

Messiah University & Engagement with Popular Culture

Questions and Answers

What is popular culture?

Popular culture can be defined in many ways, but for our purposes we simply define it as the elements that are common experience of the culture-at-large in the United States, and increasingly, our globalized society. This includes ideas, perspectives, media, art, and other phenomena that find their way into the “mainstream” cultural consciousness. How do you know something is “popular”? There really is no true authority on the matter beyond what any individual or group perceives to be relevant or current—it is a sociological construction of informal consensus.

Why would a Christian engage popular culture?

While global popular culture continues to diversify in content and medium (reflecting the broad spectrum of cultures and individuals in our world), all elements of popular culture share this in common: they are a part of our world right now. In another sense, it is part of God's creation. In the biblical narrative, God created and declared the entire world as good.¹ Most Christians believe that because of sin, however, all of creation became corrupted, and in many cases, the good parts of culture have been *lost*. As a result, both currently and historically, many religious groups have chosen to keep themselves separate from elements of secular culture.

However, Scripture also tells the story of a Christ who came to “seek and save that which was lost.”² This raises the important question: What does it mean to “seek” and “save” things that are lost, particularly a lost culture? There are a number of perspectives on this question of how Christ and culture interact.³ In contemplating these perspectives, we are mindful of Jesus' call for his followers to be “the salt of the earth.”⁴ Consider the following implications:

- 1) We are continually being transformed to resemble the good of God's creation.
- 2) We engage the world as it currently is, bringing his goodness with us.
- 3) We must do so without “losing our saltiness” —thus, remaining reflectively and carefully critical.
- 4) God's grace invites us to do so freely and hospitably, as He “seeks and saves” our lost culture.

Can this be done passively or dismissively? Or actively and responsibly? Ultimately, the active and responsible approach makes the most sense for dealing with the reality, the “here-ness” of popular culture.

Why is popular culture engaged at Messiah University?

Messiah University encourages its students to actively engage popular culture for the same reasons we are engaged with natural sciences, fine arts, literature, and social sciences: all of these are important parts of our world. We believe engaging popular culture falls under the larger University-Wide Educational Objectives, which state:

By raising the right questions, encouraging critical thinking, exposing students to multiple perspectives and helping them to process these perspectives from a Christian world view, Messiah seeks to enable students to respond with maturity to the world's complexities. In addition to nurturing these intellectual skills, the University encourages its students to apply their knowledge to the needs of the world—as servants, as leaders, as agents of reconciliation.

¹ Genesis 1:31

² Luke 19:10

³ Some find helpful as a primer on these views H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (1956), Harper and Row: New York.

⁴ Matthew 5:13

In line with these objectives, Messiah's educational programming seeks to ask tough questions, represent different viewpoints, and contribute to the development of critical thinking skills in students. The aim of this educational approach is that students learn to use wisdom in their choices concerning popular culture, becoming active culture engagers and makers, rather than passive consumers. We believe that this happens through a dialogue that is often difficult, but developmentally essential. And so we seek to start and guide a conversation.

In short, Messiah University is actively engaged in popular culture as part of our educational mission, and to ensure that students will be successful in their roles as servants, leaders, and reconcilers in church and society.

What are some practical examples of how this works at Messiah?

- The Student Activities Board (SAB) provides programming which seeks to bring popular culture to campus via concerts, films, discussions, speakers, chapels, and other events. The hope is that bringing popular culture to campus will equip students to take a responsible and active approach to how they engage. SAB hopes to model this type of engagement by making intentional choices about its programming and providing means for reflection around these events. When SAB selects films, artists, and content for its programs, it follows a set of guidelines which are intended to model this responsible approach.
- Student organizations that are officially recognized through Student Government Association will often invite speakers who offer a diversity of perspectives on their particular interest area. This means that guests to campus may hold differing values or beliefs than the campus at-large, but that their ideas are welcomed as an opportunity to actively and responsibly engage from a perspective of gracious Christianity.
- The campus cable network includes a variety of channels that offer diverse programming, including news, entertainment, music, education, and sports. These channels are chosen intentionally and discerningly to provide students with access to the goings-on of popular culture.
- The Office of Student Involvement & Leadership Programs provides support and space for discussion when there is disagreement about the appropriateness or relevancy of popular culture programming on campus. When students have questions or concerns, there are educators available to address them and facilitate discussion-based learning.

What does the University mean by a responsible engagement of popular culture?

For any artist or group performing on campus, Messiah University considers the artistic merit of the performers as well as their cultural significance. Also taken into consideration is the truth an artist communicates through his or her work. This could be spiritual truth, or truth related to ideas of love, peace, and justice, or any number of truths historically valued and observed by Christians for millennia. Finally, we also consider the appropriateness of the group or artist invited to campus—particularly with respect to the audience and venue in which they will be performing.

How does Student Activities Board select the artists/films it invites to campus?

As SAB considers artists, or the films of a particular filmmaker, it attempts to address the following elements:

- **T – Truth Communicated** – How does this artist/film communicate truth? Is there truth to be found in unlikely places? What are the messages conveyed in its lyrics/script/narrative/images?
- **R – Relevance (Cultural Significance)** – How widely relevant is this artist/film in the culture at-large? Are they popular on television, radio, Web? Do they bring a unique perspective or voice to our campus? Do they represent a minority voice in our culture that deserves to be heard?

- **A – Appropriateness (Utility)** – How does this artist/film help SAB fulfill its mission? Are there any potential issues (language, lifestyle, etc.) that may overshadow the good reasons to invite them? Could their cultural, artistic, or truthful significance be lost in the midst of these issues? (e.g. *No films with an NC-17 or X rating*)
- **Q – Quality (Artistic Merit)** – What do critics have to say about this artist/film? Have they received awards or other forms of recognition? Do they display artistic excellence?

Why would Messiah University want to invite “secular” performances to campus?

Messiah University welcomes exposure to a variety of intellectual perspectives and artistic expressions while maintaining and modeling the belief that those expressions be evaluated by Christians from their own world view. Thus, student organizations may invite artists and performers to campus who promote intellectual, emotional, or spiritual growth—as long as the opportunity for constructive dialogue exists.

Both Christian and non-Christian performers are selected for their ability to stimulate constructive thought, communicate, deepen understanding, and sharpen critical judgment in ways that will help achieve our mission of maturing young people in their intellect, character, and Christian faith. When they leave Messiah, students need to know how to interact with their culture, what to do when facing issues or people with which they may disagree, and how to be salt and light in a complex world that won't necessarily reflect their own understanding or perception of it.

More Questions?

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