AAR

The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock 'n' Roll: Theoretical Models for the Study of Religion in American Popular Culture

David Chidester

CONSIDERABLE ACADEMIC ATTENTION has recently been directed towards the analysis of religion in American popular culture [1] Although much of this academic industry has successfully marked out exciting new areas of inquiry, we still need to ask What are we talking about? What do we mean by "religion" in the study of religion in American popular culture?

Consider this "What has a lifetime of baseball taught you?," Buck O'Neil is asked in an interview for Ken Burns's television series on the history of the American national pastime. "It is a religion," O'Neil responds "For me," he adds. "You understand?"

David Chidester is Professor of Comparative Religion and Director of the Institute for Comparative Religion in Southern Africa at the University of Cape Town, Rondebosch, 7700, South Africa

[1] Basic contours of the study of religion in American popular culture can be discerned by consulting Browne, Elzey, Lippy, and Williams Recent research in this area has directed particular attention toward material culture (McDannell), media (Goethals, Jindra), and the production and contestation of sacred space in American popular culture (Chidester and Linenthal)

Not exactly, of course, because we have no idea what Buck O'Neil, the great first baseman of the Kansas City Monarchs in the 1930s, who served baseball for over six decades as player, coach, manager, and scout, means by the term, "religion " What does he mean? As Ken Burns would have it, baseball is a religion because it operates in American culture like a church, "The Church of Baseball " Is that how we should understand "religion" in American popular culture, as an organized human activity that functions like the more familiar religious institution of the Christian church?

To complicate the matter, however, consider this A religion is not a specific institution, rather, a religion is "a system of symbols " So says anthropologist Clifford Geertz; so also says author Mark Pendergrast in his account of a new religion that was founded in America but eventually achieved truly global scope, the religion of Coca-Cola

In his popular history, *For God, Country, and Coca-Cola,* Pendergrast concludes that the fizzy, caramel-colored sugar water stands as a "sacred symbol" that induces "worshipful" moods that animate an "all-inclusive world view espousing perennial values such as love, peace, and universal brotherhood " According to this reading, therefore, religion is about sacred symbols and systems of sacred symbols that endow the world with meaning and value As Pendergrast argues, Coca-Cola—the sacred name, the sacred formula, the sacred image, the sacred object—has been the fetish at the center of a popular American system of religious symbolism.

But we can complicate things even further by considering this "Let's Give It to 'Em, Right Now!," singer Joe Ely screams before the instrumental break in the Kingsmen's 1963 rock 'n' roll classic, "Louie, Louie " In the midst of the clashing, crashing cacophony, with lyrics that are unintelligible at any speed, we are struck by the strained screech of Ely's exhortation, "Let's Give It to 'Em, Right Now!" What kind of a "gift" is this?

In his book-length history of the song, which explores "the Secret" of "Louie, Louie," rock critic Dave Marsh proposes that one useful model for understanding this kind of gift-giving appears in the ritualized display, presentation, and destruction of property associated with the potlatch ritual performed by indigenous American societies in the Pacific Northwest. This analogy with a Native American ritual, Marsh argues, can illuminate what he calls the "socioreligious" character of "Louie, Louie" in American culture. In this sense, however, religion is not an institution; it is not a system of symbols, it is the gift

Church, fetish, potlatch—these three terms represent different theoretical models for analyzing religion in American popular culture By examining their recent deployment in popular accounts of baseball, Coca-

Cola, and rock 'n' roll, I hope to explore some of the consequences of these theoretical models for the study of religion Among those consequences, I will highlight the force of metaphoric transference in theory-building, the implications of these three metaphors, representing, respectively, the institutional formation of the church, the powerful but artificial making of the fetish, and the non-productive expenditure of the potlatch, for our understanding of the character of religion, and the ways in which the very term "religion," including its definition, application, and extension, does not, in fact, belong solely to the academy but is constantly at stake in the interchanges of cultural discourses and practices

1 THE CHURCH OF BASEBALL

To return to the testimony of Buck O'Neil, baseball is a religion because it is an enduring institution that is governed by established rules. "If you go by the rules," he explains, "it is right." Baseball is a religion, according to Buck O'Neil, because "it taught me and it teaches everyone else to live by the rules, to abide by the rules" (Ward and Burns: 231)

This definition of religion as rule-governed behavior, however, is not sufficiently comprehensive or detailed to capture what Ken Burns presents as the religious character of baseball. The "church of baseball" is much more than merely the rule book It is a religious institution that maintains the continuity, uniformity, sacred space, and sacred time of American life. As the "faith of fifty million people," baseball does everything that we conventionally understand to be done by the institution of the church

First, baseball ensures a sense of continuity in the midst of a constantly changing America through the forces of tradition, heritage, and collective memory As Donald Hall suggests, "Baseball, because of its continuity over the space of America and the time of America, is a place where memory gathers" (cited in Ward and Burns xviii) Certainly, this emphasis on collective memory dominates Burns's documentary on baseball. But it also seems to characterize the religious character of the sport in American culture Like a church, Major League Baseball institutionalizes a sacred memory of the past that informs the present.

