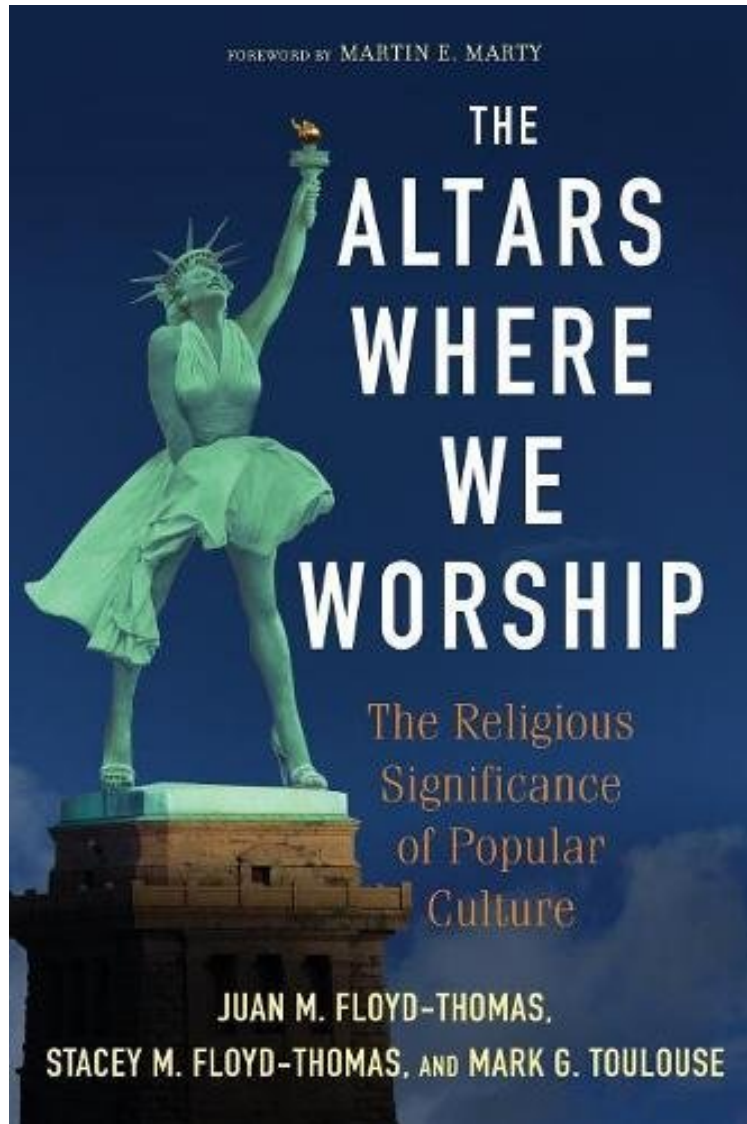


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The Altars Where We Worship: The Religious Significance of Popular Culture

Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, Mark G. Toulouse
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Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, Mark G. Toulouse : The Altars Where We Worship: The Religious Significance of Popular Culture before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Altars Where We Worship: The Religious Significance of Popular Culture:

2 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Pop-Religion Mimicking "The Real Thing"By CustomerThe Altars Where We Worship by Mark G. Toulouse, Juan M. Floyd-Thomas and Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, reviewed by Brian

Arthur Brown New Canadian Mark Toulouse and his Floyd-Thomas Texas colleagues are doing for religion what N.T. Wright and Sarah Coakley are doing for theology these days, establishing the fundamentals to set the context for study of religion (and theology) in our time. I did not know that three people could grasp the profound implications of every detail of *The Game of (Religious) Trivia* as well as the details themselves. This is in a world where almost every societal trend attracts devotion which borders on religious at a time when traditional religions appear to be waning. Of course, the current era may be a watershed moment, in this regard, as the writers claim, but it is far from the first for the church. Indeed, this is but one of many such eras over the centuries, and the authors could be reminded that we have been here before. During the upheavals of the Protestant Reformation, for example, in the fateful year of Luther's 1517 theses, the communion register at Westminster Abbey reports that only 18 adults received Easter Communion, as compared to about 5,000+ in recent years. And even before the religious watershed of the French Revolution, in 1764 Voltaire was writing in the first *Encyclopedie* that children who have never been in a church should visit one for their education, since this may be the last generation in which there is any church in Paris. He was almost right, and Notre Dame itself was soon desecrated and used for other purposes. But today in Paris there are 150 very substantial Roman Catholic churches, innumerable struggling chapels, 43 Protestant and Orthodox churches (all seemingly still dying), 20 mosques and 28 synagogues to count the places of worship in Paris online.

