**Culture, Entertainment, and Religion in America**

**Summary**

Throughout American history, religion and entertainment have influenced each other and have intersected in fascinating ways. Native American rituals and games entertained and inspired. Early white settlers like the Puritans, though defining their faith over and against profane pastimes, engaged in sport, play, and elaborate storytelling. Still, stark contrasts appeared in the 17th and 18th centuries when it came to how Catholics and Protestants in the New World thought of the theater, music, and performance. The evangelical surge in the 18th century brought with it a lively and riveting preaching style—represented by celebrity ministers like George Whitfield and Gilbert Tennent—that faced the ire of their more traditional foes for using “vulgar” methods to reach the masses. In the 19th century, African Americans, in slavery and freedom, expressed their faith in ways that combined religious systems, dancing, and music traditions from Africa and the Americas. Evangelical churches and prominent figures used entertainment to proselytize, illustrate the drama of salvation and damnation, and to enliven services. Temperance, anti-slavery, and other reformist groups employed music, novels, and theater to spread their earnest message. Pentecostals and other evangelicals took up new forms in the 20th century. They eagerly made use of radio, film, and later, television. The well-known evangelist Billy Graham was a skillful pioneer of new media. In the 20th century, Hollywood films drew on Jewish and Catholic themes, as Jewish and Catholic writers, directors, and actors put their stamp on the silver screen. Late 20th and early 21st century combinations of religion and entertainment included Muslim rap music, Christian rock, Jewish folk music, and much more. A great deal of this innovation coincided with the rise of the performance-driven megachurch and the proliferation of religious organizations that catered to athletes and drew on sports imagery and symbols for the cause. In the long sweep of American history, the devout have found new, elaborate ways to draw on popular culture and to entertain as well as enlighten the faithful.

**Keywords**

Christian rock, drama, entertainment, film, music, performance, popular culture, preaching, radio, sports, television, theater

**Religion and Entertainment in American History**

The average woman or man on the street might not automatically associate religion and entertainment. The latter might seem to be secular by design or default. The former lends itself to words like *sacred*, *holy*, *worship*, *ritual*, and maybe even *humorless*. America’s arch-gadfly, H. L. Mencken may have best expressed this thinking with his witticism about Anglo-America’s founding faith. “Puritanism,” he quipped, could be summed up as “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Similar critics over the ages have acknowledged that religion pairs with entertainment only in the most sordid or crass fashion. A variety of examples come to mind: the televangelist as electronic huckster; the flashy, vacuous self-help guru; Jim Bakker selling buckets of food for the impending apocalypse on cable TV as gospel songs play in the background; or the kitschy torch songs of 1980s evangelical soft rock groups. In this sense, in 2015 the *Washington Post*, reported on the antics of late night satirist John Oliver.[[2]](#endnote-2) The British comedian dubbed himself “Megareverend” and “CEO of Our Lady of Perpetual Exemption.” He established his ostentatious church “to test the legal and financial limits of what religious entities are able to do.” It is not surprising that so many Americans seem to think that the mix of religion and entertainment comes off as a lamentable, gaudy baptizing of P. T. Barnum.

Of course, Mencken was making a rhetorical point. John Oliver was scoring an important political point. But amusement and religiosity were not mutually exclusive. Likewise, religious entertainment is not always flim-flam or fraud. Religious communities and believers of many faiths enjoyed diversions, large outdoor revivals, spirited music, and more direct forms of entertainment. American Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Native Americans, Protestants, and many others have long embraced entertainment and even pop culture, or found ways to reach external and even international audiences. In 2011, the *New York Times* reported on the Islamic American hip-hop group Native Deen. “Some more famous Muslim rappers, like Mos Def and Lupe Fiasco, are open about their religion,” the paper noticed, “but do not make it a main focus of their art. Native Deen, by contrast, writes conspicuously Muslim lyrics. As a result, said Mr. Salaam, who joined us late at the bakery, the group’s music is particularly popular among youth from observant families.”[[3]](#endnote-3) In the previous one hundred years, evangelicals and Pentecostals made similar use of pop music, as well as film, radio, and large-scale, heavily promoted revivals. Church bazaars, fairs, church picnics, fundraising suppers, dramatic performances, evangelical and Catholic feature films, and similar diversions were regular features in the 19th and 20th centuries.

**Defining Entertainment**

Such examples abound all through American history. Yet before delving into the rich history on the intertwining of religion and entertainment, it will help to set out some of the parameters. What do we mean by “entertainment” when it comes to American religious history and culture? Like the terms “pop culture” or “mass culture,” entertainment can seem quite nebulous. John Storey, the British cultural studies scholar, and some others have pointed to one standard definition of pop culture as “the culture which is left over after we have decided what is high culture.” This usually indicates “inferior culture.”[[4]](#endnote-4) But entertainment can be of the “high” or “low” variety. An organ recital in an Episcopal church in New York City or a bebop jazz concert in a Berkeley, California, Catholic church will look rather different from a low-budget fundamentalist TV puppet show or a performance of the martial arts and strongman evangelism of the Power Team. But whether high or low, these can be under the same broad, general entertainment category.

In addition, entertainment can take on a more private, individual form, or a more public, mass form. An individual who watched a gospel music show on television in the 1970s (Figure 1) undeniably would have had a different experience from someone who attended a large-scale Billy Graham rally and enjoyed the music evangelism on hand. Similarly, a man or woman who read a temperance novel in his or her parlor in the 1870s would have had a rather different experience than someone who attended a temperance-themed play in Boston or New York City. For instance, sociologist Richard Sennett notes that “By the end of the 17th Century, the opposition of ‘public’ and ‘private’ was shaded more like the way the terms are now used. ‘Public’ meant open to the scrutiny of anyone, whereas ‘private’ meant a sheltered region of life defined by one’s family and friends.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Entertainment and amusement, as laid out in this entry, can indicate both public and private experiences.