Second, baseball supports a sense of uniformity, a sense of belonging to a vast, extended American family that attends the same church As journalist Thomas Boswell reports in his detailed discussion of "The Church of Baseball," his mother was devoted to baseball because "it made her feel like she was in church " Like her church, Boswell explains, baseball provided his mother with "a place where she could—by sharing a

fabric of beliefs, symbols, and mutual agreements with those around her—feel calm and whole" (189). Boswell draws out a series of analogies between baseball and his mother's church: both feature organs, both encourage hand clapping to their hymns, both have distinctive robes and vestments, and in both everyone is equal before God. Although his analogy between the basepaths of a diamond and the Christian Cross seems a bit strained, Boswell provides sufficient justification for asserting that his mother regarded her attendance of baseball games as roughly equivalent to belonging to a church.

Third, the religion of baseball represents the sacred space of home. In this respect, baseball is a religion of the domestic, of the familiar, and even of the obvious. As Boswell explains, "Baseball is a religion that worships the obvious and gives thanks that things are exactly as they seem. Instead of celebrating mysteries, baseball rejoices in the absence of mysteries and trusts that, if we watch what is laid before our eyes, down to the last detail, we will cultivate the gift of seeing things as they really are" (193). The vision of reality that baseball affords, therefore, is a kind of normality, the ordinary viewed through a prism that only enhances its familiarity. While many religions point to a perfect world beyond this world, Boswell observes, baseball creates a "perfect universe in microcosm within the real world" (193). By producing such a ritualized space within the world, baseball domesticates the sacred and gives it a home.

Fourth, the religion of baseball represents the sacred time of ritual. "Everything is high-polish ritual and full-dress procession," Boswell notes (190). The entire proceedings of the game are coordinated through a ritualization of time. But baseball also affords those extraordinary moments of ecstasy and enthusiasm, revelation and inspiration, that seem to stand outside of the ordinary temporal flow. In church, according to Boswell, his mother experienced those moments of "ritual epiphany." "Basically," he reports, "that's how she felt about baseball, too" (189). Through ritual and revelation baseball provides an experience of sacred time that liberates its devotees from time's constraints.

In these terms, therefore, baseball is a church, a "community of believers" (192). Certainly, the church of baseball is confronted by the presence of unbelievers within the larger society. As Thomas Boswell reports, his father failed to find his rightful place among the faithful in the church of baseball. "The appeal of baseball mystified him," Boswell explains, "just as all religions confound the innocent bewildered atheist" (189). Like any church, however, baseball has its committed faithful, its true believers. The opening speech of Annie Savoy in the film "Bull Dur-

ham" can be invoked as a passionate statement of religious devotion to baseball "I believe in the church of baseball," she declares She testifies that she has experimented with all other forms of religious worship, including the worship of Buddha, Allah, Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, trees, mushrooms, and Isadora Duncan, but those religions did not satisfy. Even the worship of Jesus, she confesses, did not work out, because the Christian religion involves too much guilt The religion of baseball, however, promises a freedom beyond guilt Although she observes the analogy between baseball and the Christian church, which is supported by the curious equivalence between 108 beads on the rosary and 108 stitches on a baseball, Annie Savoy proclaims baseball as a church in its own right "I've tried them all, I really have," she concludes, "and the only church that truly feeds the soul, day in, day out, is the church of baseball" (Boswell 189).

"What nonsense!," an unbeliever might understandably conclude in response to all this testimony about the church of baseball Baseball is not a religion It is recreation, it is entertainment, and, supported by the monopoly granted to Major League Baseball, it is big business All this religious language merely mystifies the genuine character of the sport in American society

For all the apparent mystification, strained analogies, and improbable statements of faith, however, the depiction of baseball as a church represents a highly significant development in attempts to locate religion in American popular culture. In earlier anthropological accounts, especially those produced by the anthropologist-from-Mars school of cultural anthropology that gave us the "Nacirema" (America-spelled-backwards) tribe, baseball registers as "magic" rather than "religion" (Miner) For example, a frequently anthologized article on "Baseball Magic" records the magical techniques employed by baseball players to manipulate unseen forces and control events (Gmelch) Using various kinds of amulets for good luck, players engage in specific practices—never stepping on the foul line, always spitting before entering the batter's box—that appear, in Freudian terms, just like "what are called obsessive acts in neurotics " In their magical practices baseball players display an obsession with "little preoccupations, performances, restrictions and arrangements in certain activities of everyday life which have to be carried out always in the same or in a methodically varied way" (Freud 9.117-127) Although Sigmund Freud held that such "obsessive acts" characterized the practice of both ritual and magic, the author of "Baseball Magic" implicitly upholds the familiar analytical distinction between the two. Instead of interpreting baseball as religion, however, he highlights its superstitious practices of magic.

