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Citation for the published article:

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"Mainline Churches and Popular Culture: An Introduction to a Special Issue"

*Journal of religion and popular culture*, 2018, Vol. 30, Issue 1: 1-5

URL: <https://doi.org/10.3138/jrpc.2017.0033>

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## Editors' note

### Mainline Churches and Popular Culture: An Introduction to a Special Issue

The study of the intersection of religion and popular culture has grown exponentially in past decades and gradually developed into an independent and increasingly recognized field of study. A constantly growing scholarly literature has now coalesced around the subject, including edited volumes highlighting the diversity of the field (e.g. Forbes and Mahan 2000; Lynch 2007; Mazur and McCarthy 2001; Lyden and Mazur 2015; van Nieuwkerk, LeVine and Stokes 2016; Partridge and Moberg 2017), as well as detailed monographs aimed at developing more cohesive approaches and interpretive frameworks (e.g. Partridge 2004, 2014; Possamai 2005; Lynch 2005; Chidester 2005).

This scholarship has typically been based on a broad and inclusive understanding of culture that strives to avoid binary and hierarchical-typological understandings that differentiate between, for example, "high", "low", "folk", "popular", or "mass" types of culture. Focusing in particular on mass-mediated popular cultural forms such as film, television, popular music, comic books, computer games etc., several studies have highlighted the present-day mass-mediated popular cultural environment as a de-traditionalizing and re-sacralizing force that has developed into an ever more central resource and environment for religious exploration and practice for increasing numbers of people today (e.g. Partridge 2004; Hoover 2006).

Following these developments, the realm of popular culture has become central to an adequate understanding of contemporary transformations in the religious field as a whole. Since its beginnings, a notable part of the study of religion and popular culture has focused on the appropriation of various forms of popular culture by religious groups. The bulk of all previous work in this area has focused on evangelical communities and/or some aspect of the so-called evangelical popular culture industry, especially in a North American context (e.g. Howard and Streck 1999; Hendershot 2004; Luhr 2009; Woods 2013). This is not surprising considering how North American evangelical communities have long been at the forefront of Christian engagements with popular culture – a trend that has been continued by Pentecostal and Charismatic churches in the Global South. But the impact of the present-day mass-mediated popular cultural environment has also become increasingly visible in traditional and institutional "mainline" Christian church settings. Following the general long-term decline of institutional mainline Christianity across the Western world and the gradual erosion of traditional structures and mechanisms of religious socialization, many mainline Christian churches now find themselves gazing towards the realm of popular culture as a possible avenue through which to remain culturally relevant and to reconnect with younger age groups.

Currently ongoing transformations in the general character of institutional mainline Christianity have, however, only received a limited amount of scholarly attention. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to say that the scholarship on contemporary Christianity in the West on the whole has directed a disproportionate amount of attention at various types of non-, cross-, or "post"-denominational evangelical, Pentecostal, and charismatic communities at the expense of a more sustained focus on the changing character of long-established institutional mainline churches (e.g. Wuthnow and Evans 2002, 2; Stausberg 2008, 314; Coffman 2013, 4). This tendency has been even more pronounced when it comes to the scholarship on Christian communities' various engagements with popular culture.

This special issue is motivated by a desire to counter this trend. It is grounded in the firm contention that an adequate understanding of currently ongoing transformations in mainline Christian religious life and practice in the West is contingent upon an open recognition of the ways in which the survival and persistence of mainline churches has become ever more closely “related to their ability to generate subcultural worlds of media and popular culture through which adherents feel part of a wider collective, learn and maintain particular sensory and aesthetic regimes for encountering their vision of the sacred, and find reinforcement for particular ways of seeing and acting in the world” (Lynch 2010, 552). The impact of popular culture on contemporary mainline Christian life and practice constitutes a highly notable, but thus far largely overlooked, facet of contemporary institutional religious change that raises important theoretical questions that render many of the conventional sociological ways of approaching and studying institutional religious change problematic. For example, in order to reach an adequate understanding of the contemporary religious orientations and sensibilities of younger age groups, analyses based on conventional sociological indicators such as frequency of attendance at religious services or adherence to doctrine and beliefs need to be complemented by analyses of how popular culture is implicated in changing modes of religious literacy and mechanisms of religious socialization. While these issues have been explored in a handful of previous studies (e.g. Budde 1998; Pfadenhauer 2010; Dueck 2013), they still warrant more attention. This special issue consists of five original contributions on institutional mainline church engagements with popular culture in four different countries: the United States, Germany, Greece, and Finland.