Introduction: The book holds forth the presumption that all things religious are created and perpetuated by humans, a conjecture perhaps applying to these false religions under study (false being a traditional term for them, but perhaps alternative religions would now be preferred). This could be the nub of the issue, since true religions believe themselves to have been revealed or given, rather than made by humans (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Jewish, etc.), and the issue is simply whether traditional religions are right about that or not. Certainly the golden calves of modern or ancient cultures do not create themselves, but to presume that Moses imagined his experience on Sinai is a more substantial question, as with Buddha under the Bodhi tree, Krishna confronting Arjuna in the chariot, or Muhammad surprised and terrified by his experience of revelation on Mt. Hira. It is true that human experiences before these altars contain religious characteristics in common with experiences before more traditional altars. This is true of all examples in the book, and the illustrations are very helpful in understanding our culture and the need of its people for something very much like religion. As the book says, the false (or alternative) religions naturally connect with our human desire to locate the religious impulse in something we perceive to be greater than ourselves.

Body and Sex: Centred on the sad story of Marilyn Monroe, this is perhaps least valuable of five good chapters, except that it establishes a format for what follows. It is a given that our society is sex-crazed but here we begin to appreciate the religious dimension of the pursuit of physical gratification.

Big Business: My favorite chapter only because of my close association with John Kenneth Galbraith (heir to John Maynard Keynes), when he was ill and sometimes wished he had not wasted his life on economics, when he could have become a Presbyterian minister.

Entertainment: Brilliant in presenting Walt Disney and the ability of the media to fascinate. This chapter touches on Rudolph Otto where the numinosity of a traditional God as dwelling in *mysterium tremendum* is acknowledged. Whether traditional religion is still et fascians or not is up in the air for now, at least until the vacuous nature of false religions becomes apparent to those who create and perpetuate them as religions.

Politics: The American political system brings the thesis of the book into high relief at present, though things may yet turn out to work well as the system deals with a new government. Time will tell if the new president can Trump the system. The other five categories should be tested as well they may be similarly verging on inadequacy. The one aspect I thought was missing here is a reference to the pilgrimages to presidential libraries which are designed to be quite moving.

Sports: this is where I thought the writers succeeded best in affirming that human experiences before these altars contain religious characteristics in common with experiences before more traditional altars. The sentence which leapt out at me was the experience can produce a high, a sense of radical transcendence, of feeling as if one has reached another plane of existence. The point is that this is just like religion, and religion is like that in Orthodox, Catholic and Pentecostal services, where people experience God rather than just hear about God. The protestant mainstream, represented by these writers, which is right about many other things, has a problem in this particular area at present. The Pentecostal movement has moved forward into that gap for many well-educated young adults and others, but sex, money, entertainment, politics, sports and technology are giving chase to the mainstream, as documented here.

Science and Technology: Marshall McLuhan predicted the World Wide Web (and named it) at the University of Toronto thirty years before it was invented. He was also good at the question of What happens when humans bite the apple or build the tower. I believe we are compelled to do these things for reasons best explained by Karl Jung in his explanation of the meaning of the doctrine of original sin. In this chapter I especially appreciated the reference to *i-this* and *i-that*, possibly eclipsing *I-Thou* at the moment. In my opinion, this book correctly explicates the nature of altars and temples where many people do now worship. It could have perhaps done more about where those needs could be more truly fulfilled, but that could be the next volume. Mark Toulouse, with Juan and Stacy Flood-Thomas have done us a great service. The book is good reading for all interested in the seemingly changing place of religion in the public sphere. It should be required reading in seminary and university courses in the newer discipline of Public Theology.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Where do we find ultimate satisfaction? By Paul Mastin

