



Celebrity Worship as Weak Religion

DEENA WEINSTEIN
and
MICHAEL WEINSTEIN

Celebrity is such a ubiquitous feature of contemporary culture that it is impossible to escape it. Through all the channels of the mass media, we are bombarded by icons representing individuals who have been elevated into a virtual world beyond the ordinary and whom we are beckoned, cajoled, and bullied to adore (and sometimes deplore), if only for Andy Warhol's transient fifteen minutes. Indeed, celebrity is so pervasive that we take it for granted as a normal part of life that we should be attracted to, or at least interested in, images of people whose fame has outrun any special excellence they might once have evinced, or is based on no achievement at all, but on circumstance or sensation.

The frequent use of such terms as icon, idol, god, and worship to describe celebrities and the responses of audiences to them points to a more than fanciful connection between celebrity and religion. Yet nothing could seem to be farther removed from the great monotheistic religions than worship of flawed human beings whose glamour and charisma have been contrived by the publicity machine. Indeed, if worship it be, then it is of the kind appropriate to graven images.

FILLING THE GAP OF FAITH

Religious interpretations of celebrity most often and appropriately place its

Celebrity worship is a substitute for traditional faith in a culture that denies both the truth and the demands of traditional faith. It satisfies spiritual needs with a weak religion that allows us to worship the best, the worst, and the most banal of ourselves.

emergence in the context of the weakening of traditional faith in monotheistic religions, especially Christianity, that has supposedly occurred as the modern historical period has run its course. From this viewpoint, celebrity worship is a substitute for traditional faith that satisfies spiritual needs that persist after the latter has declined.

“celebrity worship is a substitute for traditional faith that satisfies spiritual needs that persist after the latter has declined”

We need not go so far as to embrace Friedrich Nietzsche’s death-of-God decree as an explanation for our times to admit that Christianity has faced severe challenges to its conception of the God-human relationship throughout the modern period. Early in the nineteenth century, Søren Kierkegaard unleashed his attack against the state Lutheranism of his time, condemning it for legitimizing a comfortable and complacent bourgeois lifestyle rather than raising a call for a decisive commitment to be within the world, yet not of it.¹ Kierkegaard was echoed and deepened by Dietrich Bonhoeffer at a critical point in the twentieth century in his *Cost of Discipleship*, where he launched a searing critique of “cheap grace.”² Since then the line of Kierkegaard and Bonhoeffer has continued with contributors from all branches of Christianity.

The aspect of the weakening of faith most relevant to the rise of celebrity worship was identified by the German sociologist Georg Simmel in the early twentieth century. Writing at the end of World War I, when the terms of order for modern Western civilization seemed discredited and in disarray, Simmel identified a general condition in which cultural life was losing adherence to objective or transcendent standards. Addressing religion specifically, Simmel noted the growing popularity of forms of mysticism that dispensed with the structures of received faith in favor of “an indefinite expansiveness of religious emotion.”³ He traced the root of this development to “the impulse to replace the structures of faith by a religious life that is purely a functional quality of inner life: the spiritual state which gave rise, and still does give rise, to such structures of faith.”⁴ For Simmel, many people in his time were rejecting “the other-worldly objects of religious faith,” yet they still had “religious needs.” In place of faith in a transcendent God, they had substituted “religiosity as an all-embracing, spontaneous process of life.”⁵

We are familiar with the substitution of religiosity for religion today in the

¹Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack upon Christendom, 1854-1855*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944).

²Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller (German original, 1937; New York: Macmillan, 1959).

³Georg Simmel, “The Conflict of Modern Culture,” in *Georg Simmel: Sociologist and European*, ed. Peter Lawrence, trans. D. E. Jenkinson (German original, 1921; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1976) 238.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid., 239.

proliferation of forms of New Age spirituality. But far more important is the repudiation of the transcendent Other that lies behind these forms and spreads far beyond them. Denial of the transcendent God of monotheism as the focus of worship leaves spirituality floating freely, sometimes to consume itself in pious feelings, but more often to attach itself transiently to finite objects immanent in the world. When Simmel was writing, the forms of Christian worship in the West had lost their credibility for large portions of the population, leaving only mysticism for those who could not swallow the bitter pill of atheism. With the rise of the culture industry in succeeding decades, new objects would be produced to redirect worship toward human contrivances, among them celebrity.

“denial of the transcendent God of monotheism as the focus of worship leaves spirituality floating freely, sometimes to consume itself in pious feelings, but more often to attach itself transiently to finite objects immanent in the world”

THE NEW POLYTHEISM

The virtue of Simmel’s discussion of the weakening of religious faith is that it makes clear that religious impulses survived a specific rejection of God’s transcendent objectivity. The choice was not between traditional faith and nihilism, but between transcendent and immanent forms of worship. For Simmel, the rise of mysticism was essentially a response to the desire of people to worship themselves as embodiments of an embracing life-process. More than anything else, the weakening of faith was a revolt against monotheistic authority that was based, as Simmel put it, on the will of life to jealously possess itself.