In this special issue, the meaning of the term “mainline” is significantly expanded beyond its traditional usage of denoting the long-established institutional so-called “Seven Sisters” of Protestant churches in the United States (e.g. Lantzer 2012). Here, the term “mainline” is instead used to denote a much broader spectrum of long-established, traditional, and institutional churches that, to varying degrees, display most or all of the following characteristics: (1) they have long histories and have all been varyingly shaped by historical experience; (2) they display high degrees of institutionalization and bureaucratization and tend to be organized according to a territorial parish model; (3) they retain various types of close, both historic and contemporary, structural relationships to particular nation states and national social establishments; (4) they are characterized by an increasing general openness to liberal, modernist, and progressive theologies; and (5) they put less emphasis on proselytization in favor of an increasing emphasis on social issues, civic engagement, and egalitarianism (cf. Moberg 2017, 13). This expanded understanding of the mainline is thus not bound to particular national contexts and deliberately excludes independent Christian churches of a cross- or “post”-denominational character (i.e. independent evangelical, Pentecostal and Charismatic congregations), which have already received extensive scholarly treatment when it comes to their engagement with various forms of popular culture and new media (e.g. Woods 2013).

These types of mainline churches have come to share some largely similar experiences of general processes of religious change. For many, this has largely been an experience of continued, and in many cases accelerating, general decline and gradual loss of social and cultural influence. As a consequence of these developments, the discourse of many mainline churches has increasingly become marked by a general language of crisis, survival, and need for thoroughgoing structural and organizational change (cf. Moberg 2017, 13). As part of their efforts to remain culturally relevant, however, there appears to have emerged a growing appreciation within many mainline churches of how different areas of popular

culture have developed into important vehicles for the expression and articulation of more specific outlooks on life, attitudes, identities, values, ideologies, political views, and lifestyles.

Such developments have been thoroughly documented in the case of the German Catholic and Evangelical “peoples’ churches” (e.g. Pollack 2003). While in 1950 around 95 percent of the population were members of either the Catholic or the Evangelical church, membership rates have gradually declined reaching around 56 percent in 2015. About half of these belong to the Catholic, the other half to the Evangelical church. Attendance rates are significantly lower, reaching well below 10 percent. Following these developments, both churches have deepened their engagements with popular culture as part of broader efforts to re-connect with younger age groups.

Jens Schlamelcher provides a historical account of the strenuous relationship between the German peoples’ churches and popular culture in the postwar era, arguing that the onset of institutional church decline largely coincided with the emergence and spread of mass-mediated “late modern popular culture” from the 1950s onward. Schlamelcher thus poses more general questions about the correlation between the rise of popular culture and the decline of the mainline churches in Germany.

Martin Radermacher, in his turn, focuses on the relationship between the German mainline churches and the world of sports. The article outlines how the churches have become ever more willing to interact and cooperate with the world of sports since the 1950s despite reservations as to its ‘un-Christian’ values. The article accounts for how this interaction has involved continuous re-negotiations of traditional Christian positions with regard to the body and its activation in and through sports.

The article by Marcus Moberg takes us to a Nordic context through its exploration of the appropriation of popular music styles in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF). Mirroring developments in the Nordic Lutheran majority churches more broadly, membership in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland has been progressively declining for a longer period of time (from 85.4 percent of the population in 1996 to 71.9 percent of the population in 2016). The article accounts for how the ELCF, following intensifying efforts to stem further decline and to appeal more to younger people, has introduced new divine service formats that substitute traditional church music with various popular music styles. The article also explores the reception of these service formats among attendees themselves in light of the results of a large-scale survey.

Maren Freudenberg’s article takes us to the context of the United States and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). The US traditional mainline has been in a state of perpetual, and indeed accelerating, decline ever since the mid-1960s. In 2014, Pew Research Center’s *Religious Landscape Study* documented a decrease in mainline membership from 18.1 percent of the adult population of the United States in 2007 to 14.7 percent in 2014. The study also revealed that the numbers of people who self-identified as members of ELCA had dropped to approximately 2.1 percent of the adult population of the United States, as compared to 2.8 percent in 2007. Focusing on the House for All Sinners and Saints, a congregation in Denver, Colorado, the article highlights the deliberate use of popular culture as a means to unite a variety of people in religious community and encourage inclusivity, self-examination, and social engagement.

Lastly, the article by Jakob Löfgren takes us to Greece – an altogether different context when it comes to the present-day interplay between mainline churches and popular culture. In contrast to the Western European and US mainline churches, the Orthodox Church of Greece remains deeply structurally connected to the state and closely connected to Greek national identity, representing approximately 90 percent of the Greek population (Pew

Research Center 2015). Focusing on popular toy franchise co-options of the Orthodox Easter liturgy candle (the lambatha), the article provides a rare glimpse into the contemporary interplay between popular culture and mainline church practice in a Greek Orthodox context.

The contributions to this special issue attest to the diversity of ways in which mainline churches have come to engage with the present-day popular cultural environment. It is our hope that they will inspire further research and debate in this emerging field of research.

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