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Shay Sayre and Cynthia King define *entertainment* broadly, as “a constructed product designed to stimulate a mass audience in an agreeable way in exchange for money.” They note that it can also be a “live or mediated experience that has been intentionally created, capitalized, promoted, maintained, and evolved.” In addition, it is typically “attractive, stimulating, sensory, emotional, social and more to a mass audience.”[[6]](#endnote-6) It might come in the form of a service, an experience, or a product, they write. Entertainment, for the purposes of this entry, takes on a much richer and a more extensive character in the modern era (Figure 2). Improved work efficiencies, mechanization, and other technological and social trends made both leisure time and entertainment options more varied. For example, historians Carol Berkin, Christopher Miller, Robert Cherny, and James Gormly observe that, at the turn of the 20th century, “changes in transportation (the railroads) and communication (telegraph and telephone) combined with increased leisure time among the middle class and some skilled workers to foster new forms of entertainment.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

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**Pre-Columbian Developments and Native Americans**

But even in the decades and centuries before the rise of mass communication, advances in travel and household technologies, or the widespread increase in leisure activities, religious practice intersected with what we might tentatively call amusement or entertainment. Native Americans had developed a range of rituals, games, and performances that fit the pattern long before Christopher Columbus landed in the Bahamas in 1492. Many lively and complex rituals, ceremonies, songs, and performances continued long after European conquest and settlement. Others died out as small pox and other deadly diseases decimated native populations. The Pueblo Indians of the southwest, for instance, created dance performances—featuring clowns, masks, *kachinas*, and elaborate costumes—that had spiritual and entertainment value for the community.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Sports and games, too, were imbued with spiritual meaning for centuries in the Americas. Mayans and Aztecs built stone courts for ball games near to places of worship. The games themselves spoke to the creation story of the sun and the moon. Later, the Choctaws played and watched games of lacrosse with similar reverence. The game was played with deerskin balls and sticks with raccoon-skin nets. Social strife could be worked out through games. Intricate rituals and worship ceremonies took place in the days before matches.[[9]](#endnote-9) In some ways, these traditions still live on today. Anthropologist Kendall Blanchard argues that the importance of Native American sports “goes beyond the playing fields, the courts, the tracks. From Eskimos in the Alaskan north to the Yahgan of Tierra del Feugo, sport has its roots in the very essence of Native American life.” Blanchard frames this in the context of a “playful worldview” that contrasts with “the less playful style of industrial Europe.”[[10]](#endnote-10) In 1637, the Englishman Thomas Morton, an original settler at Mount Wollaston south of Boston, observed the local natives. “They exercise themselves in gaming and playing of jugling trickes,” he wrote, “and all manner of Revelles, which they are delighted in; [so] that it is admirable to behold what pastime they use of severall kindes; every one striving to surpass each other. After this manner they spend their time.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

**Colonizers and Cultures in Conflict**

The 16th and 17th century arrival of early English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish settlers in North America brought new notions of what constituted entertainment and leisure activity. Catholic feast days could brighten settlers’ otherwise often dreary existence. So, too, could theatrical performances. The French and Spanish colonizers even used performances to assimilate natives to Christianity and teach about their presumed superior culture. Yet, French Jesuits tended to view the revelries of natives as anything but edifying. Missionaries in Canada, for instance, described Indian ceremonies, music, and dance rituals as demonic and degrading. But the French Jesuits, in particular, were set apart from many other colonists for their interest in, and occasional acceptance of, native cultural practices.

Puritan and Separatists settlers in New England, by contrast, rejected the theater and the dramatic arts as devilish diversions. Thomas Morton, something of a free-spirited Anglican, would come under the watchful eye of the Pilgrims and Puritans when his frolics at Merrymount, in modern-day Quincy, Massachusetts, went too far. A Maypole celebration with dancing, along with Morton’s close ties to natives, provoked more stern nearby settlers. Morton was eventually arrested and deported. These events would serve as an inspiration for Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1832 short story *The Maypole of Merry Mount*. “Bright were the days at Merry Mount,” Hawthorne opens his morality tale, “when the Maypole was the banner staff of that gay colony! They who reared it, should their banner be triumphant, were to pour sunshine over New England’s rugged hills, and scatter flower seeds throughout the soil. Jollity and gloom were contending for an empire.” In Hawthorne’s telling, Massachusetts Bay’s Puritan governor, John Endicott, and his “grisly saints” abruptly ended the cheerful celebration (Figure 3). The story explores similar themes of dower, gloomy, and judgmental religion as did his *The Scarlett Letter: A Romance* (1850). “And with his keen sword,” writes Hawthorne, “Endicott assaulted the hallowed Maypole. Nor long did it resist his arm. It groaned with a dismal sound; it showered leaves and rosebuds upon the remorseless enthusiast; and finally, with all its green boughs and ribbons and flowers, symbolic of departed pleasures, down fell the banner staff of Merry Mount. As it sank, tradition says, the evening sky grew darker, and the woods threw forth a more sombre shadow.” In reality, Plymouth’s governor William Bradford claimed to have acted against Merry Mount because of Thomas Morton’s violation of a statute forbidding the sale of firearms to natives.[[12]](#endnote-12)

