



Kelton Cobb

Kelton Cobb, professor of theology and ethics at interdenominational Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Conn., is the author of *The Blackwell Guide to Theology and Popular Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005). He recommends two books that reflect on vital signs of the doctrine of divine providence within popular culture.

Doctrine of Divine Providence

Thomas S. Hibbs, *Shows about Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture from the Exorcist to Seinfeld* (Dallas: Spence Publishing Company, 1999). While this little book may appear from the title to be a bit dated (this is an intrinsic problem regarding books on popular culture), the underlying case Hibbs makes is deep and wide, and becoming more timely with each passing day. A trajectory that he finds arcing its way through popular culture is that of the “dark God” of nihilism, a bizarro-God of anti-providence overseeing a world without purpose, a world that ultimately means nothing. There is no assurance in this world that good will come of evil, nor that there is any point of even distinguishing between the two—beyond equating them with pleasure and pain. Some of our most brilliant makers of popular films and television shows are intent on entertaining us by deconstructing the grand narratives that have sustained the moral life and eschatological hopes of western culture for centuries. Hibbs’s credibility is increased in that he acknowledges how entertaining many of these shows are (e.g., *Seinfeld*), while at the same time he recognizes their acidic effects. He laments this situation, and by drawing attention to it invites us to retrieve our trust in providence before its pulse is lost. ◀

Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (NY: Penguin, 2003). This is a surprising recommendation, because I think Lears gets most of his argument wrong, but many of his interpretations and much of his analysis along the way are right. He sees a tension deep in the American character between belief in Providence and belief in Chance, a tension that divides those who trust that the universe is coherent and that it will reward those who work hard and play by the rules from those who see the universe as a random whirl, a “vast lottery,” where gamblers are heroes and luck is what counts. Lears tells the narrative of Providence as one that leads from Calvin through the Puritans, to the Evangelical social reformers of the Social Gospel who set in place “a culture of control”—consisting of myriad agencies, systems, and layers of management—that buffers us (or so we think) from the contingencies of life and is sapping the vibrancy out of our culture. The narrative of Chance is a story of gamblers, speculators, visionaries, and postmodern believers in mojo, ecstasy and grace, who keep life worth living. Lears sheds light on how these two faiths are manifest in popular culture. But in the end, because he’s a confirmed believer in Luck, he exaggerates its wonders while distorting the achievements of the institutions and folkways of Providence. ◀

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