the stratification of feudal society. In this case, popular culture is considered a modification that reduces the authenticity of folk

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4   Nissim Otmazgin and Eyal Ben-Ari, eds, "Cultural Industries and the State in East and Southeast Asia," in *Popular Culture and the State in East and Southeast Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 3.

5   David Morgan, "The Study of Religion and Popular Culture: Prospects, Presuppositions, Procedures," in *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. Gordon Lynch (London: IB Tauris, 2007), 21, https://scholars.duke.edu/display/pub1056944.

6   Seung-Goo Lee, "The Promises and Dangers of Public Theology," *Unio Cum Christo: International Journal of Reformed Theology and Life* 6:2 (012018/12/05 2020), 141, https://doi.org/10.35285/ucc6.2.2020.art7.

7   Gordon Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 3.

culture by making it more modern and massive.[8] Both of the above definitions contain their own problems. The idea of a cultural hierarchy, as if one were high and the other low, reflects an elitist way of thinking that many have rejected. After all, it is very difficult to draw a firm dividing line distinguishing the two phenomena.[9] Ted Turnau cautions that historically, the distinction between high and low cultures has even been a form of racial and social class abuse. The distinction was originally intended to affirm the inferiority of Black immigrants in Victorian-era American society.[10] Such discrimination proves to be social engineering that does not survive when social change occurs. An example of this is jazz music, which was originally underestimated by the middle class but slowly gained recognition as quality artistic expression and was even claimed to be a typical American art form.[11] The same can be said about cultural practices in Japan such as "*waka, haiku, ikebana* and tea ceremony," as studied by Otmazgin and Ben-Ari. According to the two researchers, the high-low distinction that Western academics make is irrelevant in the Asian context.[12] Regarding the definition that relates popular culture to folk culture, some have also questioned whether the modernization of a cultural phenomenon always means contamination. Could it not also be considered a "cultural evolution"?[13]

Another definition associates popular culture with mass media and the market economy: popular culture is a culture disseminated through the media, generally as *entertainment* produced intentionally for commercial purposes.[14] This commercial factor is often considered a feature of the superficiality of popular culture. This theory was introduced by several German Marxist scholars known as the "Frankfurt school," notably Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who highlighted the cultural excesses of capitalism.[15] This notion implies that a quality culture should be produced and disseminated without economic motives. Such an assessment is not fair, ignoring the fact that commercial factors are also attached to purported "high" cultural products, such as Rembrandt's paintings, whose exorbitant prices mean they can only be owned by the rich. Regarding this, Turnau states that "the attitude that true culture has nothing to do with money is

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[8]   John C. Lyden and Eric Michael Mazur, eds, *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 13.

[9]   Lyden and Mazur, *The Routledge Companion*, 13.

[10]   Ted Turnau, *Popologetics: Popular Culture in Christian Perspective* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2012), 113–14.

[11]   Turnau, *Popologetics*, 115–16.

[12]   Otmazgin and Ben-Ari, "Cultural Industries and the State," 7.

[13]   Lyden and Mazur, *The Routledge Companion*, 13.

[14]   Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture* (Ada: Baker Academic, 2003), 13.

[15]   Lyden and Mazur, *The Routledge Companion*, 13.

based more on myth than on fact – or, better, based on mythical reactions to a historical trauma."[16] In this case, Turnau points to the Industrial Revolution, when norms were overturned to make productivity and capitalization a priority. In that situation, the "proponents of Romanticism in Europe" created a "mythology" that envisioned art as a "savior for the lost world" – as such, it must therefore be the result of a counter-cultural process far removed from economic considerations.[17]

Those who emphasize the role of mass media in the formation of culture tend to use the term "mass culture" rather than popular culture. This term carries a condescending judgment, suggesting that the people practising the culture have no competence in assessing the quality of a cultural product, as Hikmat Budiman notes.[18] Budiman himself tends to follow Herbert Gans, who challenges the juxtaposition between cultural tastes and social classes. According to them, cultural tastes cannot be judged by quality categories but rather are a psychological matter.[19] In this regard, Gary Burns reminds us that popular culture as a folk culture deserves to be valued and studied based on the principle of the equality of all people.[20] Douglas Kellner rejects the term "popular culture" and proposes the term "media culture" to emphasize the dominance of mass media that has replaced previous means of communication in the dissemination and formation of the culture of today's society.[21] While Kellner is right that the role of the media is decisive, his proposed term does not receive widespread support, perhaps because the media is not the only factor shaping the characteristics of culture.