The monotheisms of Jerusalem provided a distinctive structure for satisfying religious impulses by centralizing worship around an absolute personal God who transcended the creation, but who made connection with human beings through revelation and, in the case of Christianity, through the single incarnation of Jesus. God’s decisive interventions into the world offered human beings a relationship with him; humans were given a way to satisfy God and thereby to achieve salvation and to repair the rupture ensuing from the Fall. God’s graciousness, however, did not come without a cost; human beings were called to obey commandments that directed them to overcome the sins of their worldly existence and to acknowledge God as Lord. Those commandments were objective and absolute; they were beyond ordinary human life and were not subject to human revision. With God’s help, human beings could fulfill the commandments, but to do so they would have to struggle to overcome the resistance posed by their fallen state. In Bonhoeffer’s terms, there were costs of discipleship.

According to Simmel’s interpretation, it was just those costs that broad sections of the Christian West were no longer willing to pay; they desired a relation

that belonged to them and that was under their control. From the viewpoint of Christian and Jewish monotheism, there could be no greater sin than for people to take religion into their own hands; indeed, self-worship was the negation of worship, a terribly destructive paradox that could only leave human beings in their fallen state, perpetually unredeemed. The aniconic God of monotheism had been a victory over idol worship and fetishism; rejection of God could only mean a return to the prior condition.

Such a return to polytheism was precisely the course that the weakening of traditional monotheistic faith took in the twentieth century, but it was not the old polytheism that personified human and natural powers into a pantheon of competing gods who existed in their own world and intervened in the human world at their discretion. The new polytheism worships self-consciously human contrivances; it is a dispersed religion of culture, not a duplication of nature on a higher plane. Here human beings worship their own creations, not even the creation.

With the weakening of faith, worship has bled into every specialized sector of modern culture. Technology, money, success, consumer goods, sex, beauty, and power are only a few of the objects that people have come to adore. Each has its cults and devotees, each its promises. An individual can choose to engage in more than one of these cults simultaneously and can exchange one for another over time. A spirit of pragmatism prevails in the new polytheism; if one form of worship fails to work, another can be taken up. Weakened faith calls forth weak religion. The rejection of objective commandments allows for a relaxation of struggle, but makes it impossible to overcome the self whose limitations are the cause of the impulse to worship, and entirely cancels out hope for salvation and redemption.

CELEBRITY

Within the new polytheism, celebrity holds a special place. For the most part, the cults of this weak and fragmented religious form are depersonalized object fetishes, in which human artifacts such as “the almighty dollar” provide sense and purpose for life. A celebrity, in contrast, is a “personality” who can summon up primary psychological processes like identification, love, and adoration. Celebrity worship seems to save the new polytheism from a total absorption in things, connecting it with the Western tradition of a personal God and with the characteristic dispositions toward that God.

We can begin to understand celebrity as an object of worship by repeating Daniel Boorstin’s often quoted definitional quip that celebrities are those who are known for well-knownness.⁶ Celebrities are people who have been elevated above the ordinary anonymous life of a mass society by having attracted the interest and attention of large numbers of people from diverse walks of life and sectors of society: their names are household words. Being well known in a specialized and

⁶Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961) 47.

fragmented society of occupations with divergent codes of conduct, multiple ethnicities, and a dizzying array of lifestyles and taste groups endows the celebrity with a mystique. Recognition cannot be taken for granted in a mass culture; when it spreads beyond a narrow slice of society, it appears to be extraordinary, bigger than life.

The transcendence of celebrity over social diversity makes it one of the only unifying components of the new polytheism. Yet that unification is abstract. What all celebrities have in common is simply being known, for whatever reason or for no reason at all. We do not need to know anything about basketball to recognize Michael Jordan, or to understand anything about mathematical physics to be aware of Stephen Hawking. Their currency gives us the sense that we share a common world with one another, but that community is usually delusive and superficial.

The cult of celebrity shows all of the marks of polytheism. Under the abstract unification of being well known, celebrities come in all flavors. Individuals can become widely recognized because they have excelled in some special area of life, have evinced some moral virtue, have been promoted by the publicity machine, have committed some great crime or indiscretion, have participated in some noteworthy event, or simply have become associated with other celebrities. Indeed, there are celebrities for all of the major interests, fears, and desires of human life, just as polytheistic religions have gods that personify the various and contradictory possibilities of human nature. Although excellence, spiritual gifts, and moral distinction are possible initial sources of celebrity, they are not necessary conditions for it; the cult of celebrity allows us to worship the best, the worst, and the most banal of ourselves. In any case, celebrities transcend the origins of their fame; they occupy their status because they are recognized and they exist to be recognized. The cult of celebrity does not offer any specific form of life, but allows its acolytes to choose their idols according to convenience.