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Hawthorne’s battle with the region’s tainted past had little to do with exploring historical realities. Yet, it is true that Puritans policed leisure activities and entertainment with absolute force. Christmas, in the eyes of New England Puritans, was anything but a merry and jubilant affair. It reeked of popery and was blatantly anti-Christian, as far as they were concerned. In 1697, Judge Samuel Sewall, of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, recorded in his diary his advice to his children about the troublesome festival. “I took occasion to dehort mine from Christmas-keeping and charged them to forbear,” he wrote. In the 17th century, Puritan colonists caught observing the holiday—with feasts or by refusing to work—received a fine of five shillings.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Puritans, in other aspects of life, encouraged play and some leisure activities. Children’s toys and evidence of games and sports speak to this lighter side. Puritan literature and sermons, as well, could have a playful and entertaining quality. Bruce Daniels, for instance, observes that “As does the popular culture of any society, Puritan writing fused religion, entertainment, moral education, and views of science and history.” The ubiquitous metaphor of pilgrimage, Daniels argues, could include harrowing accounts of journeys and fanciful tales of sin and salvation. Indian captivity narratives, too, were intended to instruct the saints. But these also thrilled, inspired, and entertained readers with shocking accounts of heroism, redemption, and fearful struggle.[[14]](#endnote-14)

**African Slaves and African Survivals**

Like many other colonial settlers, Puritans were often dismissive or hostile to the pleasures and leisure activities of others outside their realm. Likewise, many white colonizers were indifferent to the suffering of other groups, whether Native Americans, Catholics, or slaves. Since 1619, when the first documented shipment of slaves arrived in the Jamestown, Virginia colony, African-Americans had scant opportunities for leisure or the full freedom of religious expression. Slaves, who toiled in the rice paddies of South Carolina, the tobacco plantations of Virginia, or the docks of New York City, lived under incomparable miseries. For the enslaved, notes Ira Berlin, “the notion of a world purged of slavery was simply unimaginable.”[[15]](#endnote-15)

Slaves had few breaks from forced labor and grim realities. A 1713 letter from South Carolina clergy to the London secretary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel observed with dissatisfaction that “There are many planters who, to free themselves from the trouble of feeding and clothing their slaves allow them one day in the week to clear ground, and plant for themselves as much as will clothe and subsist them and their families.” Some masters gave their slaves Saturday and others Sunday to do so. But certain African religious traditions/cultural survivals persisted, even under these harsh conditions.[[16]](#endnote-16) Religious services with dynamic music, sometimes conducted in secret and away from plantations, persisted across the South, and especially in the 19th century. A dance and singing session called the “ring shout” became a part of black Christian church worship. It featured counterclockwise dancing of participants, call-and-response chants, and rhythm created with sticks, hand clapping or feet stomping. This kind of “stepping” was a common element in Central and West Africa.[[17]](#endnote-17)

**18th-Century Revivals and Preaching**

African-Americans and plainfolk whites found new ways to participate in mass religious movements through revivals that spread through the colonies in the 1730s and 1740s, and then again in the early 19th century. Many historians refer to these as the first and second great awakenings, though these terms are somewhat contested. Earlier religious fairs, a mixing of holiday and holy day, had been commonplace in Presbyterian churches of Scotland and Ireland. These 17th and 18th century communion festivals were marked by sociability, large-scale communal worship, and preaching. The closely related outdoor religious revivals that swept across the American colonies in the 18th century became some of the most important communal events of the era (Figure 4). Attendees would listen to the dramatic sermons of preachers, repent of their sins, and partake in communion.[[18]](#endnote-18)

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These heavily attended spectacles also brought to the fore what might be called America’s first celebrities. Well-known traveling preachers—including Gilbert Tennent, James Davenport, and Andrew Croswell—were among these. The promoters of this new, heightened spirituality denounced the staid, established ministry. They also emphasized the need for a converted ministry, extemporaneous preaching, and a more passionate style that could draw massive, non-denominational crowds. Most successful, and most famous, was the Anglican iterant George Whitefield. Though he suffered from crossed eyes and was a controversial figure for numerous, more conservative clergy, Whitefield had a special knack for planning and promoting his outdoor services.

Benjamin Franklin became acquainted with the revered and reviled minister. Though Franklin’s religious outlook was quite different from Whitefield’s, he could still appreciate his appeal and his stunning success. “In 1739 arrived among us from Ireland the Reverend Mr. Whitefield,” Franklin recalled in his autobiography. Whitefield “had made himself remarkable there as an itinerant preacher. He was at first permitted to preach in some of our churches; but the clergy, taking a dislike to him, soon refus’d him their pulpits, and he was oblig’d to preach in the fields. The multitudes of all sects and denominations that attended his sermons were enormous, and it was matter of speculation to me, who was one of the number, to observe the extraordinary influence of his oratory on his hearers, and how much they admir’d and respected him, notwithstanding his common abuse of them, by assuring them they were naturally *half beasts and half devils.*”[[19]](#endnote-19) Franklin figured that the renowned revivalist could be heard by as many as 30,000 congregants (Figure 5). Whitefield would deliver roughly 18,000 sermons altogether before his death in Newburyport, Massachusetts, in 1770.

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Critics hounded Whitefield, and similar ministers to the commoners, for preaching to dissenting groups and taking to the fields. The evangelical message was subjective, unverifiable, and too prone to base theatrics, they lashed out. Establishment doubters, like Boston’s Charles Chauncey, considered such outpourings to be vulgar and enthusiastic, with a special appeal to the mob. Many Congregationalists, Unitarians, and Anglicans (later Episcopalians) might not have objected to the theater, but they considered dramatic pulpit antics highly distasteful, if not downright profane. In turn, evangelical Protestants upheld their own standards against their haughty superiors. In the mid- to late 18th century, evangelical believers marked themselves off from other Americans by denouncing a range of leisure and sporting activities as well as certain rights of manhood. Gambling, drinking, dueling, card-playing, and theater attendance were all forcefully condemned.[[20]](#endnote-20)

