

Craig Detweiler's first love was movies. His road to faith went through Humphrey Bogart. Craig combines his dual passions with an MDiv from Fuller Seminary and an MFA from the University of Southern California's School of Cinema/TV. Look for Craig's feature screenwriting debut in the high energy, teen comedy, *Extremedays*.



Barry Taylor found God on AC/DC's Highway to Hell tour. His journey from sound technician to pastor was quite crooked, with stops at Fuller Theological Seminary's School of World Mission along the way. He's currently completing his PhD in Postmodern Studies. His music is featured in Agnieszka Holland's film *The Third Miracle* and Tim Bui's upcoming *Green Dragon*.

Finding God on Mars (Hill)

by Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor

Popular culture may be the key to understanding the hearts and minds of our fellow citizens in the twenty-first century, argue Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor from their Hollywood home base.

Picture yourself in Oxford Circus. Waiting for two friends who are late. To pass the time, you step into a Virgin Mega Store. Moloko's song *Pure Pleasure Seeker* assaults your ear drums, exhorting you to all kinds of epicurean delights. A catalogue from the Royal Academy's *Apocalypse* exhibition mocks you with a sculpture of the Pope struck down by a meteorite. On a giant video screen, "friends" Brad Pitt and Edward Norton pummel themselves beyond recognition in *The Fight Club*. You are shocked, dismayed, and angered by what you see. Saint Paul feels your pain.

In Acts 17, Paul waits for his cohorts, Silas and Timothy, to join him in Athens. While killing time, Paul takes a look around. And what he finds disturbs him, too. Idols abound. And Paul's anger grows.

In his insightful book, *Life: The Movie*, Neil Gabler argues that "entertainment has conquered reality". The church's

fears and suspicions about Hollywood have been confirmed. Celebrity news has replaced "real" news. The newstand rarely features the faces of prime ministers, scientists or bishops. Instead, the public devours sordid details about singers, soap operas, and movie idols. Note how the recent death of television presenter Paula Yates captured the headlines. Amidst England's petrol crisis, the overdose of a rock star's wife won the day's battle for column inches. Politicians and pastors may regret this skewed perspective, but it cannot be dismissed. Thirty years ago, John Lennon caused an uproar when he declared the Beatles more popular than Jesus Christ. Today's teen would find no argument with Jesus' relative obscurity. They would merely debate whether Oasis, Britney Spears or Radiohead are more popular than the Beatles.

It's easy to be angered by the idolatry. To walk away depressed, discouraged, and

dismissive. Statistics cited in the summer 2000 edition of *TransMission* suggest that church attendance in England has tumbled from 12% to 7.5% since 1979. It appears the unholy "flesh" of music, movie and TV have effectively vanquished the "Spirit".

Yet, Paul did not allow his initial encounter with "pagan" Athenian culture to deter him. He moved deeper into the marketplace, taking a closer look at the inscriptions adorning the idols. He became a "cultural anthropologist", striving to understand the hearts and mind of Athens. He debated with the leaders of Athenian society in the Areopagus, the gathering place for cultural debate. Paul entered their conversation using their images and their idols.

Where's our Areopagus? Pop culture serves as our meeting place, our Mars Hill. Ultimate questions about truth and reality flow from big budget productions like *The Matrix*, *The Truman Show*, and *The Fight Club*. Ethical debates about homosexuality are sparked by television programmes like *Queer as Folk*, *Ellen* and *Will & Grace*. Profound spiritual issues infor

every frame of *The Sixth Sense*, *Magnolia*, and *Dogma*.

Sadly, our theologians and academics often ignore the arts. On the rare occasions they embrace the arts, they tend to focus on “high culture”. This only creates an additional, lamentable gap between church and culture. While we may prefer the opera, the symphony and the theatre, the question remains: “What are those outside the four walls of the church watching?”

They may still read Shakespeare in school, but they discuss *Star Trek* in the pubs. To the “absent generation” missing from our churches, the only Madonna they know just had a baby with film director Guy Ritchie. They believe, as the techno song says, “God is a DJ”. To prove it, they faithfully trek to today’s temples, the local night clubs, every week. Consider the names of a few key clubs in Britain; The Ark, Sainted, Icon, Passion, Freedom, Bliss, God’s Kitchen, Ministry of Sound, Trinity, and Mass.

We can lament the triumph of pop culture, longing to turn back the clock to an earlier Christian era. Paul did not allow his anger to consume him. He pressed further, and found amidst the idolatry, some sincere religious yearning. The same longing informs today’s popular culture. If you’re willing to do some cultural anthropology, what you find may surprise and even, encourage you. Discerning Christians must look beyond the sex, violence and shock value of pop culture to see the lingering, haunting drives in postmodern audiences.