This account of baseball magic raises two theoretical problems First, by characterizing baseball as magic the author pushes us back to the basic opposition between "religion" and "superstition" that has been crucial to the very definition of religion in Western culture. As the linguist Emile Benveniste observed, "the notion of 'religion' requires, so to speak, by opposition, that of 'superstition'" (522) The ancient Latin term *religio,* indicating an authentic, careful, and faithful way of acting, was defined by its opposite *superstitio,* a kind of conduct that was allegedly based on ignorance, fear, or fraud In these terms, *we* have religion, *they* have superstition. Only rarely has the inherently oppositional character of the notion of "religion" been recognized Thomas Hobbes, for example, observed that the "fear of things invisible is the natural seed of that, which everyone in himself calleth religion, and in them that worship or fear that power otherwise than they do, superstition" (69) Baseball magic, therefore, is not religion. It is a repertoire of superstitious beliefs and practices that stands as the defining opposite of authentic religion From the perspective of the anthropologist who stands outside and observes, baseball magic is clearly something very strange that they do; it is not our religion

Second, by focusing on baseball magic, the author recalls the tension between the individual and society that has characterized academic reflections on the difference between magic and religion Following Emile Durkheim's classic formulation, magic is essentially individualistic and potentially anti-social Unlike religious ritual, which affirms and reinforces the social solidarity of a community, magic manipulates unseen forces in the service of self-interest As Durkheim insisted, there can be no "church of magic." Accordingly, if baseball is magic, there can be no "church of baseball "

Ken Burns intervenes in these theoretical problems by reversing their terms He presents baseball as religion rather than magic and thereby represents the game as an authentic religious affirmation of the traditional continuity, uniformity, and solidarity of American society Adopting a functional definition of religion, Burns documents the ways in which baseball operates like a church by meeting personal needs and reinforcing social integration In fact, his implicit theoretical model of religion seems to be informed by the kind of functional assumptions found in J. Milton Yinger's definition of a universal church as "a religious structure that is relatively successful in supporting the integration of society, while at the same time satisfying, by its pattern of beliefs and observances, many of the personality needs of individuals on all levels of society" (147) Like a church, with its orthodoxy and heresies, its canonical myths and professions of faith, its rites of communion and excommunication, baseball appears in these terms as the functional religion of America

Of course, this account of the church of baseball is positioned in an historical moment of great public disillusionment with the professional game Feeling betrayed by both greedy players and arrogant owners, many devotees have become apostates of the religion of baseball In this context the phrase "church of baseball" shifts from metaphor to irony; it becomes a figure of ironic displacement as collective memory is transformed from commemoration of an enduring tradition to nostalgia for a lost world From this vantage point the continuity and uniformity of baseball tradition, the sacred time and sacred space of the baseball religion, can only be recreated in memory

2. THE FETISH OF COCA-COLA

A very different theoretical model of religion is developed in Mark Pendergrast's *For God, Country, and Coca-Cola* Drawing upon the familiar definition of religion provided by Clifford Geertz, Pendergrast proposes that Coca-Cola is a religion because it is "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions in such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." To his credit, Pendergrast does not force his history of Coca-Cola into the mold of Geertz's definition Rather, he allows the major actors in the drama to evoke their religious moods and motivations in their own voices. Here we need to recall only the most striking examples

From the beginning, the beverage was enveloped in a sacred aura, as its inventor, John Pemberton, referred to one of Coca-Cola's original ingredients, cocaine (which remained in the mix from 1886 until 1902) as "the greatest blessing to the human family, Nature's (God's) best gift in medicine" (27). During the 1890s Coca-Cola emerged as a popular tonic in the soda fountains that a contemporary commentator described as "temples resplendent in crystal marble and silver" (16). Eventually, however, the blessings of Coca-Cola moved out of the temple and into the world

Company executives, advertisers, bottlers, and distributors displayed distinctively religious moods and motivations in relation to the sacred beverage. Asa Candler, the Atlanta entrepreneur who started the Coca-Cola empire, was described by his son as regarding the drink with "an almost mystical faith" (68) Candler eventually "initiated" his son "into the mysteries of the secret flavoring formula" as if he were inducting him into the "Holy of Holies" (61) Robert Woodruff, who became president

of the company in 1923, "demonstrated a devotion to Coca-Cola which approached idolatry" (160). Harrison Jones, the leading bottler of the 1920s, often referred to the beverage as "holy water" (146). Even the bottle itself was a sacred object that could not be changed At a 1936 bottlers convention Harrison Jones declared, "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse may charge over the earth and back again—and Coca-Cola will remain!" (178) Archie Lee, who assumed direction of Coca-Cola advertising in the 1920s, complained that the "doctrines of our churches are meaningless words," but he speculated that "some great thinker may arise with a new religion" (147). Apparently, Archie Lee, along with many other "Coca-Cola men," found that new religion in Coca-Cola.

