

The Triumph of Vulgar

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Several months ago I was looking through Westminster's library for some books on music. My eyes fell on one titled *The Triumph of Vulgar*. Good title, I thought. I also thought that it was probably some cranky Christian book on music. I picked it up and was interested to find that it was published by Oxford University Press. As I paged through the book I became more and more intrigued. The author, Robert Pattison, was neither cranky nor identifiably Christian. He was developing, in a careful and learned manner, the remarkable thesis that rock music is the contemporary vulgar expression of nineteenth-century Romantic pantheism.

What does such a thesis mean? Pattison is suggesting that at least part of the cultural development in the nineteenth century was pantheistic - that it sought the divine not as separate from and transcendent over creation, but as part of or the foundation of all reality. God is not out there, he is here. He is us; he is the world. Pattison quotes Alexis de Tocqueville's celebrated *Democracy in America* to define pantheism and show its peculiar attractions for a democratic society: "If one finds a philosophical system which teaches that all things material and immaterial, visible and invisible, which the world contains are only to be considered as the several parts of an immense Being who alone remains eternal in the midst of the continual flux and transformation of all that composes Him, one may be sure that such a system, although it destroys human individuality, or rather just because it destroys it, will have secret charms for men living under democracies... It naturally attracts their imagination and holds it fixed. It fosters the pride and soothes the laziness of their minds." In a democratic society pantheism means that we are all equally divine and that therefore all our feelings and ideas are equally good and true.

Pattison argues that the Romantic music of the nineteenth century (for example that of Richard Wagner) expressed the refined and sophisticated pantheism of that era. But the pantheism of the twentieth century has ceased to be refined and has become vulgar. The vulgar is that which is immediately understandable and accessible to all. Rock music is the chief cultural expression of this pantheism. Rock offers total emotional involvement immediately to all. Rock unifies and enfolds all who are drawn into it. What the New Age movement and radical ecology mean for the few, rock means for the many. Through rock we are enfolded into one another and experience the divine.

Interestingly Allan Bloom in his chapter "Music" in *The Closing of the American Mind* reaches a remarkably similar conclusion. He sees the role of music among the young as central: "Nothing is more singular about this generation than its addiction to music"; and "TV... compared to music plays a comparatively small role in the formation of young people's character and taste...."

Neither Pattison's nor Bloom's complex arguments can be adequately summarized here. But I would like to mention three of the dangers of devotion to rock music that emerge from these books. These are important for Christians because they raise deeper questions than just if the lyrics are moral or immoral. They look to the deeper impact of rock music on Christian young people and on the whole Christian community.

The first danger that both Pattison and Bloom note is lethargy or detachment from traditional attitudes and activities. Pattison cites John Aldridge's *In the Country of the Young*: "In ordinary circumstances, when they are not operating as a Tartar horde, the great majority of the young seem to be creatures of remarkably flaccid personality. One senses in them a singular blandness, even temperamental nullity.... Clearly, the young are suffering from a massive dissociation of sensibility, a loss of relationship with the living realities of the world." Bloom writes, "Rock music provides premature ecstasy and, in this respect, is like the drugs with which it is allied... In my experience, students who have had a serious fling with drugs - and gotten over it - find it difficult to have enthusiasms or great expectations. It is as though the color has been drained out of their lives and they see everything in black and white."

The second danger, closely allied to the first, is a diminished capacity for rational thought. Bloom wrote, "music is the soul's primitive and primary speech and it is alogon, without articulate speech or reason. It is not only not reasonable, it is hostile to reason." Pattison argues, "When the pantheist equates self and God, he demotes thought to secondary role in the universe and elevates feeling as the fundamental way of knowing." He applies this to rock music: "Rock lyrics are suffused with the language of emotion; need, want, and feel are the building blocks of its abstract vocabulary. Logic and reason are everywhere associated with the loss of youth and the death of vitality." Bloom concludes, "My concern here is not with the moral effects of this music - whether it leads to sex, violence, or drugs. The issue here is its effect on education, and I believe it ruins the imagination of young people and makes it very difficult for them to have a passionate relationship to the art and thought that are the substance of liberal education."

The third danger developed particularly by Pattison is the threat rock music poses to transcendent religion, and therefore to Christianity. He writes, "Some dreamers have hoped to harness rock to propagate the values of transcendent ideologies... But rock is useless to teach any transcendent value. The instigators of these projects merely promote the pagan rites they hope to co-opt. Rock's electricity as much as its pantheist heritage gives the lie to whatever enlightened propaganda may be foisted on it. The rocker is simultaneously alone with himself and at one with the universe. No intermediate state of transcendence such as Christianity or schoolbook morality preached is likely to appeal to him. He takes his pantheism neat." He continues, "Rock knocks the props out from under religion, first, by shifting the locus of faith from God to self, and secondly, by depriving sects and churches of their claim to exclusive revelation. By forcing churches to compete on the basis of their ability to titillate the instincts of their worshipers, vulgar pantheism compels the champions of organized religion to abandon their pretension to superior truth and turns them into entrepreneurs of emotional stimulation. Once God becomes a

commodity used for self-gratification, his fortunes depend on the vagaries of the emotional marketplace... In the age of rock, one would expect to find both a decline in attendance at traditional church services, especially among the young, and a simultaneous proliferation of religious cults that cater to the emotions that cannot be satisfied by established rituals. And this is just what the facts indicate.”

Rock has triumphed. What are Christians to do? At the very least they must severely limit the exposure of Christian young people to rock music so they will not become addicted. They must seek to make learning an adventure, helping young people to experience the excitement and riches of great literature and great art and music. They must never accept mediocre, bland education in their Christian schools. They must refuse absolutely to compromise their worship to meet the fancies of the rock generation. Even secular observers see that rock music is fundamentally incompatible with Christian worship. Christians must become missionaries to those addicted to rock music to help deliver them from the addiction for Christ’s sake.

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