**Popular Religion in the 19th Century**

Rough sports and manly rituals might have been off limits for evangelicals, but their revivals in the 18th and 19th centuries offered regular Americans a chance to witness the drama of the redemption story, work through their inner turmoil, and commune with thousands of likeminded believers. In colonial America, services also had great entertainment value. Some could not see that great of a difference between Whitefield’s oratory and what they could witness on the stage of a theater. Whitefield had even had some training as an actor before his conversion. Historian Thomas Kidd notes that, even though Whitefield came to reject the debased performing arts, “the theater taught Whitefield a great deal about how to perform in public. He resented the unwholesome aspects of his education, but praised his tutor for teaching students ‘to speak correctly.’”[[21]](#endnote-21)

Nineteenth century revivalists kept this dramatic tradition alive. They appealed to the hearts of their listeners with sentimental sermons about perdition and everlasting life. The most famous of these included Charles Grandison Finney (1792–1875), Dwight Lyman Moody (1837–1899), and the so-called Georgia Wonder, Sam Jones (1847–1906). The latter was especially adept at using humor and folksy wisdom to entertain large crowds in auditoriums, churches, and civic halls.

Victorian America was awash with uplift and moral reform movements. By the 1830s and 1840s, evangelical Protestantism was now a mass religious movement that claimed the largest denominations in the country, the Baptists and the Methodists. Though these denominations would split over the divisive issue of slavery, many of the faithful in the North and South were now drawing from a common well of popular culture. Protestant reformers in the 19th century eagerly used melodrama, popular melodies and songbooks, and even the theater to reach a wide audience. Over the decades, adherents had decided to embrace popular entertainment, sanctifying it for what they considered the greater good. It was a process that would be repeated over and over again. Abolitionists as well as pro-slavery advocates, peace movement activists, and women’s rights reformers produced tracts that relied on some of the same mass-appeal strategies that evangelicals had honed over the decades (Figure 6). One of the most powerful and influential figures of this evangelical reformism was Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), which shed a harsh critical light on the ravages of slavery. It was one of the most influential books of the century. Reformers branched out into popular music as well. Touring theater companies performed the stage adaptation of the novel well into the 20th century. In 1836, Isaac Knapp and Maria Weston Chapman published *Songs of the Free and Hymns of Christian Freedom* in Boston. Other, similar hymnals were brought out in the years before the American Civil War.[[22]](#endnote-22)

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Few did more to wrap an unwavering evangelical message in the garbs of 19th-century popular culture than the Salvation Army. Founded by Methodist minister William Booth in the slums of East London in 1865, the organization soon spread to the United States. Salvationists established missions to the poor in inner cities and launched welfare and immigrant aid organizations. One of the distinctive characteristics of initiatives was the adoption of military uniforms, ranks, and the incorporation of martial themes into music and performances. Booth, and his American counterparts, favored using popular melodies set to new Christian lyrics. In the denomination’s popular hymnal, *Revival Songs*, Booth declared: “The music of the Army is not, as a rule, original. We seize upon the strains that have already caught the ear of the masses, we load them with our one great theme—salvation—and so we make the very enemy help us fill the air with our Saviour’s fame.” They plucked popular melodies from spirituals, drinking songs, Victorian ballads, and patriotic anthems. The music was theatrical, loud, and designed to reach urban and working-class men and women who had been forgotten by mainline groups.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Temperance societies across the country, like the Salvation Army, also used popular music as well as performances to draw attention and allegiance to the dry cause. Productions like *The Drunkard*; *One Cup More, or the Doom of a Drunkard*; and *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* played to large audiences in New York City, Boston, Washington, DC, and Philadelphia. Audiences were moved to tears and exaltation at the sight of tales of despair and deliverance.[[24]](#endnote-24) In 1869, the *Democratic Press* of Ravenna, Ohio, reported on a powerful performance of *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* (Figure 7). “There was a real solemnity about this piece that gave a deep impress of its moral,” wrote the awestruck reporter. “The fatal extent of misery that one man will inflict on his fellow-beings by leaving an honest occupation at the ‘old grist mill’ for a dishonest and criminal one at the ‘grog-shop,’ ” was on full display. “No *seller* could witness it without shedding a penitent tear,” concluded the reviewer.[[25]](#endnote-25) Such depictions also carried with them strong anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant feeling. Germans, Irish, Eastern Europeans, and other recent arrivals bore the brunt of teetotalists’ righteous indignation.

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**Church Construction in the 19th Century**

With a rise in wealth, status, and aspiration in the late 19th century, American Protestants made new cultural accommodations. Church buildings and furnishings became more elaborate and grand in the period after the Civil War. The Gothic (1840s–1850s) and Romanesque (1870s–1880s) architectural revivals brought new levels of ornamentation, splendor, and romance to urban churches (Figure 8). In the nation’s large cities, the purely functional and simple churches of the early century were now a distant memory. Affluent Methodist congregations adopted paid seating arrangements and employed professional organists and choirs. The churches of the Gilded Age reflected some of the changing aesthetic tastes and values of the era. Henry Ward Beecher, the Congregationalist minster of Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York, embodied this novel, comfortable Protestantism. R. Laurence Moore claims that “Beecher may very well best illustrate how the ardent Protestant became the consummate consumer, endlessly ‘striving after stimulative pleasures, the gratification of each new want.’|” He had a special talent, Moore argues, in making “his middle-class congregation luxuriate in their emotions, to weep and to take pleasure in the many ways they could imagine themselves as good-deed doers, as loving and as loved agents.”[[26]](#endnote-26)

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**The Holiness Movement, Pentecostalism, and Fundamentalism**