Hence, there is no perfect and generally agreed definition of popular culture. Instead of struggling to find a precise definition, it is perhaps better to mention examples of what popular culture includes. Lynch mentions not only "cultural texts" such as "TV shows, music videos, movies, pop music, and pop literature," but also daily activities including "cooking and eating, caring for children or other dependents, spending time at work or with friends, having sex, tidying, mending or improving our homes, washing, dressing or day-dreaming." Popular culture thus includes "the environment, practices, and resources of everyday life."[22] In other words, popular culture meets all definitions of

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[16] Turnau, *Popologetics*, 121–22.

[17] Turnau, *Popologetics*, 122.

[18] Budiman, *Lubang Hitam Kebudayaan*, 106.

[19] Budiman, *Lubang Hitam Kebudayaan*, 109.

[20] Gary Burns, "Introduction," in *A Companion to Popular Culture* (Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons, 2016), 4, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118883341.ch1.

[21] Douglas Kellner, *Budaya media: cultural studies, identitas, dan politik : antara modern dan postmodern*, trans. Galih Bondan Rambatan (Yogyakarta: Jalasutra, 2010), 47.

[22] Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 15–16.

culture, and therefore, judgments that demean popular culture indicate an archaist, elitist, or reductionist attitude. The term "popular culture" can be generally understood to refer to the way people today interpret and actualize everyday life. This includes making meaning of relationships and communication with fellow creatures and with the one believed to be the creator and provider of life. In that sense, the intersection of popular culture with theology becomes clear.

Popular Culture in the Indonesian Context

Many consider popular culture to be a form of Western, or specifically American, imperialism. Asian leaders frequently use this presumption as justification for restricting or outlawing the spread of popular culture, which is thought to be a form of alien infiltration into local culture and is therefore both morally reprehensible and risky from a political standpoint.[23] In the past, President Soekarno of Indonesia imprisoned members of the boy band Koes Plus because he believed they were promoting "*nekolim*" (neo-colonialism) culture through their loud music and long, shaggy hair. Through the promotion of regional arts, such as *lenso* dance shows at the palace, Sukarno aimed to refute popular culture.

It must be admitted that many popular culture "texts" emerged from the Western world before they became widespread globally. Various types of pop music, fashion, fast food, movies, games, as well as mass media ranging from tabloids to television to social media are all related to the dynamics of European and American societies. Fabienne Darling-Wolf, who uses a "translocal approach" to examine popular culture, affirms the leading role of the United States but considers it to be part of the historical background. That is, at the present stage, popular culture can no longer be understood as solely American or Western culture because of the process of "glocamalgamation": namely, "a situation in which the global, national, and local are constantly and simultaneously (re)negotiated in the production, distribution, and consumption of popular cultural forms."[24] Darling-Wolf also challenges a West-East "binarism" approach that she perceives as ignoring the diversity of Western (and Eastern) societies themselves. By contrasting the world's citizens in two seemingly homogeneous categories, binarism underestimates the experience of marginalized circles in Western societies, which are often victims of prejudice and discrimination themselves.[25] Darling-Wolf's opinion is noteworthy given the fact that many popular culture products in America emerged from that circle. In a similar

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[23]   Otmazgin and Ben-Ari, "Cultural Industries and the State in East and Southeast Asia," 4.

[24]   Fabienne Darling-Wolf, *Imagining the Global: Transnational Media and Popular Culture Beyond East and West* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press Digital Culture Books, 2014), 144.

[25]   Darling-Wolf, *Imagining the Global*, 9.

