

Augustine on Popular Culture: Ancient Take on a Modern Problem

In his recent book, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture*[\[1\]](#), theologian Kelton Cobb observes that in our day, “a great number of people are finding solace in popular culture, solace they find lacking in organized religion.”[\[2\]](#) This is just one important reason why Christians must give careful thought and analysis (discernment) to the issue of popular culture. As members of the body of Christ, who desire to see others brought into loving fellowship with Him, it behooves us to understand why it is that many people claim to find greater consolation in popular culture than they do in the church of Jesus Christ.

But there’s another reason why today’s Christians must give some attention to popular culture, namely, for better or worse, we are all swimming in it. As Cobb reminds us, “whole generations in the West have had their basic conceptions of the world formed by popular culture.”[\[3\]](#) Just think for a moment about how much we are daily influenced by various artifacts of popular culture—things like television, movies, music, magazines, comic books, video games, sports, and advertising (just to name a few). How should the believer relate to popular culture? Should he shun it, embrace it, seek to transform it? Or should he rather do all of the above, depending on what particular item of popular culture is in view? As one can see, these are difficult questions. Not surprisingly, therefore, thoughtful Christians have answered these questions rather differently. But instead of trying to review all their answers here,[\[4\]](#) I will briefly discuss just one view which, I believe, still merits our careful consideration.

Augustine is considered by many to be the greatest theologian of the early church. Born on November 13, 354 A.D., to a pagan father and a Christian mother, he pursued his studies for a time in Carthage, the North African capital. According to Cobb, "Carthage was an epicenter of popular entertainment in the [Roman] empire, famous for its circus, amphitheater and gladiatorial shows—a fourth-century Las Vegas."[\[5\]](#) Cast into this environment as a passionate young pagan, Augustine indulged both his appetite for sex and his love for the theater. These early experiences led the later, Christian Augustine, to a unique appreciation for the almost irresistible draw that the artifacts of popular culture can have on us. In spite of this, however, he did not conclude (as the earlier church father Tertullian had largely done) that there is nothing of redeeming value in popular culture. Indeed even the pagan theater, which by his own admission had been partly responsible for stirring up his youthful lusts, is not entirely consigned to the garbage bin of useless "worldly" entertainment. Instead, Augustine took the intriguing position "that aspects of pagan culture ought to be preserved and put into the service of the church."[\[6\]](#)

In his monumental work, the *City of God*, Augustine postulated the existence of two cities—the city of man and the city of God. Although these two cities will eventually be separated at the last judgment, for the moment they are "mingled together" in the world, with the result that the inhabitants of both cities participate in many of the same social and cultural activities. So what differentiates the inhabitants of one city from those of another? According to Augustine it is the "quality of their love," along with the nature of their attachment to the things of this world. Cobb comments on Augustine's view as follows: "We are citizens of the earthly city to the extent that we love the earthly city as an end in itself; we are citizens of the heavenly city to the extent that we make use of the earthly city—including its astonishing arts and cultural attainments—as a way of loving God."[\[7\]](#)

In other words, Augustine is suggesting the following principle for evaluating various cultural activities from a Christian perspective: Does the activity (in some form or fashion) inspire a greater love of God or one's neighbor? If so, then there is something of genuine value to be had from participating in that activity. On the other hand, if the activity leads one to think less of God or one's neighbor, then it's probably suspect from a Christian perspective. "Thus," writes Cobb, "Augustine offers a strategy for the appropriation of pagan religious symbols and all varieties of popular art. They may be appropriated if they can be pressed into the service of charity, into the journey of the soul to God, as a *means* of devotion rather than as *objects* of devotion"

[\[8\]](#)

Of course, Augustine was aware that there are other principles which can (and should) be used in evaluating whether or not to participate in some cultural activity. For example, he taught that "Wherever we may find truth, it is the Lord's." [\[9\]](#) And truth is intrinsically valuable and good. So if a particular cultural activity helps you toward a greater understanding and appreciation of God, or the things which God has made—and if it's not contrary to some moral precept in the Bible—then this, too, is probably something valuable and appropriate for Christian participation.

As one considers Augustine's principles, one can't help but be impressed by their wisdom. Not only are these principles extremely practical, they are also thoroughly biblical. Indeed, they remind one of the way in which Paul interacted with the cultural artifacts of *his* day. You can scarcely study the life of this great missionary/theologian without being impressed by the way he took pains to genuinely understand something of the Gentile culture to which he had been called to minister. Thus, in Acts 17 we not only see him conversing with some of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers (v. 18), but we also learn that he had taken time to familiarize himself

with the religious beliefs of Athens (vv. 22-23). Moreover, when he describes the nature of God and man to the members of the Areopagus he cites, *with approval*, the statements of two pagan poets (vv. 28-29). Finally, as we study his letters we also see repeated references and allusions to the athletic games of his day (e.g. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Philippians. 3:14; 2 Timothy 2:5; etc.). Clearly Paul was attuned to the cultural concerns and activities of the people he sought to reach for Christ.

In light of all this, Paul's words to the Philippians are especially significant, particularly as we reflect on the ever-persistent question of how we, as believers, should relate to our *own* culture: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." (Philippians 4:8-9).