Throughout the second half of the twentieth century the Coca-Cola religion inspired a missionary fervor. At the first international convention at Atlantic City in 1948 an executive prayed, "May Providence give us the faith . to serve those two billion customers who are only waiting for us to bring our product to them" (238) As advertising director in the early 1950s Delony Sledge proclaimed, "Our work is a religion rather than a business" (261) Obviously, the Coca-Cola Company has imagined its enterprise as a religious mission

For the consumer, however, Coca-Cola has also assumed religious significance It has "entered the lives of more people," as one executive put it, "than any other product or ideology, including the Christian religion" (406) In the jive vocabulary of the 1930s Coca-Cola was known as "heavenly dew" (178) But the religious significance of Coca-Cola extended far beyond the scope of such a playful invocation It gave America its orthodox image of Santa Claus in 1931 by presenting a fat, bearded, jolly old character dressed up in Coca-Cola red, it became the most important icon of the American way of life for U S soldiers during World War II; it represented an extraordinary sacred time—the "pause that refreshes"—that was redeemed from the ordinary post-war routines of work and consumption, and from the 1960s it promised to build a better world in perfect harmony As one indication of the popular religious devotion to the drink, public outcry at the changed formula of "New Coke" in 1985 caused one executive to exclaim, "They talk as if Coca-Cola had just killed God" (364) In these profoundly religious terms, as editor William Allen White observed in 1938, Coca-Cola became a potent symbol of the "sublimated essence of America" (198).

Although the religion of Coca-Cola has pervaded American society, that popular religion has also been global. Represented in over 185 countries, more countries, Pendergrast notes, than are included in the United Nations, the Coca-Cola Company has extended its religion all over the

world As company president Roberto Goizueta put it, "Our success will largely depend on the degree to which we make it impossible for the consumer around the globe to escape Coca-Cola" (397). Suggesting the impossibility of escaping the religion of Coca-Cola, the 1980s film "The Gods Must Be Crazy" presented an absurd parable of its effect among a remote community of Bushmen in southern Africa As Mark Pendergrast notes, the film opens as "the totemic bottle falls out of the sky onto the sands of the Kalahari Desert, where it completely transforms the lives of the innocent Bushmen as surely as Eve's apple in Eden" (406). Here we find Coca-Cola as a sacred sign, a sign subject to local misreading, perhaps, but nevertheless the fetish of a global religion, an icon of the West, a symbol that can mark an initiatory entry into modernity Through massive global exchanges and specific local effects, the religion of Coca-Cola has placed its sacred fetish "within arm's reach of desire" all over the world

"What utter nonsense!," a skeptic might justifiably conclude after reviewing this alleged evidence for the existence of a Coca-Cola religion Coca-Cola is not a religion. It is a consumer product that has been successfully advertised, marketed, and distributed In the best tradition of American advertising, the Coca-Cola Company has created the desire for a product that no one needs Even if it has led to the "Coca-colonization" of the world, this manipulation of desire through effective advertising has nothing to do with religion

In the study of popular culture, however, the religious character of advertising, consumerism, and commodity fetishism has often been noted "That advertising may have become 'the new religion of modern capitalist society,'" Marshall W. Fishwick has recently observed, "has become one of the clichés of our time" (155) [2] Advertising-as-religion has transformed the "fetishism of commodities" into a redundant phrase In the symbolic system of modern capitalist society that is animated by advertising, the commodity is a fetish object

As a model for defining and locating religion, the fetish raises its own theoretical problems As William Pietz has shown in a series of articles, the term "fetish" has focused ongoing controversies in Western culture over what counts as authentic *making.* From the Latin *facere,* "to make or to do," the term has carried the semantic burden of indicating artificial, illicit, or evil making, especially in the production of objects of uncertain meaning or unstable value In this respect, the fetish is not an object, it is a subject for arguments about meaning and value in human relations.

[2] On advertising and consumerism as "religion," see Ewen, Jhally, and Stromberg

As a modern dilemma, the problem of the fetish arises in complex relations of encounter and exchange between "us" and "them " On the one hand, the fetish is something "they" make Recalling the evil making—the *maleficium*—of black magic, Portuguese traders on the west coast of Africa in the seventeenth century found that Africans made *fetissos,* objects beyond rational comprehension or economic evaluation Likewise, for generations of anthropologists the fetish was an object that "they" make, a sign of their "primitive" uncertainty over meaning and inability to evaluate objects On the other hand, Marx, Freud, and their intellectual descendants have found that the fetish is something "we" make—the desired object, the objectification of desire—that is integral to the making of modern subjectivities and social relations (see Apter and Pietz)