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vein, Rupert Till shows many types of Western pop music that contemplate the struggles of marginalized Black communities while spotlighting that those musical types are rooted in sub-Saharan African culture. According to Till, it is such a background that gives pop music the characteristics of liberating bodily expression, in contrast to classical music, which tends to curb the movement of the body in accord with traditions of the European nobility.[26]

The resistance of some Asian governments to popular culture, although using the rhetoric of patriotism and the preservation of local traditions, was actually based more on an awareness of the power of popular culture to inflame the spirit of freedom and the rights of individuals who can shake their hegemony of power.[27] As stated by Chua Beng-Huat, popular culture can shape "soft power" among the people by opening their horizons to the global context, helping them see that the reality at home is not the only possibility.[28] Most of Asia underwent major economic and political change in the second half of the 20th century, becoming more market-oriented. This had an effect on popular culture's political stance. As Otmazgin and Ben-Ari observe, the understanding of popular culture in Asia shifted toward its economic benefits.[29] In Indonesia, the market-friendly Suharto regime created a climate more conducive to the development of popular culture. Pop music with comedy interludes gained a wide space through television entertainment programmes such as *Aneka Ria Safari* and *Camera Ria*, which at that time were favourite shows of Indonesian viewers. That period can be called the revival of Indonesian pop music, which was marked by the emergence of Indonesian artists and bands who presented legendary works.

In that period, the Indonesian *dangdut* music genre also developed, which gave birth to famous artists such as Elvy Sukaesih and Rhoma Irama. Dangdut, which combines Malay, Indian, and Arabic with pop and Latino styles of music,[30] quickly attracted popular interest and became the main entertainment at community events in kampongs and villages, shifting traditional arts such as puppet shows and ethnic music like *gamelan*. The popularity of dangdut is generated by its familiarity with the problems of everyday life as expressed through the song titles and lyrics. Kalinga Seneviratne sees dangdut music

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[26]   Rupert Till, *Pop Cult: Religion and Popular Music* (London: Continuum, 2010), 13.

[27]   Timothy J. Craig and Richard King, *Global Goes Local: Popular Culture in Asia* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003), 4–5, https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/distributed/G/bo70073134.html.

[28]   Beng-Huat Chua, "Delusional Desire: Soft Power and Television Drama," in *Popular Culture and the State in East and Southeast Asia*, ed. Nissim Otmazgin and Eyal Ben-Ari (New York: Routledge, 2011).

[29]   Otmazgin and Ben-Ari, "Cultural Industries and the State in East and Southeast Asia," 9.

[30]   Andrew N. Weintraub, "Nation, Islam, and Gender in Dangdut, Indonesia's Most Popular Music," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Robert Hefner (New York: Routledge, 2018), 370.

as a powerful cultural force that demonstrates creativity and freedom while showcasing Islamic tolerance for popular culture.[31] Dangdut music was originally a cheap entertainment product but then became a political force. The popularity of the dangdut "king," Rhoma Irama, who gave moral and religious charge to his musical verses, and his affiliation with the political power of Islam were seen as a threat to the glory of the New Order regime.[32] Likewise, Hawaiian music popularized by the group Hawaiian Seniors, one of whose singers was a former national police chief known for his honesty and anti-corruption attitude, Hoegeng Iman Santoso. Both dangdut and Hawaiian Seniors were banned from airing on state television, TVRI, which at that time was the only television station in Indonesia. Hence, the New Order government, although more open to popular culture as a market commodity, still applied restrictions to popular culture practices that were considered to enter the political sphere.

The post-New Order period was marked by the increasing embrace of popular culture by the political world. Dangdut music, which Suharto suspected, was used by almost all political camps, especially in campaign events.[33] In addition, political parties took advantage of the fame of the artists by making them their representatives in the legislative and executive bodies. Several pop singers managed to take parliamentary seats, including Desy Ratnasari, Krisdayanti, Anang Hermansyah, Mulan Jameela, and Harvey Malaiholo, while film actors Dede Yusuf and Deddy Mizwar alternated as deputy governors of West Java. Even presidential candidates have appeared in popular culture forums, such as Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who wrote several pop songs himself, in the final of *Indonesian Idol* and Joko Widodo ("Jokowi"), who went viral as a metal music fan at the "Concert of the Two Fingers." According to Ariel Heryanto, Jokowi's success owed much to the support of artists and unorganized masses who prefer "soft power" through social media and popular art forms.[34]

In the field of cinema, Asia has a long history of creating films with distinctive characters that combine symbols of local culture and global trends. Until the 1990s, Indian and Hong Kong films dominated cinemas in Asia, matching the popularity of Hollywood films. Currently, their popularity has been displaced by Korean cinema products, which are able to penetrate the global market through streaming services such as Netflix and Disney+Hotstar. According to Otmazgin and Ben-Ari, the success of the Korean film

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[31] Kalinga Seneviratne, "Turning the Tide of Cultural Imperialism with Dangdut," *Media Asia* 35:4 (January 2008), 228, https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2008.11771962.