Reactions to a newly perceived opulence, or even decadence, were as swift as they were strident. For instance, the Holiness and Pentecostal movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries emerged, in part, as a social protest against comfortable, middle-class Protestantism. Holiness and Pentecostal believers tended to emphasize greater works of the spirit and Christian perfectionism, and they had a hot and cold relationship with popular culture and mass entertainment. Stalwarts preached against alcohol and tobacco, the theater, circuses, dancing, fancy clothes, and, in some case, even Coca Cola. They also aimed their sights on the fineries of downtown churches. Denominations like the white Church of the Nazarene, the Assemblies of God, and Pentecostal Holiness Church were linked to African-American groups like the Church of God in Christ and the Church of Christ (Holiness) in their denunciations of the status and class aspirations of the mainline. In the late 1890s, one popular evangelist of the Holiness movement railed against “Church Entertainment,” that, “fairly floods the sacred building with every conceivable kind of proceedings” and “the house is often made a playground.”[[27]](#endnote-27) “Worldly” Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian practices received special rebuke.

Simultaneously, in the late 19th and throughout the 20th century, Holiness folk and Pentecostals enthusiastically embraced certain aspects of popular culture and mass entertainment. Pentecostal and Holiness groups early embraced print media, and then radio and television evangelism. From her California base and her impressive church/auditorium, the famed Pentecostal celebrity, Sister Aimee Semple McPherson (1890–1944), may have been one of the most skilled exploiters of mass culture and entertaining religion (Figure 9). Historian Matthew Avery Sutton has described Sister Aimee’s great appeal and her ability to harness technology and entertainment as “Hollywood Religion.”[[28]](#endnote-28) In the 1920s, her Los Angeles auditorium-cum-church called Angelus Temple seated 5,000. Here she presented dramatic Broadway-style gospel productions and attracted Hollywood stars and journalists, who marveled at the spectacle of it all. She founded a radio station, KFSG, only the third one in Los Angeles. Her church housed a 100-member choir and an orchestra, and often featured elaborate set designs.

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Americans in the Jazz Age were also kept informed and entertained on religious matters by the fundamentalist preacher Billy Sunday (1862–1935), who, like Sister Aimee, was one of the most well-known and popular figures of his day. Sunday had played baseball for the Chicago White Stockings before his conversion experience. He worked with the muscular, evangelical YMCA. In his later, large-scale revival campaigns and his published sermons, Sunday used salt-of-the-earth language, colloquialisms, the logic of ardent fundamentalism, and had a pugnacious and boundless stage presence. Lyle W. Dorsett comments on the energetic preacher’s appeal: “Entertainment-starved communities turned out in large numbers to hear Billy Sunday if for no other reason than that his meetings offered something entertaining.”[[29]](#endnote-29) Sunday’s touring partner, the song evangelist Homer Rodeheaver, made a fitting match to the gravel-throated Sunday. Rodeheaver, who played the trombone, invigorated services with rousing renditions of gospel anthems. At his revival meetings, Sunday mixed in with his fundamentalist message a hyper patriotism, teetotalism, and denunciations of movies, popular music, and fashion fads. Yet, Sunday was eventually convinced that movies could be used to good purpose.

**Immigrants and Hollywood**

American Catholics and Jews, who had come to America in larger numbers with waves of other immigrants in the late 19th century, realized the great potential of movies and popular culture. Though religious leaders regulated the kinds of entertainment believers could or could not partake in, they joined other Americans in embracing new trends in mass entertainment. Religion scholar Rodger Payne writes that surprisingly, “Catholic moral attitudes governed the content of most American films from the 1930s to the 1960s and, in the process, helped transform American attitudes towards Catholicism.”[[30]](#endnote-30) In his view, how Catholicism was represented in American film was closely tied to the moral guardian role the church played. Catholic themes, characters, and ideas played to American filmgoers in movies like *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938), *Boys Town* (1938), *The Fighting Sullivans* (1944), and perhaps most influentially, *Going My Way* (1944), and *The Bells of St. Mary’s* (1945). In the latter two, Bing Crosby played the crooning, gentle, athletic, and acculturated priest Father O’Malley. *Going My Way* won an Oscar for Best Picture. In the pre-Vatican II era, films like these and others introduced Americans to positive depictions of Catholicism and Catholics.

Catholics charted success on the small screen as well. Catholic Bishop Fulton J. Sheen (1895–1979) took to the air with his popular radio and television broadcasts. His radio talks, starting with the *The Catholic Hour* in 1930, would span 22 years. As auxiliary bishop in New York, he hosted the weekly *Life is Worth Living* (1951–1957) television show. It claimed approximately 30 million viewers. Here his strong anti-communism was on display, as well as his oratorical skills and his ability to speak to the pressing concerns of Catholic daily life.

Themes of Jewish assimilation and identity were also key to films like *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the first mass release talkie, *Disraeli* (1929) and *The House of Rothschild* (1934). Early-20th century film was far more comfortable with ethnic themes and drew on a larger immigrant audience than the movie industry would later in the century. But large-scale biblical epics like *The Ten Commandments* (1956), directed Cecil B. DeMille, or *Ben-Hur* (1959), directed by William Wyler, appealed to Americans across denominational boundaries and marked a kind of new, Judeo-Christian civil religion that was perfectly suited for the conformity of the Cold War era.

Hollywood studios and key figures in the industry had Jewish roots. Samuel Goldwyn (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios) and Adolph Zucker (Paramount) both studied in their youth at European *yeshivot*, religious training schools.[[31]](#endnote-31) Jewish actors like Jack Benny, Eddie Cantor, Groucho Marx, Dinah Shore, and Danny Kaye joined directors, cinematographers, and writers in making a major mark on popular culture. Still, many movies, as with those that dealt with Catholicism, downplayed religious differences and uniqueness and focused instead on assimilation and Americanization. A kind of consensus model of religion or a type of civil religion informed Hollywood throughout most of the century.