Drawing upon this ambivalent genealogy of the fetish in Western culture, Michael Taussig has recently emphasized the importance of "State Fetishism" in both making and masking the rationality and terror of the modern political order This recognition of the role of fetishized making in the production and reinforcement of the state resonates with recent research on the making of those collective subjectivities—the imagined communities, the invented traditions, the political mythologies—that animate the modern world (Anderson, Hobsbawm and Ranger, Thompson) All of these things are made, not found, but they are made in the ways in which only the sacred or society can be produced

Unlike the historical continuity and social solidarity represented by the church, therefore, the fetish provides a model for religion in which religion is inherently unstable As an object of indeterminate meaning and variable value, the fetish represents an unstable center for a shifting constellation of religious symbols Although the fetishized object might inspire religious moods and motivations, it is constantly at risk of being unmasked as something made and therefore as an artificial focus for religious desire The study of religion in popular culture is faced with the challenge of exploring and explicating the ways in which such "artificial" religious constructions can generate genuine enthusiasms and produce real effects in the world

3 THE POTLATCH OF ROCK 'N' ROLL

As if it were not enough to bestow religious status on baseball and Coca-Cola, we now have to confront the possibility that rock 'n' roll should also count as religion Certainly the ambivalent relations between rock and religion have often been noticed As Jay R Howard has observed, "Religion and rock music have long had a love/hate relationship"

(123) On the one hand, rock 'n' roll has occasionally converged with religion. Rock music has sometimes embraced explicitly religious themes, serving as a vehicle for a diversity of religious interests that ranges from Heavy-Metal Satanism to contemporary Christian evangelism (Gross, Seay and Neely) On the other hand, rock 'n' roll has often been the target of Christian crusades against the evils that allegedly threaten religion in American society From this perspective, rock music appears as the antithesis of religion, not merely as an offensive art form but as a blasphemous, sacrilegious, and anti-religious force in society (Larson, Martin and Segrave, Peters, Peters, and Merrill)

Rock's ambivalent relationship with religion is obvious. Less apparent, perhaps, is the inherently religious character of rock 'n' roll. How do we theorize rock 'n' roll as religion? Attempts have been made For example, rock 'n' roll has given rise to "a religion without beliefs" (Shenk and Silberman: ix); it has given scope for the emergence of a new kind of "divinely inspired shaman" (Magistrale), rock has revived nineteenth-century Romantic pantheism (Pattison), rock music, concerts, and videos have provided occasions for what might be called, in Durkheimian terms, "ecstasy ritual" (Harvey), and a new academic discipline—"theomusicology"—has included rock 'n' roll in its mission "to examine secular music for its religiosity" (Spencer 205) From various perspectives, therefore, rock 'n' roll has approximated some of the elementary forms of the religious life

In one of the most sustained and insightful analyses of the religious character of rock 'n' roll Dave Marsh has undertaken a cultural analysis of the archetypal rock song, "Louie, Louie," in order to explore the secret of its meaning, power, and rhythm, the "sacred *duh duh duh duh duh*" (74). Marsh issues a daunting assessment of all previous attempts to address his topic The "academic study of the magic and majesty of *duh duh duh duh duh,*" as Marsh puts it bluntly, "sucks" (77). To avoid this condemnation, we must proceed, not with caution, but with the recklessness that the song requires We must say, with the song's African-American composer Richard Berry, who first recorded "Louie, Louie" as a calypso tune in 1956, "Me gotta go now," and see where that going takes us.

As Dave Marsh follows the sacred rhythm of "Louie, Louie," especially as it was incarnated by the Kingsmen in 1963, he dismisses previous attempts to explain the secret of the song's appeal as the result of effective marketing or as the effect of the intentional mystification that is produced by its unintelligible lyrics.

As an example of the first type of explanation, Marsh cites the commentary of Geoffrey Stokes, who authored the section on the 1960s in

Rock of Ages. The Rolling Stone History of Rock'n'Roll. "It's almost embarrassing to speak of 'significance' in any discussion of 'Louie Louie,'" Stokes claimed, "for the song surely resists learned exegesis" (cited in Marsh 77) Its success can only be attributed to aggressive marketing and efficient distribution.

Illustrating the second type of explanation, Marsh invokes the analysis provided by Robert B. Ray, Professor of Film Studies at the University of Florida, who has earned his rock credentials by serving as songwriter and singer for the band the Vulgar Boatman According to Ray, the Kingsmen rendered "Louie, Louie" in a way that revealed that they had "intuited a classic strategy of all intellectual vanguards the use of tantalizing mystification " Like Lacan and Derrida, for example, the Kingsmen employed terms and phrases that "remained elusive, inchoate, quasi-oral charms" (cited in Marsh 78). The result—alluring but ultimately incoherent—was the strategic production of mystery

