Welcome to the Religion and Culture Web Forum's public discussion board for June 2008. In this thread you will find the invited responses from Crystal Downing, Jean Bethke Elshtain, Robert Johnston, and William Paden.

To leave your own question or response to Brent Plate's essay or to another posting, choose "post reply." In order to submit a comment, you must register with a personal user ID and password.

Debra Erickson
Editor, Religion and Culture Web Forum

Both screen beings and religious beings exist virtually, at the level of imagination, albeit through the media of words, voices, iconicity. Gods are "filmic" in this aspect; while they are not on the movie screen, they are on the mind screen; spiritual beings—such as deities, ancestors, and demons—are the primary agents of mythic dramas, yet like the personae in cinema are without materiality, without real bodies. I suspect we build these larger than life representations, these maya-like dreamscapes, with the same naturalness that all organisms build habitats or environments. Hence, human worldmaking, culture.

I'm struck by the reference to the Woody Allen film where the character comes off the screen and takes the film viewer out to dinner. Gods, too, come out of the heavenly screen, penetrate our permeable street
worlds, and enter our lives as allies, saviors, forces to be dealt with. Spirits, in the genre we call religion, constitute real, institutional social capital and their currency is accepted in most public places, though movie stars too can have enough charisma to affect everyday lives.

In this essay Plate features formal, aesthetic parallels with religion, but differences are of course equally interesting, as the author knows. Yes, in some ways cinema has a re-creative function in that it is a time when we can step back from routine life and consider another way the world might be. Yet periodic religious observances (e.g. Sabbaths) are perhaps less typically a re-creation of imagination and more typically (and structurally) a rehearsal of an enduring mythic template and its social obligations.

Again, Plate knows that he is selecting, for comparison, one aspect of the function of the Sabbath, its life-creating open-endedness. But repeatability is a formal feature of religion, a feature structurally uncharacteristic of the one-time, episodic worlds of film, although cult-films would be exceptions insofar as they invite continual re-entry. Likewise, religious spaces are typically performatory and participatory where filmic spaces are spectatorial, though again, I think Plate understands that that can be reversed. It is worth noting, in contemplating differences, that there is something that cinema and its aesthetic analogues do by their nature that religions do not, and this was pointed out by Ernst Cassirer long ago: art, by its plasticity, offers freedom from the otherwise fixed, entrapping way that myth assumes literal, objective reality in the religions.

But here de-essentializing the concept of religion is in order. The notion of frames helps do that, for a religion is not a single world but a concept encompassing a host of phenomenological worlds with different spaces, purposes, sub-settings—a host of different camera angles such as panoramas and close-ups, a repertoire of framing devices and lightings—and this corresponds to Plate’s important last point about multiple layers of filmic reality, each presenting its own contents and occluding the other layers as it does so. Erving Goffman’s frame theory seems to apply here. In this essay, Plate sides with the imaginal rather than prescriptive sides of the life of the gods.

The larger point, that all of this exemplifies something that can be called worldmaking, is the heart of Plate’s approach, but note the ramification that not only can film and religion be compared as forms of world construction but so can many forms of culture. Blessedly, culture is not a single, homogeneous field, but a repertoire of environments arrayed in terms of diverse spaces of purpose in variegated mediums, just as in commonsense terms we are used to the differences between play space and work space, courtship space and battlefield space.

Each of these stagings has its creative patterns and dramatic eventfulness that affect the way its participants perceive the world. Dedicated, specialized worlds like those of each of the arts, each of the
sciences, and indeed, religious studies, generate distinctive skills, perspectives, languages, and knowledges through which we discover, re-discover, and re-construe the universe.