Celebrities are also disposable. Although some of them may achieve more than fifteen minutes of fame, they are continually being elevated, cast down, and replaced in frenzies of hype. Dependent upon the whims of promoters and public opinion, they rise and fall in dazzling succession. Here the new polytheism differs decisively from its classical counterpart, in which the gods were a projection of an enduring community; postmodern life, with its devotion to transformation and spectacle, requires ever new incarnations of all the impulses of the old Adam.

Thus far we have been treating celebrities as though they were simply people who have been elevated for one reason or another into the condition of general recognition in diverse and complex mass societies. That, however, is only an oversimplified first approximation. In fact, rather than being primarily human individuals, celebrities are the reference points for images created by publicity machines and disseminated through the various channels of the mass media.

Celebrity is impossible to imagine apart from the vast technological and or-

ganizational network that generates and sustains it; celebrities are creatures of the media. General recognition in mass societies cannot be acquired through word of mouth and personal acquaintance, but is only gained through representation. The representation of celebrities to the general public is almost never in their own hands, but is contrived by professional image makers who have little or no concern with who their clients or charges are as concrete individuals, and consuming interest in how and where they appear to a potential audience. Celebrities gain their general recognition by sacrificing recognition of themselves to recognition of their images; they become icons and idols that are reproduced endlessly through the media in photographs, sound bites, and video clips. Their actual physical presence is merely an episodic phenomenon of staged “public appearances,” and their recognition often grows after they have died. As images, celebrities are marketed commodities. They are continually made aware of the need to stay “on message,” to reiterate and revalidate their celebrity texts (scripts and images): the celebrity, at bottom, is an imaginary construction that is referenced to a living or dead body.

*“the celebrity-image is constructed to give the audience
what it wants and expects, not to take the audience
beyond its limitations and to challenge it”*

The crucial importance of the celebrity-image is not merely due to the necessity of mediated representation to gain general recognition, but arises from what makes it possible for the celebrity to be recognized beyond a specialized station or activity. The content of the celebrity-image is a persona, a fabricated mask of personality that may have something to do with the individual’s actual character but that never exhausts it, usually exceeds it, and always distorts it. What the celebrity worshiper relates to is precisely this ersatz “personality,” investing it with devotion. The celebrity-image is constructed to give the audience what it wants and expects, not to take the audience beyond its limitations and to challenge it.

The object of celebrity worship only appears to be a person; in fact, it is as much an artifact as money or technology—yet another object fetish. Even those who stumble into celebrity by happenstance or bad luck quickly hire handlers to craft their representation. Awareness on the part of the audience that celebrity is an image of personality, not the real thing, leads to a secondary industry of getting behind the construction to the actual person. Yet rather than reaching some truth, celebrity profiles and exposés just add new layers to the original image. The common denominator of recognition that everyone can relate to is personality, yet it is just personality that is most elusive in the celebrity figure; the more information that we receive about celebrities, the greater the possibility of contrivance and manipulation. At the same time, persistent digging for dirt makes celebrities human, indeed, all too human, with feet of clay, just like the rest of us.

Celebrities form an ever changing pantheon of subdeities who cavort and

contend with each other according to the requirements of their images, adding lustre to one another at roasts and benefits, in gossip columns, and on talk shows. Their comings and goings, and couplings and ruptures across the mediascape form the contemporary equivalents of the mythic tales of the gods in traditional polytheistic religions. We need not look to the heavens to find the projections of our unredeemed nature; we need only turn on the TV.

WORSHIP

It is not difficult to understand why the publicity machine produces celebrities: celebrity sells. Celebrity is a commodity in our all too familiar consumer capitalism. Whatever the inner life of the image makers and the bodies that reference their handiwork may be, we can be sure that they are pursuing some mix of the quests for profit, power, and prestige. The more interesting and troublesome question is why people buy into fabricated personae and invest religious emotions in them. What are the motives of the audience—the celebrity worshipers? What is the state of their souls? In his extensive study of the publicity machine's production of celebrity, Joshua Gamson anchors his analysis on the famous nineteenth-century promoter P. T. Barnum. For the publicity machine, there's a sucker born every minute.⁷

Following Simmel's observation that the weakening of traditional faith leads to an immanent spirituality that turns religion into a function of the individual's life, we can expect that the primary motives for celebrity worship are based on needs and deficits of the individual self related to coping with an all-embracing world that seems to provide no breakthrough to transcendence. Writers on celebrity have identified psychological, social, and spiritual motives for celebrity worship, all of which concern the efforts of a weak and discontented self to achieve stability and peace.