In rejecting these economic and rhetorical explanations Marsh advances an analysis of the secret of "Louie, Louie" in explicitly religious terms His analysis uncovers layers of religious significance that are all associated with the gift. Although his discussion is inspired by the dramatic prelude to the instrumental break—"Let's Give It to 'Em, Right Now!"—it is also directly related to the power of giving and receiving in the history of religions

The song might be regarded as if it were a divine gift. As Marsh's colleague Greil Marcus puts it, by the 1980s "the tune was all pervasive, like a law of nature or an act of God" (cited in Marsh 78) Marsh plays upon this theme If the song was a gift from God or the gods, he observes, "he, she, or they chose a vehicle cut from strange cloth, indeed—*deus ex cartoona*" (78) However, the sacred gift of "Louie, Louie," the hierophany of incoherence, three chords, and a cloud of dust, cannot be accounted for in the conventional terms of any orthodox theology. Accordingly, Marsh turns to a passage in the gnostic Gospel of Thomas that seems to capture the "holy heartbeat" of "Louie, Louie "

> Jesus said, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you "

Bringing forth all that is within them, the gnostic celebrants of "Louie, Louie" are saved, if not "eternally," as Marsh clarifies, then at least temporarily during the liberating moment in which they participate in the rhythm of the "sacred *duh duh duh duh duh*" and the "magical incantation" of "Let's Give It to 'Em, Right Now!" (73-74).

Ultimately, however, the religious significance of the gift must be located in relations of exchange. Here a Native American ritual—the potlatch—provides a model for giving and receiving in which the gift assumes a sacred aura. From a Chinook term meaning simply "to give," the potlatch practiced by indigenous communities of the Pacific Northwest signifies the ritualized display, distribution, and sometimes destruction of valued objects at ceremonial occasions (see Vertovec).

Although potlatch has variously been interpreted in the ethnographic literature as religious ritual, as status competition, as a kind of banking system, or even as a periodic outburst of "unabashed megalomania," Marsh focuses on three aspects. First, the gift is total. The potlatch demands giving "everything you had: your food, your clothing, your house, your name, your rank and title." As a ritual occasion for giving everything away, the potlatch demonstrates an "insane exuberance of generosity." Second, the gift is competitive. In ritual relations of exchange, tribes compete with each other to move to the "next higher plane of value." Third, the sacred secret of the gift is ultimately revealed in destruction. As the ritualized exchanges of ceremonial gift-giving escalate in value, the supreme value of the gift is realized by destroying valued objects, so that, as Marsh concludes, "eventually a whole village might be burned to the ground in order that the rules of the ceremony could be properly honored" (79-80).

By odd coincidence, the Pacific Northwest was home to both the Native American societies that performed the potlatch and the rock 'n' roll bands of the early 1960s that played the song "Louie, Louie." In Marsh's account both demonstrate the religious "Secret" of the gift, especially as it was revealed in acts of conspicuous destruction, in ritual acts that "violated every moral and legal tenet of non-Native American civilization, encumbered as it was with the even stranger socioreligious assumption that God most honored men by allowing them to accumulate possessions beyond all utility in this life, let alone the next" (80). In these "socioreligious" terms the "modern day electronic potlatch" of rock 'n' roll violates Euroamerican religious commitments to capitalist production and accumulation, to property rights and propriety, by reviving the sacred secret of the gift.

In defense of the capitalist order J. Edgar Hoover's FBI pursued a four-year investigation of "Louie, Louie" during the 1960s in search of evidence of subversion and obscenity in the song and its performers. As Marsh recalls, Hoover's mission "consisted precisely of visiting the plague of federal surveillance upon any revival of the potlatch mentality" (80). But

"Louie, Louie" survived this state-sponsored inquisition Defying all attempts to suppress it, the song remains the archetype of the sacred gift at the religious heart of the potlatch of rock 'n' roll

"What utter, absolute, and perverse nonsense!," anyone might conclude after being subjected to this tortuous exposition of the religion of rock music Rock 'n' roll is not religion Besides the obvious fact that it is a major part of the entertainment industry, rock 'n' roll is a cultural medium in which all the "anarchistic, nihilistic impulses of perverse modernism have been grafted onto popular music " As a result, it is not a religion, it is a "cult of obscenity, brutality, and sonic abuse" (Bayles 12).

The model of the potlatch, however, refocuses the definition of religion. As exemplified most clearly by rituals of giving and receiving, religion is a repertoire of cultural practices and performances, of human relations and exchanges, in which people conduct symbolic negotiations over material objects and material negotiations over sacred symbols If this theoretical model of religion as symbolic, material practice seems to blur the boundaries separating religious, social, and economic activity, then that is a function of the gift itself, which, as Marcel Mauss insists in his classic treatment, is a "total" social phenomenon in which "all kinds of institutions find simultaneous expression religious, legal, moral, and economic" (1) According to Mauss, the potlatch, as ritual event, social contest, and economic exchange, displays the complex symbolic and material interests that are inevitably interwoven in religion Similar interests, as Dave Marsh and Greil Marcus argue, can be located in rock 'n' roll.

