

Case Study: Fan Worship

There is nothing unusual about young people admiring famous people from the world of music, sports, film and television. Consumer culture in the modern world thrives on the cult of celebrity, and we are taught by the mass media to value individual achievement alongside talent, good looks and charisma. Many people go through phases of enthusiasm for popular icons such as Leonardo DiCaprio and Britney Spears, and the Internet is full of websites devoted to them. For some people, however, being a 'fan' is something that they take very seriously, and their allegiance to the person or group will form a significant part of their self-identity. Fans of distinctive bands like The Cure, The Smiths or Radiohead, for example, are often devoted to what they perceive as the ethos of the artist (their beliefs and values) as well as to their music. In some cases, the untimely death of a rock star has only served to heighten their cult status: tributes to Kurt Cobain, who committed suicide in 1994, continue to portray him as a god-like figure of contemporary youth culture, while fans of the Manic Street Preachers were devastated by the mysterious disappearance of Richey James, whose reputation for anorexia and self-mutilation had made him infamous. At the most extreme end of the spectrum, we hear about 'celebrity stalking' by fans who become obsessed with a particular person to the point of threatening their welfare: Madonna, Brad Pitt and Jill Dando have all been victims of this, the latter with tragic consequences.

Sources:

- for an article on 'celebrity stalking', see:
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1408843.stm> (an article by Peter Gould for the BBC)
- for a scathing attack on 'obsessive fans', see:
<http://www.ggower.com/fans/winners.shtml>

Questions:

1. Think of some of the artists, musicians, and celebrities of whom you are a fan: what kinds of ideas and values do you associate with them?
2. To what extent do you think 'fan worship' can be practised like a religion? How do 'obsessive' fans relate to the people they admire?
3. Think about how this might fit into the debate about secularization: is the 'cult of celebrity' a replacement for religion or just a new form of it?
4. If a Durkheimian sociologist were to suggest that the idols we admire are really collective representations of society, would you agree?
5. What does the wide range of idols and figureheads we have in contemporary society suggest about religious pluralism?