Midterm Essay

When analyzing historical context, religion is often perceived as a divisive force, but modern media outlets and popular culture direct the message of contemporary religion to broader audiences and unify its message. David Chidester discusses how a simplistic definition of religion does not fully describe its modern complexities, and the definition of “sacred” must be revised. Furthermore, Michael Jindra proposes new methods in which people can express their spirituality as opposed to institutionalized religion. These ideas can be applied to see how popular culture has allowed the message of the Orthodox community to be experienced beyond its boundaries.

Chidester defines three terms with which contemporary religion can be analyzed: church, fetish, and potlatch. These terms can be used to understand how entirely new entities are now “sacred”. Chidester argues that baseball is a church (in the sense of an institutionalized religion) as, “baseball ensures a sense of continuity…baseball supports a sense of uniformity...the religion of baseball represents the sacred space of home...baseball represents the sacred time of ritual.” (Chidester 215-216) Baseball is more than a simple set of behavioral rules; different teams have established traditions, the unwavering devotion of fans, and even memorabilia such as game balls and retired jerseys considered to be sacred. This means that a non-religious activity—baseball—is serving the same purpose as traditional religion in people’s lives. In addition to the abstraction of what it means to be an institutionalized religion, Chidester describes how the symbolism of religion is now pervasive in popular culture with the notion of fetish. Chider notes that, “Coca-Cola has assumed religions significance for the consumer…a fetish of a global religion, an icon of the West, a symbol that can mark an initiatory entry into modernity.” (Chidester 220-221) What Coca Cola accomplished through its marketing campaign is the association of its beverage and brand with the ideas of progress and optimism. The beverage’s evolution into a symbol not only enabled its commercial success, but it also satisfied consumer’s fetish demand for a system of symbols representing virtuous traits. Finally, Chidester discusses the notion of potlatch (gift-giving). With the example of “Louie, Louie” Chidester argues that, “the song might be regarded as if it were a divine gift…the religious significance of the gift must be located in relations of exchange.” (Chidester 223-224) Given the often-conflicting relationship between religion and rock and roll, the fact that the combination of the two has achieved commercial success and a cult following signifies that giving the gift of music and thus joy has a broad appeal. With the ideas of church, fetish, and potlatch in mind, it is possible to formulate a more complete understanding of how popular culture has replaced many elements in people’s everyday lives previously occupied by institutionalized religion.

Jindra uses the example of Star Trek to describe how secular constructs can become religious phenomena. Jindra describes the analogous features of Star Trek to organized religion as having “an origin myth, a set of beliefs, organizations, and some of the most active and creative members anywhere.” (Jindra 161) Star Trek conventions, the extended canon, and memorabilia all enlarge the mythos of Star Trek, and what is especially significant is the fact that this expansion is fan-made. It is devoted fans who are expressing their faith through a secular, in this case science-fiction, construct. If a less ethnocentric definition of religion is used, it can be described as “the daily, lived expression of an individual’s or society’s most important values.” (Jindra 162) Star Trek is a perfect example of this as the idealized view of the future and the feeling of progress fuel people’s everyday optimism that may be weighed down with modern burdens. Instead of the notion of a distant heaven, Star Trek provides a seemingly obtainable utopia that is guided by an established set of values (the Prime Directive) that overlaps with society’s current virtues. Popular culture has become a venue for people to express their spirituality as well as find direction outside of traditional organized religion.

Applying Jindra’s and Chidester’s ideas to music of the religious Orthodox Community, it is possible to discern how music fills people’s desire for celebration and recreation. The tone of religious practice is often austere, and Orthodox Judaism has a draconian set of behavioral guidelines. Because of the strict regulation of what is deemed “appropriate”, one of the few outlets people can use to express themselves is music. One of the criticisms of the rabbinical prohibition of artist Lipa Shmeltzer noted that the religious authorities were cutting off one of the few outlets Orthodox members could use to have fun without compromising their faith. This prohibition, the critic argued, would lead members of the Orthodox community to turn to even more heretical outlets.