In the performance of the potlatch, Mauss observes, the contested nature of symbolic and material negotiations becomes particularly apparent, the "agonistic character of the prestation," he notes, "is pronounced" (4) If contests over the ownership of sacred symbols characterize the potlatch, what is the contest that is conducted in the potlatch of rock 'n' roll? It is not merely the competition among musical groups, a competition waged in the "battle of the bands" that Marsh identifies as an important element of the history of "Louie, Louie " It is a contest with a distinctively religious character In broad agreement with rock critics Marsh and Marcus, anthropologist Victor Turner proposes that rock 'n' roll is engaged in a contest over something as basic as what it means to be a human being in a human society "Rock is clearly a cultural expression and instrumentality of that style of communitas," Turner suggests, "which has arisen as the antithesis of the 'square,' 'organization man' type of bureaucratic social structure of mid-twentieth-century America" (262) By this account, rock 'n' roll, as anti-structure to the dominant American social structure,

achieves the human solidarity, mutuality, and spontaneity that Turner captures in the term *communitas* It happens in religious ritual; it happens in rock 'n' roll

This "agonistic character" of the potlatch of rock 'n' roll, however, is not only evident in America. As Greil Marcus has proposed, the potlatch might unlock the "secret history of the twentieth century" Tracking a disconnected narrative that links dada, surrealism, litterists, situationists, and performance art, Marcus rewrites the cultural history of the twentieth century from the vantage point of the punk rock that was epitomized in 1976 by the Sex Pistols Surprisingly, perhaps, that revised history depends heavily upon a sociology of religion that is implicitly rooted in the foundational work of Emile Durkheim and extended by Marcel Mauss's seminal essay on the gift, but it is a left-hand sociology of religion that takes an unexpected turn through the world of the French social critic, surrealist, and student of religion, Georges Bataille

In his 1933 essay, "The Notion of Expenditure," Bataille takes up the topic of the potlatch to draw a distinction between two kinds of economic activity, production and expenditure. While production represents "the minimum necessary for the continuation of life," expenditure is premised on excess and extravagance, on loss and destruction, or, in a word, on the gift This alternative range of economic activity "is represented by so-called unproductive expenditures. luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (i e , deflected from genital finality)—all these represent activities which, at least in primitive circumstances, have no end beyond themselves" (118). While productive economic activity is directed towards goals of subsistence, gain, and accumulation, expenditure is devoted to achieving dramatic, spectacular loss In expenditure, according to Bataille, "the accent is placed on a loss that must be as great as possible in order for the activity to take on its true meaning" (118) In the performance of the potlatch, especially when gift-giving escalates to the destruction of property, Bataille finds a model of expenditure that informs his entire theory of religion

As exemplified by the potlatch, religion intersects with rock 'n' roll because they are both cultural practices of expenditure. The gift, as in "Let's Give It To 'Em, Right Now," reopens the complex ritual negotiations over meaning and power, over place and position, over contested issues of value in modern American society In that context, religion in American popular culture is not a church; nor is it a symbolic system revolving around a fetish Beyond the constraints of any institution or the play of any desire, religion is defined as religion by the practices, performances,

relations, and exchanges that rise and fall and rise again through the ritualized giving and receiving of the gift.

4. RELIGION IN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE

So now where are we? After this long journey through the religious contours and contents of baseball, Coca-Cola, and rock 'n' roll, we are still left with the question Where is religion in American popular culture? How do we answer that question? Where do we look? If we only relied upon the standard academic definitions of religion, those definitions that have tried to identify the essence of religion, we would certainly be informed by the wisdom of classic scholarship, but we would also still be lost.

In the history of the academic study of religion religion has been defined, following the minimal definition of religion proposed in the 1870s by E B Tylor, as beliefs and practices relating to spiritual, supernatural, or superhuman beings (Tylor I,424) This approach to defining religion continues to find its advocates The assumption that religion is about beliefs in supernatural beings also appears in the discourse of popular culture For example, the extraordinary athlete can easily become the focus of religion to the extent that he or she is regarded as a superhuman being When Michael Jordan returned to basketball in 1995, his "second coming" was portrayed in precisely these superhuman terms "When it is perceived as religion," Jordan complained, "that's when I'm embarrassed by it " While *Sports Illustrated* recorded Michael Jordan's embarrassment at being regarded as the superhuman focus of religious regard, it also added that this reservation was expressed by "the holy Bull himself" about "the attention his second coming has attracted " Adding to the embarrassment, the same article quoted Brad Riggert, head of merchandising at Chicago's United Center, who celebrated the return of Michael Jordan by declaring, "The god of merchandising broke all our records for sales" (92) In this case, therefore, Michael Jordan—the "holy Bull," the "god of merchandising"—registers as a superhuman being that should satisfy Tylor's minimal definition of religion