William Paden
University of Vermont

Anonymous
Posted: 02 Jun 2008 16:01    Post subject: Crystal Downing’s response to Brent Plate

Having published over forty essays on the cultural significance of film, I was delighted with the opportunity to read “The Altar and the Screen” by S. Brent Plate. Furthermore, having slogged my way through too much arcane film theory, I appreciated the lucidity of Plate’s prose, which not only makes his thesis clear, but also offers lovely flourishes like “All the world’s a stage, and all worlds are stages.” This very flourish, in fact, might function as a synecdoche of Plate’s thesis: our world is a stage upon which we construct the myths of film and religion, both of which stage re-creations—new visions and hence versions—of the worlds we inhabit. Such a thesis, I have no doubt, will be welcomed, if not celebrated, by most modernists (liberal humanists) among us. But people trained in various postmodern theologies—not to mention the pre-modern faiths they sometimes echo—may be somewhat disturbed.

Plate writes that the “the making of film . . . is not far from the making of religion”: both create new worlds. But if lengthy credits proclaim the makers of film, who is it that similarly “makes” religion? Plate offers an answer by quoting William Paden: world-making “is an open-ended, interactive process, filled with various and complex sensory and cognitive domains, encompassing both representation and practice, both imaginal objects and bodies-in-performance.”

This is most certainly true of religion, and also of film in its production. But the parallel falls apart when it comes to the responding audience. In a movie theatre a film is not open-ended or interactive; it has the same beginning, middle, and end on the screen whether the theater is packed or empty, whether people yell at the characters or fall asleep half way through, whether it is viewed on the day of its release or fifty years later. And perhaps this harmonizes with a modernist view of religion: it is a cultural construction that comforts a passive audience, as in the famous pronouncement by Marx: “Religion is the opiate of the masses.” For Marx, religion provides an escape into what Plate approvingly calls “a world of fantasy, a world of ideology.”

More current views of religion, however, emphasize the performance of the audience (for lack of a better word) as constitutive of religion itself. Both post-liberal narrative theology and Radical Orthodoxy repeatedly allude to participation in their postmodern theologies. In “Radical
Orthodoxy: A New Theology (1999), Laurence Paul Hemming explains that “‘I’ am constitutive for the [religious] tradition as being in an intimate dialogue with it: I am the potential horizon of its being made actual, its realization.” This cannot be said of film audiences, who “participate” only insofar as buying the opportunity to passively watch.

Of course, without paying customers, movies would not be “made actual.” And, as Plate notes, such audiences are given a new vision of the world. But this is a far cry from the performativity of postmodern (and much pre-modern) Christianity, wherein followers not only perform rites and rituals, but also perform Christ to others. As Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt puts it (in Radical Orthodoxy), “[A]cts of charity are not simply a way of showing forth the reality of God, but are themselves acts of seeing God”: a far cry from the seeing of movies.

In contradistinction to Plate’s modernist view of religion, a postmodern (or post-postmodern) view might parallel religion not with film but with live theater. While most theatre starts with a text—as do the three Abrahamic faiths—stage actors attest that the response of an audience makes a difference to their performance. In fact, an audience can permanently change a theatrical piece, actors reprising idiosyncrasies of a successful performance in future shows. Unlike film audiences, those “seeing” live theater contribute to its making.

Theater, unlike film, also illuminates the postmodern theology of John D. Caputo. In his award-winning book, “The Weakness of God” (2007), Caputo builds upon the thought of Jacques Derrida to argue against the cultural construction of religion, replacing it with the possibility of the Impossible, of an Event that exceeds all expectation: “the event is an excess, an overflow, a surprise, . . .something that requires a response from us.” This, of course, can be said of a movie event—but only our first experience of it. And though we may notice something new in successive viewings of a film, the movie itself is unchanging, no matter our response. In contrast, anything could happen with actors on a stage, which is what makes theater so thrilling.

Movies, then, are comparable to what Derrida calls “messianisms”: constructed religions limited to the imaginations of their makers. Derrida encourages, instead, the “messianic”: an unanticipated encounter with something/someone that exceeds human constructions, something/someone that is beyond human imagining. It is a call for mystery, explaining why postmodern theorists and theologians have found Augustine, the “Prince of Mystics,” far more provocative than the Peter Berger invoked by “The Altar and the Screen.”