Lipa Shmeltzer composes music specifically for the Orthodox community, and in “Splash” he describes that “A heavenly splash when He will make us pure.” (Shmeltzer) The idea of potlatch applies to this song in two ways. First, Shmeltzer is giving the audience the gift of music as he is using contemporary melodies fused with more traditional Jewish rhythms to help express this feeling of purity. Second, the song describes how god will bestow the gift of purity and enable his followers to become closer to the divine. In addition, the idea of fetish also applies to this song as the symbolism of water representing purity is evident throughout the entire song. Shmeltzer expands upon this divine potlatch as he sings, “No more *kinah sinah* [jealousy and hatred]…A *rayne moyeky a klure kop* [A clear brain, a clear head].” (Shmeltzer) These lines are in accord with Jindra’s notion of a set of virtues found outside classical religious scripture as Shmeltzer is generalizing this notion of divine purity with more humanized emotions. This adds a level of complexity to “Splash” as Shmeltzer is expressing his emotions *and* his spirituality through popular music. The utopia Shmeltzer describes in “Splash” is not a place, but rather a state of tranquil emotion and mind, and the message of reaching this utopia through faith is channeled through his popular music. The popular appeal of this song is experienced by the religious Orthodox community as it fills in many elements of religion that strictly traditional practice cannot satisfy.

Despite being an artist more focused on appealing to the Orthodox community, Lipa Shmelzter tackles the modern obsession with smartphones in the techno-pop song “Hang up the Phone”. A topic that applies to anyone with a smartphone and likely many members of the Orthodox community is that people simply spend too much time on their mobile devices. This unhealthy habit of constantly being connected is described by Shmeltzer as he sings, “we can barely focus Davening and driving Eating working sleeping Why keep on replying.” (Shmeltzer) To a certain degree, smartphones have become a church as described by Chidester. For many people, their entire schedules, social interactions, and entertainment rely on the device. Shmeltzer attacks this “institution” of a smartphone as he believes that is not only an everyday distraction, but also a distraction from faith. Expanding upon the lyrics of the song, the visuals in the music video satisfy Chidester’s idea of fetish as the dancers and Shmeltzer are in robot costumes representing what people become when glued to their smartphones. Furthermore, the techno-pop sound of the music along with the flame juggler in the video further the popular appeal of this song. This follows Jindra’s notion of secular expression as the subject matter of excessive smartphone usage is not directly related to religion. Rather, Schmeltzer is upset with the impact smartphones have on people’s everyday habits in his community, but this a more general issue that applies to society beyond just the religious Orthodox community. The utopia in this song is simply people hanging up their phones. This utopia is very tangible and thus has a broad appeal as many people both inside and outside the Orthodox community are resentful of how smartphones’ have distracted and distanced people from person-to-person interaction.

Viral videos provide a vehicle for Orthodox values to be shared with millions of people. In the music video by the Maccabeats called “Candlelight”, the group shares the origin story of Hanukah and the miracle victory over the Greeks. To the popular tune of Taio Cruz’s “Dynamite”, the talented acapella group sings, “The war went on and on until the mighty Greeks were gone… Just wanna celebrate for all eight nights.” (Maccabeats) By parodying an extremely popular song, the Maccabeats communicate the story of the rededication of the second temple and enable an audience beyond the Orthodox community to experience this religious message. Another example of how messages of the Orthodox community are experienced beyond its boundaries is “L’Chaim” by Gad Elbaz and Nissim Black. The lyrics of the song are celebratory as they describe, “You better stand for him you better Rock for him you better love him thank him everybody now scream L'chaim,” (Elbaz, Nissim) where “L’chaim” is essentially a toast to life. This song has the sound of a modern pop song while also containing the sound of Middle-Eastern Jewish music. This coupled with the historic backdrop of Jewish people dancing in Poland enable the song to encompass global elements of Jewish tradition. The historical elements of the music video and the lyrics’ religious message of devotion to god are juxtaposed with an upbeat melody, excited dancers, and an overall sense of optimism that is common in popular music across all genres. The rap element of the song also modernizes the music, enabling an audience who may be only culturally Jewish to appreciate the message. Viral videos, modern music, and popular culture contribute to spiritual expression outside of organized religion by creating new, contemporary opportunities for self-expression.