

When media culture and celebrity culture collide

And what worship looks like when they do

by [Clint Schneklath](#) in the [May 20, 2020](#) issue

In Review



Celebrity Worship

By Pete Ward
Routledge

It's difficult to tell from Pete Ward's richly ambiguous title whether his new book is an examination of celebrities at worship (like Kanye West), the worship of celebrities (like Beyoncé), or worship leaders as celebrities (like Joel Osteen). Spoiler alert: it's all three, and then some.

Celebrity Worship is more a study of religion than a theological work—although for Ward the two have long been intertwined. In his earlier book *Participation and Mediation: A Practical Theology for the Liquid Church*, he claimed: “A central missiological issue for the Western Church relates to how it chooses to react to the mediation of the spiritual in popular culture.” If the church is called to pay attention to popular culture, so too is theology: “The convergence on culture marks a significant move in practical theology. Turning to culture means that doctrine is increasingly read in and through the social and the embodied and so ‘theology’ itself is seen in a new light.”

Theology as ethnography. Theology as religious studies. This way of thinking was uncommon when Ward began using the term *liquid church* nearly 20 years ago. It remains his guiding principle in *Celebrity Worship* as he aims to understand today's popular mediated culture.

Ward begins with the claim that at the center of all media platforms, crucial to all technologies of communication, are people. “When we consume media, we consume people, and these people are celebrities, or rather they are transformed into celebrities as they participate in processes of production, representation and consumption.” Ward calls this process the “celebrification of everyday life.” He makes the fascinating observation that a celebrity is a mediated individual. “Celebrity is what media processes do to individuals,” he writes.

There are two sides to celebrification, Ward explains. One side involves the mediated presence of the celebrity. The other side involves the ways we, through our identification with and participation in such celebrification, make meaning out of what we consume. Celebrities are one of the primary resources we use to shape and massage what Ward calls the “project of the self.” And the project of the self is the new sacred project that defines much of religion in the 21st century.

In other words, celebrities are not special all by themselves; they're special because of what they mean to their fans. But celebrities are only meaningful to their fans to the extent that they serve the fans' construction and orientation of their own identities. The many selves of fans, therefore, are the aspect of celebrification that

carries religious significance.

Ward devotes much of the book to a programmatic analysis of the many meanings of celebrity worship through these basic theses. In conversation with contemporary work in the history and philosophy of celebrity culture, he analyzes the move toward the self, social media's centralization of self-presentation, and the connection between celebrity and religious change.

To illustrate these trends, Ward examines individual celebrities who function as theologians of the self, including Lady Gaga, Madonna, Ariana Grande, and Beyoncé. He investigates socially mediated responses to celebrity deaths in a chapter that will be familiar to anyone who's participated in a memorial service for a celebrity on Facebook or Twitter. He includes a chapter on evangelical celebrity culture as it relates to megachurch personalities like Rob Bell and Mark Driscoll. And he articulates a fascinating final thesis, itself worthy of another book: the church itself in some instances becomes a celebrity or a brand (e.g., Hillsong).

Ward believes that the study of celebrity has been marginalized in most analyses of the effects of media on religious change. This book is designed as one contribution toward ameliorating this omission. For Ward, mediated individuals (celebrities) are the missing piece in our somewhat disjointed explorations of the religion and media conversation.

The intersection of media culture and celebrity culture isn't the cause of our turn toward the self, but celebrity worship does function as an "amplification system to this reorientation of how the self is situated in relation to religious traditions." Ward explains:

The accelerant that has boosted this change has been the idea of choice. With the self at the centre of a religious narrative, then the emphasis moves from acquiescence to agency. Selection, however, also leads to the fragmentation of religious traditions. The religious self is free to choose, to edit, and to combine, across religious traditions and non-religious sources.

What does this shift mean for religious practice? "The self as a selecting and constructing agent brings about a change in how religion is present" in the realm of lived experience, Ward writes.

Fascinatingly, though, celebrity culture doesn't function by way of direct influence. It's not the content of celebrities' religious commitments that generate religious change. It's not what they say or sing or endorse. It's the sense of agency they project, combined with the shift toward the self as our central cultural formation in an increasingly socially mediated world.

Ward takes as a given that our social constructions of religion are taking on new functions, especially in their fluidity and their focus on the individual and the personal. I deeply appreciate this approach, and I hope the church will follow Ward's model. Instead of deploying theology to critique the mediation of the spiritual in modern culture, he seeks to understand and embrace. It's not that such understanding leads to wholesale glorification of all that is. Rather, it exemplifies study as a form of empathy driven by curiosity and care.