[32] Weintraub, "Nation, Islam, and Gender in Dangdut, Indonesia's Most Popular Music," 371.

[33] Ariel Heryanto, ed., "Pop Culture and Competing Identities," in *Popular Culture in Indonesia* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 13.

[34] Ariel Heryanto, "Popular Culture and Identity Politics," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Robert Hefner (New York: Routledge, 2018), 358.

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industry is the fruit of the South Korean government's policy change that no longer separates cultural benefits and economic ones.[35] Forms of popular culture are now seen as products of the creative economy, contributing to the strength of the nation's economic competitiveness.

In Indonesia, film is a cultural product that is trans-ethnic and trans-regional. In addition to presenting entertainment in the form of melodramatic stories, Indonesian films promote wisdom and, not infrequently, political criticism. David Hanan, who studies the history of Indonesian cinema from the 1950s to the present reform era, sees Indonesian films as reflecting the encounter between traditional societal culture and contemporary issues, including political dynamics and freedom of expression.[36] Hanan takes the example of several Indonesian films from different historical periods, each of which contains political content in the form of allegories and satire. Satire is a common style of criticism in the traditions of Indonesian society.[37] The Indonesian governments' limited acceptance of films up until the New Order period was also evident in state policy and the establishment of the Film Censorship Agency. Censorship was carried out not only against erotic scenes considered morally damaging but also against parts of the stories considered to be at risk of provoking political critical attitudes. On the other hand, film was also used as a tool of government political propaganda, as was the case with *Pemberontakan G30S PKI* (The September 30 Rebellion of the Indonesian Communist Party), which, during the New Order period, was shown nationally every September 30.

While each regime of government imposed different policies toward expressions of popular culture, the reception of popular culture by the Asian people was generally quite positive. In fact, most Asians negotiate their attachment to local and ethnic cultures and their interest in popular culture. The notion of cultural clash with respect to popular culture seems to be more the imagination of academic circles exploited by political rulers than the concrete experience of most ordinary people.

Popular Culture as a Theological Context

In the public sphere, religion and popular culture meet in almost every realm. Among these are in terms of the formation of self-image and social ethics. Movies, fashion, pop music, and other forms of popular culture not only reveal but also shape people's

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[35] Otmazgin and Ben-Ari, "Cultural Industries and the State in East and Southeast Asia," 17.

[36] David Hanan, *Moments in Indonesian Film History: Film and Popular Culture in a Developing Society 1950–2020* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 2.

[37] Hanan, *Moments in Indonesian Film History*, 65.

self-image. At the same time, religion also performs such a function. The self-image of Christians, for example, is shaped not only by their religious beliefs but also by the genre of music they like, their diet, and the style of clothing they wear every day. In many people, these factors are intertwined. Religious beliefs influence choices over music genres, diet, and clothing models. Conversely, religious beliefs can also be influenced by elements of popular culture. Practically, how one reconciles religious beliefs with elements of popular culture determines what one is known for. Thus, one becomes an active subject, not merely a passive object, in the formation of one's own self-image.