In a second classic attempt to define religion Emile Durkheim in 1912 stipulated that religion was constituted by beliefs and practices that revolve around a sacred focus, a sacred focus that serves to unify a community (Durkheim· 62) In this approach to defining religion, which also continues to have its proponents, religion depends upon beliefs and practices that identify and maintain a distinction between the sacred and its opposite, the profane That distinction between the sacred and the profane

has also appeared in the discourse of American popular culture. For example, during the long and difficult development of a crucial new software product, Microsoft hired a project manager who undertook the task with religious conviction According to the unofficial historian of this project, that manager "divided the world into Us and Them This opposition echoed the profound distinction between sacred and profane We are clean; they are dirty We are the chosen people; they are the scorned We will succeed, they will fail" (Zachary 281). According to this account, therefore, the cutting edge of religion—the radical rift between the sacred and the profane—appears at the cutting edge of American technology.

Like church, fetish, and potlatch, these classic definitions of religion—belief in supernatural beings, the distinction between sacred and profane—are at play in American culture As a result, religion is revealed, once again, not only as a cluster concept or a fuzzy set but also as a figure of speech that is subject to journalistic license, rhetorical excess, and intellectual sleight of hand [3] For the study of religion, however, this realization bears an important lesson The entire history of academic effort in defining religion has been subject to precisely such vagaries of metaphorical play

As I argue in detail elsewhere, the study of religion and religious diversity can be seen to have originated in the surprising discovery by Europeans of people who have no religion. During the eras of exploration and colonization Europeans found indigenous populations all over the world who supposedly lacked any trace of religion Gradually, however, European observers found ways to recognize—by comparison, by analogy, and by metaphoric transference from the familiar to the strange—the religious character of beliefs and practices among people all over the world This discovery did not depend upon intellectual innovations in defining the essence of religion, it depended upon localized European initiatives that extended the familiar metaphors that were already associated with religion, such as the belief in God, rites of worship, or the maintenance of moral order, to the strange beliefs and practices of other human populations (Chidester). In the study of religion in American popular culture, I would suggest, we are confronted with the same theoretical dilemma of mediating between the familiar and the strange.

The theoretical models of religion that we have considered allow some of the strangely religious forms of popular culture—baseball, Coca-Cola, and rock 'n' roll—to become refamiliarized as if they were religion

[3] On the significance of the polythetic categories of "cluster concepts" and "fuzzy sets" for the study of religion, see Poole 428, Smith 50

They allow them to appear as the church, the fetish, and the sacred gift of the ritual potlatch in American popular culture Why not? Why should these cultural forms not be regarded as religion?

The determination of what counts as religion is not the sole preserve of academics The very term "religion" is contested and at stake in the discourses and practices of popular culture Recall, for instance, the disdain expressed by the critic who dismissed rock 'n' roll as a "cult of obscenity, brutality, and sonic abuse " In this formulation the term "cult" signifies the absence of religion "Cult," in this regard, is the opposite of "religion " The usage of the term "cult," however it might be intended, inevitably resonates with the discourse of an extensive and pervasive anti-cult campaign that has endeavored to deny the status of "religion" to a variety of new religious movements by labeling them as entrepreneurial businesses, politically subversive movements, or coercive, mind-controlling, and brainwashing "cults " In that context, if we should ever speak about the "cult" of baseball, Coca-Cola, or rock 'n' roll, we could be certain about one thing We would not be speaking about religion

The very definition of religion, therefore, continues to be contested in American popular culture However, if we look again at the privileged examples that we have considered—baseball, Coca-Cola, and rock 'n' roll—they seem to encompass a wildly diverse but somehow representative range of possibilities for what might count as religion They evoke familiar metaphors—the religious institution of the church, the religious desires attached to the fetish, and the religious exchanges surrounding the sacred gift—that resonate with other discourses, practices, experiences, and social formations that we are prepared to include within the ambit of religion Why do they not count as religion?

In the end, we will need to answer that question By saying "we," however, I refer in this case to all of us who are in one way or another engaged in the professionalized and institutionalized academic study of religion Participants in American popular culture have advanced their own answers As a baseball player, Buck O'Neill certainly had an answer "It's a religion " As a Coca-Cola executive, Delony Sledge definitely had an answer: "Our work is a religion " As a rock 'n' roller, John Lennon had his own distinctive and controversial answer "Christianity will go It will vanish and shrink I needn't argue about that. I'm right and I will be proved right We're more popular than Jesus now" (Bronson: 201) From the church of baseball, through the fetish of Coca-Cola, to the sacred and sanctifying gift-giving of the potlatch of rock 'n' roll, the discourses and practices of popular culture raise problems of definition and analysis for the study of religion In different ways, as I have tried to suggest, these

three terms—church, fetish, and potlatch—signify both the problem of defining religion and the complex presence of religion in American popular culture

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