

SERIOUS TIMES

MAKING YOUR LIFE MATTER IN AN URGENT DAY

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The Celebrification of Culture

One of the more telling cultural shifts of the last seventy-five years has been what some are calling the “celebrification” of culture – an awkward term, perhaps, but like “industrialization” and “bureaucratization,” it speaks to a broad and historical trend: the increasing centrality of celebrities to the culture. Movie and television stars, professional athletes and musicians, business moguls and journalists, have captured our attention as never before.

Daniel J. Boorstin, in his seminal study *The Image*, suggested that the celebrity is a person who is “well-known for his well-knownness” (or as his quip is often paraphrased, “a celebrity is someone famous for being famous.”). The celebrity is, writes Boorstin, the “human pseudo-event” (think Paris Hilton). This is vastly different than the “hero,” who used to fill the role of the modern celebrity. “The hero was distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark,” writes Boorstin. “The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero was a big man; the celebrity is a big name.”

Yet now the *celebrity* is the hero. Joseph Epstein writes that “a received opinion about America in the early twenty-first century is that our culture values only two things: money and celebrity.” From this, celebrities have become our cultural commentators, charity spokespersons, role models, and political candidates. They have become the arbiters of taste, morality and public opinion. We live in the “Age of Celebrity,” notes Darrell West of Brown University, where “Movie stars run for elective office and win. Politicians play fictional characters on television shows. Rock stars raise money for political parties. Musicians, athletes, and artists speak out on issues of hunger, stem cell research, and foreign policy.”

The danger, West notes, is when the press pays closer attention to celebrities speaking out on complex policy subjects than to experts with detailed knowledge, “politics will be drained of

substance, and serious deliberation will be diminished." Yet the media pays attention to celebrities for a simple reason: *we do*. 2.3 million people are buying *The National Enquirer* on any given week. Another 3.5 million are tuning in to watch *Inside Edition*. As Richard Schickel, who has written for Time magazine since 1972, reflects, "No issue or idea in our culture can gain any traction with the general population unless it has celebrity names attached to it."

Perhaps John Lennon was more prescient than we knew when he remarked that the Beatles were more famous than Jesus Christ. To be sure, the new role of celebrity is not without its religious implications. There can be little doubt that many are turning to celebrities to fill a spiritual void. Murray Milner, Jr., Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Virginia, observes the following parallels: Celebrities, like religious leaders, are usually very charismatic; religious language and concepts are often invoked by fans who say they "worship" or "idolize" celebrities who they describe as "gods" or "goddesses"; tourists attending a celebrity event in Hollywood are in many ways similar to religious pilgrims at a holy site; and the responses of fans at, say, a rock concert are in many ways comparable to devotee's behaviors at "spirit-filled" religious events. When this is coupled with a celebrity actively *promoting* a particular religion (not simply filling a generic religious role), the influence is staggering. Potentially positive? Yes. But for every Mel Gibson, there is a Tom Cruise. In our day, it would be more accurate to say that for every one Mel Gibson, there are ten Tom Cruises.

Our devotion to celebrity does not end with celebrities themselves, but to become celebrities *ourselves*. In many ways, this is the real force behind "reality television" – individuals who will do anything for their fifteen minutes of fame. A CNN/Time poll conducted in June of 2000 found that 31 percent of all respondents would be willing to allow a reality show to film them in their pajamas, 29 percent kissing, 26 percent crying, 25 percent having an argument with someone, 16 percent drunk, 10 percent eating a rat or insect, 8 percent naked, and 5 percent having sex. An article in the Dallas Morning News, titled "Living in a People Magazine Culture," noted that reality-TV stars "are like lottery winners, ordinary people spontaneously made extraordinary."

Christians are not immune to celebrity culture. Some Christians seem to look to Bono as much as Bonhoeffer. Yet influence from a Christian celebrity is only as helpful as the integrity of that celebrity's faith. The most ubiquitous star of the moment, Jessica Simpson, was raised by a Baptist minister father and got her start on the Christian music circuit, initially attracting legions of Christian fans. She now says that she rarely goes to church or reads the Bible anymore. "Me and my family got out of that and came to L.A.," she recently commented to a reporter. If you've seen her latest music video, you believe her. Sadly, many young Christian girls have also seen the video, and don't know what to believe.

The celebrification of culture reflects the deeper needs and longings for that which is transcendent. We are spiritual creatures, and divorced from a relationship with a living God we will search for *something* spiritual – no matter how passing or trivial – to attempt to satiate our spiritual cravings. Sadly, our culture has reached the point where we are turning to celebrities to fill our spiritual desire. This will not end anytime soon, for celebrities themselves revel in not only the attention, but the influence. When Johnny Damon of the Boston Red Sox was compared to Jesus, he replied, "What more can you ask for? Even being mentioned in the same sentence as Jesus or God...I mean, those guys are awesome."

Sources

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