A prominent self-image theme in both Christian theology and popular culture is freedom. The Exodus narrative in the Bible portrays life in slavery as a serious perversion of human nature that must not go unpunished. That is why God freed the slaves of Israel from the land of Egypt and formed them into a free nation. The dramatic process of liberation and *nation building* in the biblical narrative expresses a theological concept of freedom as a quality of life as opposed not only to slavery but also to anarchism. The theology of freedom is also emphasized in the New Testament, which presents the image of Jesus Christ as a free person. Verne Fletcher describes three facets of the freedom of Jesus: namely, he is free from attachment to possessions, from dependence on status and prestige, and from submission to an exclusive morality.[38] Jesus' freedom serves as a model for the formation of the Christian character. Freedom is also a major theme in Paul's theology, which confronts forms of slavery in the name of divine law (Gal. 3:11-14; Eph. 2:15) and ritualism (Gal. 4:7-10; Col. 2:20-23). In general, both the Old Testament and the New Testament promote freedom as a quality of life that must be fought for. At the same time, the Bible points to the failure of a religion that was supposed to be a vehicle for liberation but in fact became the spiritual foundation for the blasphemy of human dignity and new practices of slavery. The prophets' criticism of Israelite ritualism (Is. 1:10-15; Jer. 7:1-15; Amos 5:21-27) and Jesus' sharp words to the clergy (Matt. 23:1-36) show the gap between biblical theologies and traditional religious practices. Indeed, the gospel is about God's freedom to restore human freedom.

In popular culture, freedom is reflected in lifestyles such as informal dress, various shades of music, unconventional sexual activities, and other creativities, as well as in the fluid and non-elitist natures of popular culture itself. In terms of freedom, it seems that popular culture often clashes with elite-dominated religions based on claims of sacredness or seniority and tends to be resistant to change. On this subject, Stephen B. Roberts gives an example of the music of Lady Gaga, whom, he suggests, is not only an artist but also essentially a public theologian. According to Roberts, the theme of freedom is

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[38] Verne H. Fletcher, *Lihatlah Sang Manusia! Suatu Pendekatan Pada Etika Kristen Dasar* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2007), 248–64.

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reflected in all aspects of Lady Gaga's music, including in her lyrics that openly challenge the conservative morality of religion that marginalizes minorities in terms of ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation.[39] Popular culture, then, is an attractive proposition for people frustrated with conservatism and religious elitism that deprives them of their freedom. Whether concepts of freedom in popular culture offer a better alternative or vice versa, it is the task of theology, as a normative discipline,[40] to review them. In this case, a public theology is needed that facilitates contestation between religion and popular culture in a fair manner. Public theology is not merely a tool of religion,[41] so it should not provide a blind defense of conservatism and religious elitism. Theology that is faithful to its own sacred narrative is both open and critical of the values embodied by popular culture and religion.

In the realm of social ethics, popular culture plays a role Lynch calls a "hermeneutical function" that highlights and interprets fundamental human issues such as sex, association, family, violence, and death.[42] The function of popular culture as "soft power" as mentioned above also clearly proves the strong political ethical dimension of many popular culture texts, including music and film. In addition, there are many examples of how popular culture has drawn attention to social ethical issues through talk shows on television, radio, and social media. Shows such as *Oprah* in the American media and *Kick Andy* in Indonesia provide viewers with effective social moral learning on a wide range of topics, from the survival of people with disabilities and ethnic minorities to women's struggles with patriarchal culture, as well as the efforts of victims of political conflict and war to survive amid the stigmas that marginalize them. In terms of environmental ethics, popular culture also plays an active role in raising public awareness. Matthew Schneider-Mayerson cites the influence of disaster movies that dramatically portray a terrible future for the world if the destruction of nature is allowed to continue as it is today.[43] Bron Taylor shows how Walt Disney's entertainment company, through several thematic films and theme parks, instills "spiritualities of belonging and connection to

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[39] Stephen B. Roberts, "Beyond the Classic: Lady Gaga and Theology in the Wild Public Sphere," *International Journal of Public Theology* 11:2 (2 June 2017), 170–78, https://doi.org/10.1163/15697320-12341481.

[40] Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 98.

[41] Duncan B. Forrester, "The Scope of Public Theology," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17:2 (1 August 2004), 6, https://doi.org/10.1177/095394680401700209.

[42] Lynch, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture*, 31.