Notes

1. I am particularly indebted to the discussion of Augustine and popular culture found in Kelton Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Pub., 2005), 80-86.
2. Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide*, 6.
3. Ibid., 7.
4. The interested reader can find more information in texts like Cobb's (mentioned above) and H. Richard Niebuhr's classic, *Christ and Culture*.
5. Cobb, *The Blackwell Guide*, 80.
6. Ibid., 83.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 86.
9. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D.W. Robertson, Jr (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), II/18; cited in Cobb, *The*

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Can Western-style Education Transform the Middle East?

Dear Probe reader,

A highlight of my recent tour of Jordan—a land teeming with biblical history—was visiting King’s Academy. Jordan’s new prep school emphasizes critical thinking over rote learning, teaching students not *what* to think but *how* to think. Could it become a model to train a new generation of Middle Eastern leaders to shake hands with each other and the West?

As you analyze your world through biblical lenses, it’s important to be aware of significant global developments. King’s Academy has garnered considerable attention among US and international media:

“Rather revolutionary” (TIME)

“What could be more important in the Middle East than educating open-minded future leaders?” (The Sunday Times [London] op-ed)

“Bringing the best of western education to the Middle East.” (NPR)

“There is a crisis in Arab education. This school [is] about the future—trying to pull an education system into the 21st Century—to build bridges between clashing cultures.” (CBS-TV News)

Biblical worldview, of course, promotes careful, critical thinking. Many westerners are unaware of how lack of critical thinking permeates Middle Eastern education and, hence, influences international relations. This piece aims to expand readers’ geopolitical understanding. And, alas, too many western readers lack critical thinking themselves, so this uses current news to help focus attention on that biblical value, a crucial one if we are to communicate cross culturally.

As are most of my shorter articles on the Probe Ministries website, this is an op-ed written for secular newspapers. I’m honored that you might read it and hope you find it useful.

Warm regards,

Rusty Wright

If you only learn to repeat what you’ve been taught—and not to think for yourself—you may be ill prepared to vote.

That’s the lesson the Jerusalem-born librarian conveyed as we sat in her office in a brand new boarding school near Madaba, Jordan. When Afaf Kazimi moved to Jordan many years ago and could vote for the first time, she simply cast her ballot on another’s recommendation without knowing much about the candidate. I voted for the wrong person, she concluded in hindsight.

Much of her early school education had involved rote memorization—learning facts for tests, as is common in the Middle East—and had lacked training in critical thinking,

skills she developed later. Now she's excited to be part of a new experiment that blends Western analytical emphases with traditional Arab culture, helping students avoid the educational path she and others had to take.

Arab Preppies

Jordan's King's Academy opened in 2007 with goals of helping students from many nations and different religious backgrounds learn not *what* to think but *how* to think. Patterned after Deerfield Academy in Massachusetts, King Abdullah's alma mater, King's looks much like a New England prep school. Think *Dead Poets Society* or *The Emperors Club*, coed and transplanted to a desert oasis.

Students wear preppie blue blazers and ties, khaki trousers. Many live in dormitories, with faculty house parents. They have service responsibilities in the dining hall and community.

Sports aim to cultivate teamwork and discipline. An honor code is being developed. Course offerings involve the humanities, social sciences and hard sciences and include studies in Islam, Christianity, world religions, communication, rhetoric and ethics. Financial aid aims for socioeconomic diversity. Courses are taught in English and Arabic.

King Abdulla's Deerfield experience was formative in his young life. It developed lasting relationships. He's a friend of the West. Jordan has led efforts to renounce religious extremism and help religions coexist peacefully. King's Academy hopes its multinational faculty will train future leaders for the Middle East and beyond.

Critical Thinking

Since I attended Choate, Deerfield's peer (and, my classmates would want me to emphasize, chief rival), I'm especially

interested in this Jordanian experiment. I'm grateful that I learned early to think critically and to ask lots of questions. King's appears eager to cultivate inquisitive minds.

A poster of William Shakespeare hung in the King's library along with promotion for J.R.R. Tolkien and the *International Herald Tribune*. Broad reading—especially of writers with whom you disagree—can facilitate learning and enhance communication. Intelligent people are always ready to learn, affirms an ancient proverb. Their ears are open for knowledge ([Proverbs 18:15](#) NLT). How much better to get wisdom than gold, and good judgment than silver! claims another ([Proverbs 16:16](#) NLT).

Logical, analytical thinking is, of course, crucial for healthy societies. Sloppy logic can be amusing or devastating: All fish swim. I swim. Therefore, I am a fish. Somewhat similar illogic appears in numerous aberrations: Muslim extremists threaten Western society. Omar is a Muslim. So Omar is a threat to me. Or, American foreign policy undermines my country. You're an American. Thus, you're my enemy. Shallow thinkers can turn illogic into dogma and breed fanaticism.

Of course, no school will produce perfect students. George W. Bush's critics might sometimes wonder if his Andover education taught him to think clearly. And if Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had attended Andover, would he and Bush get along? Well, maybe. But please, don't expect miracles.

King Abdullah's promising educational venture deserves close scrutiny. Could it become a model to train a new generation of Middle Eastern leaders to shake hands with each other and the West?

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