**African Americans and Popular Music**

In the transitional era from silent to talkie films, African-American musicians and performers also had a major influence on the arts and entertainment in the United States. Elder Lightfoot Solomon Michaux, the Holiness radio preacher, who would later branch out into early television, enjoyed enormous success with a song he made famous in the 1930s, “Happy Am I.” Michaux’s Happy Am I Choir regularly sang on air and boosted the careers of Gospel legends Mahalia Jackson and Clara Mae Ward. *Time* magazine took notice of the Washington, DC, entrepreneurial minister, observing that Michaux “needs large auditoriums or stadiums” for his events, which he announced on air as coming from “the banks of the Potomac.” Michaux, wrote *Time*’s reporter, “sometimes conducts mammoth baptismal services, with white-clad participants splashing in the river or Chesapeake Bay and spectators on gaily decorated barges and excursion boats. Last summer he scandalized District of Columbia officials by asking leave to baptize a flock in the reflecting pool in front of the Lincoln Memorial.”[[32]](#endnote-32) Upon his death at age 84 in 1968, *Jet* magazine heaped praise on him. The singing minister and vivacious religious entertainer was a “friend of Presidents F. D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and Dwight Eisenhower” and his “spectacular baptismal pageantry in Griffith Stadium drew crowds of 30,000 .|.|.” Michaux especially stressed the interracial character of his mass religious meetings.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Michaux was joined on the national stage by the father of Gospel Blues, Thomas Andrew Dorsey (1899–1993), and such powerful performers as Sister Rosetta Tharpe (1915–1973). After his conversion and dedication to writing only gospel music, Dorsey abandoned his blues stage and performing name “Georgia Tom,” and sold his sheet music to black churches and fellow musicians. His music drew together sacred lyrics and what had been considered the “profane” music of the blues. Tharpe, a master performer from the black pentecostal Church of God in Christ, would go on to play her electric guitar-driven gospel at the storied Cotton Club and would land a recording contract with Decca. Her vocal phrasing and picking and rhythmic style would blaze a trailer for later rock and roll music.

Little Richard, one of the founders of the rock and roll genre, counted Tharpe as one of his most powerful influences. He also admired and styled himself after the flashy singing evangelist Brother Joe May, the “Thunderbolt of the Middle West.” Though Richard was raised a Seventh-day Adventist, he regularly attended black Pentecostal services because the music and the dancing were so invigorating. Other early rock legends similarly had experiences with and even deep roots in the black and white Pentecostal music and worship tradition. Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis both grew up in the Assemblies of God Church. Johnny Cash and Tammy Wynette spent part of their youth in the Church of God (Cleveland). B. B. King, like Tharpe, went to the Church of God in Christ. Elvis counted himself an enormous fan of the gospel stylings of white quartets like the Blackwood Brothers and the Stamps Quartet. He also appreciated and modeled his singing after black groups like the Golden Gate Quartet.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Of course, some of the bold borrowings from religious music could be quite controversial. Soul pioneers like Ray Charles, Otis Redding, Dionne Warwick, Lou Rawls, and Aretha Franklin all drew heavily from the church music of their roots when crafting their chart-topping songs. For instance, Charles’s reshaped the gospel song “It Must Be Jesus” by the Southern Tones for his popular 1954 song “I’ve Got a Woman,” co-written with Renolds Richard. Charles’s repetition at the end of the song of “she’s alright,” exploited a standard gospel style. When ministers and gospel singers faulted him for his profanations, Charles brushed his critics aside, saying in his autobiography, “I really didn’t give a shit about that kind of criticism.”[[35]](#endnote-35)

**Jesus Rock and Countercultural Christianity**

There were musical borrowings from the other direction as well. Just as 19th-century Salvationists used popular tunes for evangelical purposes, 20th-century believers did much the same. In the 1960s and 1970s, evangelicals, Pentecostals, and Catholics all found new ways to bring together pop culture, entertainment, and the traditional message of redemption through Jesus. The Jesus People movement, a Christian hippie response to the revolutions of the turbulent 1960s, fused evangelical and Pentecostal beliefs with rock music, countercultural fashions, and anti-institutional ideals. Observers labeled the music Jesus Rock or God Rock. It ran the gamut, from soft rock and ballads to heavy metal and acid rock. New record labels like Myrrh Records (founded in 1972) and Sparrow Records (founded in 1976), put out the new gospel sound. Early bands, including Love Song, 2nd Chapter of Acts, and the Resurrection Band had a somewhat derivative sound. Yet, their popularity showed a new eagerness from younger evangelicals to explore new styles of music and entertainment. Solo artists—including key founders of the genre Larry Norman, as well as Barry McGuire, Phil Keaggy, and Andraé Crouch—had significant experience in the entertainment industry and brought a high level of professionalism and talent to their music and performances. In the coming decades, bands and solo artists like Stryper, Vigilanties of Love, DC Talk, Starflyer 59, Damien Jurado, Sufjan Stevens, L.S.U., Switchfoot, and Sixpence None the Richer would steer fans into glam metal, hip-hop, alternative/indie, folk rock, and mainstream directions.