[43] Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, "Disaster Movies and the 'Peak Oil' Movement: Does Popular Culture Encourage Eco-Apocalyptic Beliefs in the United States?" *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 7:3 (2013), 289–314, https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.v7i3.289.

nature."[44] Meanwhile, the British band Coldplay organized an eco-friendly tour around the world. Coldplay not only donates a portion of ticket sales to tree planting and uses environmentally friendly vehicles, but also introduces "kinetic flooring" technology where fans' body movements are used to generate electrical power, thereby reducing the use of conventional energy sources.[45]

In terms of social ethics, theology and popular culture are not always contesting parties. The idea of public theology contains the realization that theology is inherent not only in religion, but also in various reflective activities, including popular culture, at least implicitly. Correspondingly, Detweiler and Taylor, referring to the Christian doctrine of "common grace," sought to explore the "theology *of* popular culture, not the theology *for* popular culture." They are concerned that theology embodied in popular culture often escapes the reach of traditional academic and religious circles.[46] In this regard, the interaction between theology developed by religion and theology implicit in popular culture becomes interesting. That interaction can be synergistic, dialogical, complementary, or confrontational. As a contemporary product, popular culture has an advantage over traditional religion in terms of understanding the actual situation and its moral complexity. Popular culture has been illuminated by the latest scientific findings and a new ethical awareness resulting from today's cross-border encounters. Its fluid nature also makes popular culture more flexible and more open to changes in morality. All of this allows the theology of popular culture to be progressive and dynamic, thus disrupting the position of conventional religion-based theology. Popular culture, for example, is far more assertive and overt than religions in terms of challenging slavery, polygamy, and discrimination based on sexual orientation. The same can be said with respect to bioethical issues and medical ethics such as abortion and euthanasia.

This does not mean that religion can simply be replaced by popular culture. As a matter of fact, theology cannot be completely separated from religion. The idea of a "theology of popular culture" as advocated by Detweiler and Taylor has been studied by Graeme Smith, who uses the term "popular public theology." Referring to the methodology of public theology as described by Elaine Graham, Smith reminds us of the importance of popular public theology as having a "bilingual" nature and shows a "correlational"

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[44] Bron Taylor, "Rebels against the Anthropocene? Ideology, Spirituality, Popular Culture, and Human Domination of the World within the Disney Empire," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 13:4 (2019), 433, https://doi.org/10.1558/jsrnc.39044.

[45] "Coldplay's Eco-Friendly Tour: What Is It and What Does It Mean for Touring in the Future?" *Impact Magazine*, 16 November 2021, https://impactnottingham.com/2021/11/coldplays-eco-friendly-tour-what-is-it-and-what-does-it-mean-for-touring-in-the-future/.

[46] Detweiler and Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings*, 16.

approach to be considered a public theology.[47] Smith means that although popular public theology uses non-religious language, its ideas must be worthy of a response by conventional, religious community-based theology. Academically, a popular public theology must be able to be analyzed theologically, not just socially.[48] In other words, a popular culture message can only be considered theological if it invites theological discourse referring to religious sources. Thus, implicit theology in popular culture must have the potential to spark the renewal of the conventional religion-based theology.

Confrontation, Adaptation, or Negotiation?

Based on field research projects in Germany, Tanzania, and Indonesia (East Java), Claudia Währisch-Oblau highlights the negative attitudes of church leaders and ministers toward popular culture. They tend to judge popular culture as "immoral, consumerist, manipulative, or simply dumb."[49] The negative attitude, according to Währisch-Oblau, is owing to a standpoint that contrasts entertainment with faith, a view that can be traced in the history of the church. Based on that view, faith reflections should not contain any entertaining element. She suggests that churches pay attention to the results of recent research in social sciences showing that "entertainment is far more than simple consumerist pleasure seeking … it is a playful way of engaging in the serious stuff of life." Quoting Joke Hermes, Währisch-Oblau points to a postmodern analysis of media reception that takes emotions and feelings seriously.[50]

In short, Währisch-Oblau advises churches to change the approach to popular culture from confrontation to adaptation. Concretely, this adaptation can be done through worship practices, which young people feel are "meaningless, empty, boring or outdated" because they are too cognitive and give less space to affective, let alone sensual, elements. Such a worship style contrasts with popular cultural events that involve the body optimally. For Währisch-Oblau, popular culture events provide "thick practices" that shape people's lives and beliefs, whereas conventional Christian worship provides only "thin practices" that have little impact on everyday life.[51]

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[47] Graeme Smith, "A Popular Public Theology," *Political Theology* 16:1 (1 January 2015), 26, https://doi.org/10.1179/1462317X14Z.000000000127.