Recent trends in pop culture have renewed our hope in Christ. Consider the new hedonism dominating Ibiza’s discos. Moloko’s *Pure Pleasure Seeker* sounds like a rallying cry for unbridled debauchery. Having heard every dour warning about global warming, famine and Aids, what’s a teen to do? Enjoy today since tomorrow is not guaranteed. That’s a desperate act of seeking life, a reflection of the ironic wisdom of Ecclesiastes.

Paul’s theology allowed for the possibility that God was at work everywhere, even amongst idolatrous Athenian culture.

To paraphrase Ecclesiastes 3.11, can eternity possibly reside in the hearts of today’s club kids?

The National Gallery stages an exhibition entitled *Seeing Salvation*. Hollywood produces transcendent films like *American Beauty* and *The Green Mile*. *Touched by an Angel* tops America’s Neilson ratings. In the words of Marvin Gaye, “What’s Going On?” Is this merely millennium fever?

Big questions about the existence of angels, the possibility of miracles, and the future of humanity appear on television, in theatres, on the radio. Spirituality is suddenly fashionable. A search is definitely on. Popular artists are engaging in a wild, woolly theological roundtable. It has never been easier to use the cultural artefacts of everyday life to spark a spiritual conversation. Are we aware of the deep spiritual conversation happening both around us and without us?

Consider the growth of piercing, tattoos and torture. The ultimate act of self-destructive nihilism? Or a desperate cry for feeling, for meaning, for knowing what’s real? Tattooed Los Angeles performance artist Ron Athey was raised in a fundamentalist Christian home. Via acts of onstage violence, he seeks to purge the falsehood, lies and half truths that ruled his childhood. His self-mutilation has echoes in the early saints, seeking to purify himself (and his audience) of unfeeling, unreflective lives.

The recent *Apocalypse* exhibit is surely designed to shock. But it’s intended to shock its audience out of sleep, out of complacency, into an awareness of the evil surrounding us: the fragility of everyday life; the beauty that points to God. Another Ecclesiastes-driven show. A critic commented, “There’s no religion in the art, but the art’s religious.”

Paul also affirmed his audience’s spiritual search, “I see that in every way you are very religious.” He recognised their idols as a valid expression of a deep spiritual longing to worship, “An Unknown God”.

Critics harped on the barefisted violence that forms the central core of David Fincher’s riveting 1999 film, *The Fight*

Club. But why are men gathering to fight? To break out of the mundane routine of working life. To pummel themselves out of materialism, beyond navel-gazing self-help groups. *The Fight Club* is a desperate cry for vital, relevant, abundant life by a culture that’s come to the end of its tether.

The artistic cries are extreme because the needs are extreme. The potential for depression, inertia and suicide have never been greater. That’s why the questions are being screamed even louder. “We want life! We need meaning! We demand hope!”

Director Sam Mendes’ *American Beauty* finds hope amidst a gun shot and a pool of blood. *Trainspotting* urges viewers to “Choose Life”. *The Sixth Sense* suggests the dead can help the living. *Dogma* rescues God from a ventilator. These are small, hard-won victories, forged in a time of profound pain and confusion. But they are victories nonetheless.

God speaks via the songs of rock stars, like U2. He speaks through filmmakers like Kevin Smith and John Woo. He also speaks through anyone he darn well pleases. Like Susan Sarandon in *Dead Man Walking*. Or Chris Offill’s controversial painting, *Black Madonna*. As Paul discovered in Athens, “God is already there”, alive and well, vibrant in the marketplace.

At our Sanctuary church in Santa Monica, California, we attract artists, musicians and movie producers. We use the faith-infused paintings of Van Gogh, the music of Elvis Costello, and the films of Krystof Kieslowski for sermons. Our postmodern audience doesn’t mind mixing the writing of the early church fathers and ancient Orthodox icons with *The Simpsons*. Our web page (www.sanctuary-church.net) offers links to the finest Christian artists and the most absurd current humour. We embrace the “popular” arts because we’re interested in appealing to common people. But we do not pursue pop culture merely for the sake of mission. We watch what our constituents watch, listen to what our parishioners care

about because that's genuinely who we are.

If you're concerned about the future of the church, we suggest you listen to techno DJ Moby's new CD, *Play*. If you've got a heart for the next generation, heed their cries on display in *Apocalypse*. If you want to discuss God with teenagers, watch *The Matrix* with them. Several times.

God is alive and well and living in pop culture. Through common grace, God has entrusted his precious message to producers, painters and pop stars. Walter Brueggeman wrote an appreciation of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, in which he announced, "Finally come the poets, the true sons of God." May we have eyes to see and ears to hear all the eternal things Christ is accomplishing through the poets of "disposable" pop culture.

Who knows? We might even find God on Mars.