There is an impressive body of literature in behavioral psychology devoted specifically to "celebrity worship."⁸ The basic idea expressed in this literature is that the devotee of a celebrity creates a "para-social relationship" with the object, investing the celebrity with phantasmic projections of need-fulfillment. In mild cases of "worship," the individual simply takes an interest in the celebrity through the media. More intense devotees enter into more particular networks of the publicity machine like fan clubs. Zealots attempt to make contact with the celebrity, indulge in fantasies of being part of the celebrity's life, and sometimes try to act out those fantasies.

Researchers have found that celebrity worshipers tend to be introverted and

⁷Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

⁸Lynn E. McCutcheon, Renee Lange, and James Houran, "Conceptualization and Measurement of Celebrity Worship," *British Journal of Psychology* 93 (2002) 67-83. The authors provide a useful overview and summary of the psychological literature on celebrity worship.

intuitive (rather than rationally calculating) and that they find it more difficult than the average person to relate to other people. In the most full-blown cases, the fanatic is scarred by an inability to trust. Celebrity worship is associated with “erotomania,” the belief that one is loved by the para-social object. At its root, it is an expression of a need for love by someone who distrusts their capacity to love or to be loved. The relation to a weakening faith in a God of love could not be more clear.

“celebrity worship is explicitly a failure to love one’s neighbor”

A social dimension of celebrity worship is described by anthropologist Eric Gans, who traces the phenomenon to social resentment.⁹ According to Gans, people worship celebrities so they can avoid acknowledging and admiring the actual human beings in their midst who display superior virtues or have acquired more of what society has to offer. By placing an idol (that the psychologists tell us is a personal projection anyway) above their neighbors, they level the latter’s real distinctions and ease their inferiority feelings. For Gans, celebrity worship is explicitly a failure to love one’s neighbor.

Sociologist Chris Rojek fills out the motives for celebrity worship by describing its spiritual dimension as a “cult of distraction.”¹⁰ Weakening of traditional faith, Rojek argues, leaves individuals to confront the limitations, adversities, and injustices of worldly existence by themselves and without hope of reconciliation. Unable to confront naked existence in the absence of God, they wire themselves into the spectacle of the mediascape. For Rojek, celebrity worship is no more than a diversion; he observes that nobody believes that idolizing an icon will give them salvation or redemption—it is just an ever repeated temporary escape from existential anguish.

Celebrity is methadone for the soul, produced by consumer capitalism to palliate unfulfilled psychological needs, social resentments, and spiritual discontent. Beneath its glittering façade of spectacle, there is nothing but the old Adam, imagining idols in a ceaseless and failed effort at worshipping a self that the worshiper from the beginning finds wanting. The French social critic Jean Baudrillard astutely points out that the appeal of mass culture resides precisely in the fact that it is all surface and no substance; it “seduces” just because it is hollow.¹¹ In the absence of faith, the “silent majorities” are not strong enough to face up to their condition and accept any challenges to overcome themselves. Rather, they want “riskless adventures,” another way of saying cheap grace.

⁹Eric Gans, “Chronicles of Love and Resentment: More On Celebrity.” Online: <http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw114.htm> [cited 11 August 2002].

¹⁰Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion, 2001) 90-91.

¹¹Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (French original, 1979; New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990).

We return to Simmel to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the state of the celebrity worshiper's soul. Behind all the psychological maintenance functions performed by celebrity is the unwillingness or inability of the worshipers to devote themselves to anyone or anything beyond their own weak selves. They need a religious object that appears to be other than themselves and superior to them, but that in fact is merely a projection of themselves and under their control. In the terms of traditional monotheism, idol worship is a sin, a rebellion against God. Yet celebrity worship does not partake of the defiance that we associate with rebellion. There is no strength or assertion in celebrity worship, no struggle of wills, not even a temptation—only an empty seduction. If we can even speak of rebellion here, it is not only passive but also unconscious. Celebrity worshipers play a cynical game of bad faith with themselves, raising up what they have already cast down and pretending that they are related when they are deeply solipsistic and narcissistic.

Should one be so grave and remonstrative about something so common that appears in many ways to be innocent? This is always a question when something that is dubious and problematic at best, and evil at worst, turns out to be based on weakness rather than some vital, even if misguided or malign, assertion. If nothing else, celebrity worship responds to religious impulses that are embedded deeply within the Western tradition; it is more than entertainment, but far less than faith. ⊕

DEENA WEINSTEIN is professor of sociology at DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois. MICHAEL WEINSTEIN is professor of political science at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. They share a research specialization in cultural theory.