[48] Smith, A Popular Public Theology," 29.

[49] Claudia Währisch-Oblau, "Evangelism and Popular Culture: Reflections and Questions from an International Study Process," *International Review of Mission* 103:399 (2014), 216.

[50] Währisch-Oblau, "Evangelism and Popular Culture," 220.

[51] Währisch-Oblau, "Evangelism and Popular Culture," 223.

Währisch-Oblau's adaptive approach fits Pete Ward's concept of "liquid church." According to Ward, the local community-based "solid church" with a rigid institutional system and a standard service model no longer fits into the way people live today. Referring to Zygmunt Bauman, Ward describes the present as an era of "liquid modernity" in which the existence of local communities is no longer significant.[52] He considers that the conventional church model, which better reflects the life of past modernity, is no longer able to carry out the true mission of the church, even though many "solid churches" have "mutated" into different functions.[53] What is needed now is a "liquid church" model that is "flowing" in the sense that it is not static but rather responsive to change.[54] In Ward's description, an individual-based "liquid church" is free from attachment to traditional as well as local communities. While conventional churches emphasize physical gatherings in specific locations, liquid churches emphasize communication that involves technology and, thus, they are translocal in nature.[55] Ward's views imply an adaptational approach to popular culture. The church must conform to the nature of popular culture that is not tied to locality, tradition, or primordialism.

The adaptational approach to popular culture has implications for the concept of contextualization. I have noted above Ott's critique of contextualization practices that tend to look to the past and ignore the rapid changes taking place. Ott goes on to suggest that the contextualization of theology not only rejects homogenization according to Western theological patterns but also does not fall into the "fragmentation" of local theologies that are not interconnected. Referring to the theory of globalization, Ott proposes contextualization as "a process of hybridization" in which global elements are negotiated with local elements.[56] Long before, Indonesian contextual theologian E. G. Singgih asserted that contextualization is not xenophobia, because xenophobia denies the universal dimension of the church. Singgih states that while highlighting particularity, contextualization does not negate the dimension of universality.[57] In a similar vein, responding to objections to the Western content in popular culture, Ron Barber

[52]   Pete Ward, *Liquid Church* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 25.

[53]   Ward, *Liquid Church*, 26–28.

[54]   Ward, *Liquid Church*, 40–41.

[55]   Ward, *Liquid Church*, 48, 89.

[56]   Ott, "Globalization and Contextualization," 53.

[57]   Emanuel Gerrit Singgih, *Berteologi Dalam Konteks: Pemikiran-Pemikiran Mengenai Kontekstualisasi Teologi Di Indonesia* (Yogyakarta and Jakarta: Kanisius and BPK, 2000), 25.

considers it no longer relevant to attempt contextualization that contrasts "west" with "east" and understands the authenticity of a culture as if it were sterile to external influences.[58] For Barber, contextualization should be a dynamic in which local sources and those from around the world produce a new cultural pattern.[59] In other words, theology needs to learn methodology from popular culture practices themselves. From dangdut and K-pop music, contemporary batik fashion and modified *kebaya*, to thematic cafés serving various local coffee variants, all show a glocalization methodology that reconciles local elements with external ones into a unique new creation that bridges the present and the past, West and East, as well as change and consistency.

Conclusion

A public theology needs to realize the significant role of popular culture in the public sphere. To make a fair theological response to popular culture, we must avoid entanglement in high-low, West-East, and local-global cultural binarism. A study of popular culture practices in Asia, including Indonesia, shows that popular culture contains not only aspects of entertainment but also social criticism, moral concepts, and spiritual content. Thus, from the perspective of public theology, popular culture is a worthy partner of theology in striving for the betterment of public life. In that sense, the method of doing theology with popular culture in the public sphere needs to be synchronized with the character of popular culture that negotiates various cultural resources to produce novelty.

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[58] Ron Barber, "Globalization, Contextualization, and Indigeneity: Local Approaches to Indigenous Christianity," *Missiology* 48:4 (1 October 2020), 379, https://doi.org/10.1177/0091829620916918.

[59] Barber, "Globalization, Contextualization, and Indigeneity," 386.