Observers of religious life in the United States have long noted the decline of

religious commitment. Church attendance and professions of faith, while still substantial, have declined precipitously for a couple of generations. But as Juan Floyd-Thomas, Stacey Floyd-Thomas, and Mark Toulouse write in *The Altars Where We Worship: The Religious Significance of Popular Culture*, what we observe is not so much a decline in religion but a redirection of our religious affections. They write, "decreasing numbers at the altars of organized religion has not meant the cessation of worship." Following Paul Tillich, they show that religion, as understood as "the 'ultimate concern' of a person," is expressed through culture, through those things that give people fulfillment. Reflecting on body and sex, big business, entertainment, politics, sports, and science and technology, the authors demonstrate that, for some people, these expressions of culture have become a replacement for religion. It is important to note that, although they are writing as Christians, they are not writing about Christianity and popular culture, or religion in popular culture. Rather, they describe popular culture as religion. Each chapter describes the rituals, icons, apostles, morality and ethics of popular culture. For example, sports fans have their "cathedrals" where they "worship" on game day. The players and fans have rituals they go through. The rule book provides the guidelines, administered by the priests in black and white stripes. As a college football fan, this hits home with me. During football season, I must be honest, I look forward to attending games more than I look forward to Sunday worship. The enthusiasm with which I sing and worship on Sunday morning pales compared to the exuberance with which I cheer for my team on Saturday afternoon. In a similar way, we find escape through music and film, satisfaction through work and business (and with the "conspicuous consumption" that comes along with it), and communal faith through civil religion. Each of the chapters is thought-provoking and forced me to examine the extent to which I place my "ultimate concern" in these areas. The authors' treatment is descriptive, not prescriptive; their aim is to "suggest a new direction in the study of American religion that would make room for a broader understanding of how religion and religious experiences hidden within American popular culture actually shape the lives of nearly all Americans." In spite of their nonjudgmental academic detachment, readers who identify as Christians and who take seriously a life of discipleship will grapple with the realities that the authors identify. They draw from a variety of academic disciplines as well as from current events as they link fulfillment to culture. If we are honest with ourselves, our professions that we sing on Sunday, that we "surrender all" to Jesus or that "All I need is you, Lord," fall a little flat as we worship through the week at a variety of other altars. For Christians, may our prayer be that our ultimate satisfaction would come from the only one who can ultimately satisfy. Thanks to Edelweiss and the publisher for the complimentary electronic review copy!

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. What are your altars? By Dorough Powerfully convicting for those of us (all of us?) who find ourselves falling into some form of idolatry at one point or another, // *The Altars Where We Worship: The Religious Experience of Popular Culture* // by Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, and Mark G. Toulouse exposes six aspects of American culture as altars and religions. The book's chapters follow these aspects: (1) Body and Sex, (2) Big Business, (3) Entertainment, (4) Politics, (5) Sports, and (6) Science and Technology. Using Ninian Smart's seven dimensions of religion as an outline in // *The Religious Experience of Mankind* //, the authors demonstrate each of the aforementioned by including supporting data for the following: mythology, doctrine, ethics, ritual, experience, institutions, and materiality. The authors write, "Rather than trying to debunk these altars in any fashion, we believe it is important to recognize that these altars naturally connect with our human desire to locate the religious impulse in something we perceive to be greater than ourselves (p.7). Just as the apostle Paul did not deny the perceived existence of many gods (1 Cor 8:5), the authors do not want us to deny that these exist and turn a blind eye to those that pull at us (or have completely taken hold, as the case may be). The authors continue:-----We want to make clear that our approach is not interested in trying to define which religious experiences are true and which are not. In the chapters that follow, we examine six aspects of American culture that function essentially as altars where Americans gather to worship and produce meaning for their lives. At these altars, Americans reconcile themselves to a serviceable God who promises to meet their every desire. By examining the major players, fads, trends, movements, and events associated with each of these altars, each chapter will examine the religious inner workings of the popular cultural phenomenon associated with them. (p.13)-----While their overall approach does not attempt to delineate those experiences as true or not true, the authors certainly make their opinions known when subjects concern their respective theologies. However, regardless of how these are read, it is important to take the book for what it is and as it is intended: describing six aspects of American culture in religious terms. Readers may find themselves convicted by an entire chapter(s), or perhaps just a few tidbits here and there. While it may be easy for some of us to recognize some things as merely practical participation in a thing without a necessary connection to a religious experience, these again should be understood as parts of a whole that support the way each of these greater culture aspects can indeed do very much function as altars and religions. There's a lot of good food for thought here, and I'm sure others will continue to find the same things in other aspects of their respective cultures.*I received a temporary digital copy for review from Westminster John Knox Press via NetGalley.