There were numerous other ways in the late 20th and early 21st century that Christians in the United States engaged with popular culture, mass media, and faith-themed entertainment. The critically acclaimed 1972 documentary film *Marjoe* tells the story of a former Pentecostal child preacher, Marjoe Gortner. As an adult, Gortner discovered the lucrative prospects of a hyped-up, entertaining style of revivalism. A comet of sheer energy on stage, he copied the dance moves of Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones and held audience’s rapt attention. The film garnered an Oscar in 1973 for best documentary. Revivalism and entertaining services, even when conducted for profit and notoriety, long marked such low-church traditions. Fittingly, no religious groups or individuals embraced television quite like black and white evangelicals or Pentecostals did. Healing evangelists and mass revivalists led the way in the 1950s and 1960s. Oral Roberts conducted successful healing campaigns, with accompanying gospel music, in the 1950s. Billy Graham’s revival campaigns around the globe won him enthusiastic support and the largest audience of any religious figure in the world, with the exception of the Pope. (In the early 1970s, Graham, a former critic of rock and roll, even reached out to the Jesus People and lent his support to Christian rock.) Critics, bristling at Graham’s simple gospel message and his flashy technique, thought his crusades had a circus-like quality to them. John Steinbeck, sarcastically referred to Graham as one of the two “great men” of our time. The other, he sneered, was Elvis Presley.[[36]](#endnote-36)

**Televangelism, the Electronic Church, and Christian Pop Culture**

Other religious celebrities of television, like Pat Robertson and Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, experimented with the talk show format, the use of puppets and children’s programming, political chat shows, and more. The Bakker’s Christian theme park, Heritage USA in Fort Mill, South Carolina, was one of a range of amusement spots, roadside religious attractions, and leisure gathering places for the faithful. Others included the Holy Land Experience in Orlando, Florida; the Creation Museum and Ark Encounter in Petersburg and Williamstown, Kentucky; and the World’s Largest Ten Commandments display in Murphy, North Carolina. By the 1990s and 2000s, new celebrity TV ministers dominated the airwaves, including T. D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, John Hagee, Creflo Dollar, and Joyce Meyer. These have all been made possible because, since the 1970s, new television outlets, such as Trinity Broadcasting Network, Christian Broadcasting Network, and Daystar blended lighthearted fair with hard-sell evangelism and shows about the imminent apocalypse.[[37]](#endnote-37) Campaigns that broadened out into podcasting, social media, Youtube channels, and other new media in the new century proved to be popular and natural extensions of ministry.

The rise of Christian bookstores and retail chains made the selling of mass marketed materials as profitable as it was effective. Book series and then films, spun off massively popular end-times novels and non-fiction, like Tim LaHaye’s *Left Behind* series and Hal Lindsey’s *Late Great Planet Earth*, lent the evangelical marketing enterprise an enormous sense of immediacy. A now-classic documentary film by Alexandra Pelosi is a humorous exploration of the world of evangelical goods, Christian kitsch, and entertainment culture. In *Friends of God: A Road Trip with Alexandra Pelosi* (2007), the director profiles Christian wrestlers, creationists, “edutainers,” megachurch ministers, and political activists.

Over the centuries, American believers have shown a remarkable ability to blend their faith with popular culture. They have used once-shunned venues like the theater, the rock concert hall, or the amusement park to draw in seekers or new members. The mixture of sports and religion, since the days of Victorian muscular Christian, continues to be attractive to Americans, eager to link up small or large victories on the field with a higher message.

**Historiography**

The literature on religion and entertainment in America addresses questions from a variety of angles. Some scholars focus heavily on the secular realm and film, popular music, performance, sports, radio, and television. Others study how churches, denominations, temples, and mosques engage in what might be called entertainment for outreach purposes. The scholarship on the topic goes all the way back to first contact between natives and white settlers. What follows is just a small sampling of the rich research on the subject.

Recent works on Puritans, Anglicans, Native Americans, and slaves in the colonial world, in an attempt to recapture the ebb and flow of daily life, have become more attuned to how settlers and others lived out their religion far outside of churches and scared spaces. Bruce Daniels’ *Puritans at Play: Leisure and Recreation in Early New England* (1995) focuses on the recreation, leisure, and lively world of Puritans, upending old stereotypes along the way. Similarly, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* (1991) reveals, among many other things, how Puritans lived, brewed beer, ate, spent their free time, and played amid the harsh realities of the era. Other studies look at the many ways that religious movements and revivals, print culture, and popular trends of the 18th century inspired and entertained colonists.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Numerous works on the 19th century also examine the interplay of religion, entertainment, and the overlooked world of popular religion. Jeanne Halgren Kilde’s *When Church Became Theatre: The Transformation of Evangelical Architecture and Worship in Nineteenth-Century America* (2005) looks at how architecture reflected new religious values. The late 19th century emergence of the auditorium church, with its theater-style interiors, re-imagined church as entertainment. Scholars like Simone Natale, *Supernatural Entertainments: Victorian Spiritualism and the Rise of Modern Media Culture* (2016), show how other borrowings from the world of entertainment were occurring in the era. Spiritualists, observes Natale, used the promotion and performance techniques of the entertainment world and commodity culture.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Sports and religion intersected quite naturally through much of American history. Scholars have looked at the religious imagery and pageantry of football, baseball, and basketball. They have also focused attention on parachurch groups like the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and Promise Keepers that linked together millions of Americans. In *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport* (2007), William J. Baker spans over the course of American history to show how the religious use of sports developed and changed over time. Condemnation slowly gave way to tolerance, and then to the modern, enthusiastic embrace of sports. The historian Clifford Putney, in *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880–1920* (2003), examines how religious leaders in the late Victorian age promoted sports and exercise to invigorate Christianity.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Other scholars have focused on additional ways that religion has thrived under the bright lights of mass culture. Some have focused on evangelical and Pentecostal media savvy preachers and television personalities. In *Oral Roberts: An American Life* (1987), David Edwin Harrell described the entrepreneurial skill, personal charisma, and dynamism of a much criticized religious celebrity. Grant Wacker’s recent biography, *America’s Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation* (2014), details the evangelist’s basic themes, his close ties to political elites and presidents. Wacker also looks at Graham as an entrepreneur, southerner, icon, and architect. Graham’s celebrity and iconic status were essential to his success.[[41]](#endnote-41)

Similar biographical and historical treatments have explored the ways that “pastorpreneurs,” megachurch ministers, builders of media empires, and bestselling novelists made their mark on America and brought together piety and entertainment. Accordingly, Susan Harding’s *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (2001) studies the sermons, speeches, books, audiotapes, and television broadcasts of Falwell and others. She finds that fundamentalists, seemingly cut off or separated from society, actually found ways to engage with worldly issues in powerful ways. This fits in with a new scholarly turn. Other historians of Pentecostalism, evangelicalism, and fundamentalism—like Matthew Sutton, Timothy Gloege, Brandon Pietsch, Jonathan Walton, Bethany Moreton, Randall Stephens, and Roger Robins—have looked at how modernity intersected with conservative religion. Preachers, evangelists, and media entrepreneurs within these movements eagerly embraced the latest technologies to broadcast their message. Their rhetoric and their willingness to move into pop culture and entertainment reveals just how comfortable they became with modern forms.[[42]](#endnote-42)

*Religion as Entertainment* (2002), edited by C. K. Robertson, delves into how churches and religious groups serve an entertaining function for laypeople. Chapters explore how religion is represented in various media: music, film, television, and literature. Similar studies on the late 20th and early 21st centuries ask critical questions about the flexibility of religious groups. Why have some traditions been more willing to adopt the strategies and techniques of entertainment? What makes certain movements more visible in popular film, music, and television? With the rise of the Internet, social media, and global religious networks, such questions reveal something basic about the reach and appeal of modern American religion.[[43]](#endnote-43)

**Primary Sources**

There is a wide range of primary materials that cover religion and entertainment. Unfortunately, there are no major collections of original documents. Still, there are many ways to access sources related to religion and entertainment. What follows are some general suggestions.

Historical newspaper collections like the Library of Congress’s free \*Chronicling America (1789–1924)[http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/]\* and the \*Google Newspaper Archive[https://news.google.com/newspapers]\* give access to smaller regional newspapers, which are quite hard to find otherwise. In addition, the \*Proquest Historical Newspapers[http://www.proquest.com/products-services/pq-hist-news.html]\* database is one of the best resources for high-profile magazines and newspapers. For partial and full views of books, magazines, records, and more, see also \*Google Books[https://books.google.com/]\* (the full, color collection of *Life* magazine is especially valuable). Sports publications, *Youth for Christ*, and *Intervarsity* magazines, and a range of other youth and sport-oriented magazines are rich with research material. The online collection \*Hathi Trust[https://www.hathitrust.org/]\*, the \*Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress[http://www.loc.gov/pictures/]\*, and the still somewhat new \*Digital Public Library of America[https://dp.la/]\* (DPLA) also contain helpful materials. The DPLA acts as a kind of clearinghouse for many other online depositories. The DPLA, for instance, catalogs a range of texts, prints, video, and music. A good search through the pages of the Smithsonian website and the \*Smithsonian Folkways[http://www.folkways.si.edu/]\* collections yields very useful resources. See, for instance, the search results for Classic African American Gospel on the Smithsonian Folkways.

For films, movie trailers, and television programs, YouTube is always an excellent source. However, the lack of curation or vetting of content make it difficult to sift through all of the millions of hours of material on \*YouTube[https://www.youtube.com/]\*. For the persistent, YouTube delivers 1970s Christian television programs, prophecy shows from Pentecostal broadcasters, Muslim music videos and chat programs, footage of early Christian rock bands, etc. Similarly, the \*Internet Archive[https://archive.org/]\* holds over three million films, videos, and television programs, many which can be downloaded.

Researchers of popular culture, mass culture, religion, and entertainment are advised to think broadly about how to access primary sources. Denominational archives are increasingly digitizing and making available public documents, photographs, music, charts, and letters. See the excellent collections of the Assemblies of God’s \*Flower Pentecostal Heritage Center[https://ifphc.org/]\* full-text search. The Congregational Library and Archive in Boston has a \*digital collections section[http://www.congregationallibrary.org/digital-collections]\* on its website. Other collections that have similar holdings include the \*Center for Jewish History[http://access.cjh.org/]\*; \*The Catholic University of America, Digitized Online Collections[http://archives.lib.cua.edu/docuon.cfm]\*; the digital collections at \*Brigham Young University Library[https://lib.byu.edu/]\*; and the \*Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Digital Resources[http://www.sbhla.org/digital\_resources.asp]\*. Of course, this is only partial, a fraction of the primary source items that can be accessed.

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Randall J. Stephens

Figure 1. A 1962 portrait of legendary gospel singer Mahalia Jackson. Courtesy of the \*Library of Congress[https://www.loc.gov/]\*.

Figure 2. “Edison's greatest marvel—The Vitascope,” *c.* 1896. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Figure 3. From Cotton Mather, Thomas Robbins, and Samuel Gardner Drake, *Magnolia Christi Americana: The Ecclesiastical History of New England* (Hartford, CT: Silas Andrus and Son, 1855).

Figure 4. “Camp meeting of the Methodists in N. America,” 1819. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Figure 5. An anti-Whitefield print, “Dr. Squintum’s exaltation or the reformation,” London, 1763. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Figure 6. “|‘Get Off the Track! A Song for Emancipation,’ sung by the Hutchinsons,” Boston, 1844. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Figure 7. An 1865 poster advertising a performance of *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room*. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Figure 8.“West (Front) Elevation; from Southeast—Trinity Episcopal Church, Copley Square, Boston.” The Romanesque style church was built in the 1870s. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Figure 9. “Aimee Semple McPherson, 2/14/27.” Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

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