While a large percentage of Americans claim religious identity, the number of Americans attending traditional worship services has significantly declined in recent decades. Where, then, are Americans finding meaning in their lives, if not in the context of traditional religion? In this provocative study, the authors argue that the objects of our attention have

become our god and fulfilling our desires has become our religion. They examine the religious dimensions of six specific aspects of American culture body and sex, big business, entertainment, politics, sports, and science and technology that function as altars where Americans gather to worship and produce meaning for their lives. The Altars Where We Worship shows how these secular altars provide resources for understanding the self, others, and the world itself. For better or worse, the authors write, we are faced with the reality that human experiences before these altars contain religious characteristics in common with experiences before more traditional altars. Readers will come away with a clearer understanding of what religion is after exploring the thoroughly religious aspects of popular culture in the United States.

"Leaving the safe, stuffy hallways of academia, the Floyd-Thomases and Mark Toulouse, as participant-observers, provide a riveting, rigorous, and reflective analysis of 'worshiping' at one of the seven popular altars of U.S. culture a process they call "altar-ization." Regardless as to which 'secular' altar you bend your knees; this groundbreaking book will raise your consciousness to the meaning of your participation."Miguel A. De La Torre, Professor of Social Ethics and Latino/a Studies, Iliff School of Theology"Americans' search for ultimate meaning is alive and well, although it looks different than it has in the past. The Altars Where We Worship is an intelligent and intriguing exploration into the ways in which Americans are increasingly living in multiple religious worlds at once, where traditional religious altars have been replaced in people's hearts with altars created by popular cultural (e.g., business, entertainment, sex, technology, sports) altars no less demanding and meaning-full."Renita J. Weems, biblical scholar, African Methodist Episcopal minister, and author of Just A Sister Away and Battered Love"This book provides a compelling analysis that expands our understanding of religion by revealing its presence in cultural activities far beyond the traditional confines of churches, mosques, temples, and other sacred spaces. It demonstrates that the intensity of religious devotion is not limited to such traditional locations as churches, temples, mosques, and shrines but actually flourishes in various spheres of our cultural life, such as big business, body and sex, entertainment, sports, politics, and science and technology."Peter J. Paris, Elmer G. Homrighausen Professor Emeritus of Christian Social Ethics, Princeton Theological Seminary"Tillich meets Marx in this sweeping indictment of where Americans really go to find ultimate meaning not to church but to sex, business, entertainment, politics, sports, and science and technology. Rejecting the idea that popular culture is devoid of religion, the authors argue instead that religion in America is deeply and pervasively self-indulgent."Amanda Porterfield, Robert A. Spivey Professor of Religion and Professor of History, Florida State University"What is religion and where does one find it? What are the markers of religiosity exposed through popular culture? These are some of the vital questions addressed by this important text. Those interested in a rich and multilayered analysis of how religion is organized and expressed within the everyday language, symbols, and practices of cultural life will find this text an important contribution to scholarship. It is insightful and a much-needed addition to our understanding of the deep significance of the cultural worlds that hold and express religious belief and practices."Anthony B. Pinn, Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities and Professor of Religion, Rice University

About the Author Juan M. Floyd-Thomas is Associate Professor of African American Religious History at Vanderbilt University Divinity School. He is the author of *Liberating Black Church History: Making It Plain*, among other works. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas is Associate Professor of Ethics and Society at Vanderbilt University Divinity School. She is the author or coeditor of numerous books, including *Beyond the Pale: Reading Ethics from the Margins* and *Beyond the Pale: Reading Theology from the Margins*, both published by Westminster John Knox Press. Mark G. Toulouse is Principal and Professor of the History of Christianity at Emmanuel College of Victoria University in the University of Toronto. He has written and edited numerous books, including *God in Public: Four Ways American Christianity and Public Life Relate*, published by Westminster John Knox Press.