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Crystal Downing
Messiah College
Brent Plate has once again proven both helpful and provocative in his writing on religion and film. We continue to learn from him. In this article, Brent focuses on the functional equivalencies between religion and cinema, the altar and the screen. Both present the faithful “with alternate worlds, prescriptions for a better life, and imaginative tools for re-viewing the world as it is.” As Plate helpfully describes, there are analogies between these two cultural expressions. Both are rooted in stories that inspire – that connect a created world to everyday life. Both film and religion focus the participants’ attention by providing frames, by projecting a particular human ordering in ways that invite humans in to its world to become participants.”

This connection between the cineplex and the cathedral has been described by others in a variety of ways. Some have posited that the conversation between religion/theology and film is an “interreligious dialogue” [see Bryan Stone, “Faith and Film” (2000) and John Lyden, “Theology and Film: Interreligious Dialogue and Theology,” in R. Johnston, “Reframing Theology and Film” (2007)]. In “Reel Spirituality” (2006) and “Finding God in the Movies” (2004, with Catherine Barsotti), I have spoken of the power of movies, like that of the church, to usher viewers into the presence of the Transcendent.


In this article, Plate chooses to play the role of bricoleur, “juxtaposing film theory and religious theory in order to highlight the ways both religion and film are engaged in the practice of worldmaking.” Both priest and filmmaker are actively engaged with the raw materials of “earth,” attempting to make meaning of spaces, times and peoples by framing our attention in new ways.

While extremely helpful, such a focus on social construction, on the creation of ordered worlds, on being a bricoleur, also has its limitations when applied to religion and film. For the experience of film, like that of faith, is also receptive. It is receiving a “gift” (gaube), and not just doing a “task” (aufgaube). Plate labels the activity of both religionist and filmmaker as “re-creation,” playing on the word “recreation.” He says the hyphen allows the word to resonate with a deeper meaning. He fears that “recreation” is something we do “to get away from the world.” “Re-creation,” on the other hand, allows us to dissect, analyze,
But are not religion and film also “recreational” activities? Plate’s discussion of the Sabbath, following Heschel, seems to allow for this, but he takes Heschel’s comments in another direction.

Play/leisure/recreation is defective if it is mere escape. Rather, Sabbath, like all play experiences, is productive, even if non-instrumental. It is the alternate of work, a second means of engaging the world. Though a parenthesis in life, it is not an escape from life. Rather, recreation provides life both meaning and perspective, our spirits entering into communion with others and the Other.

In both religion and film-going, we not only enter into social construction, we are also “constructed” as we tap into the transformative power of other worlds. Our “reaching out” is met by the “in-reaching” of another/Another, or at least it can be (Cf., Loughlin on icons; Greeley on sacraments; Johnston on divine encounters; Marsh on worship.) Here is the mystery that Heschel so helpfully describes. Religion, like filmmaking, helps frame the endeavor. It projects a certain ordering. But we must not confuse such projections with the Reality encountered through them.

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Robert K. Johnston
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Author of Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue

Anonymous
Posted: 13 Jun 2008 20:26   Post subject: Jean Elshtain’s reply to Brent Plate

Editor’s note: this commentary has been edited for length. To view the full version, go to: http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/webforum/062008/elshtain_response.pdf

Plate’s essay begins with language that evokes the mystery and power of film. His argument overall provokes appreciation, engagement, and criticism—all features of a conversation about fascinating matters. In what follows, I will offer general comments as well as a few shorter points.

Plate enters interpretive territory as he analogizes film to religion. The comparison both illuminates and confounds, however, as do all comparisons between protean subjects. Surely not all moviegoers who have paid admission to see a particular film, not film-as-such, do so to “escape” the world. Sometimes, yes. At other times, the moviegoer enters the world more deeply rather than escaping....
Plate’s choice of Woody Allen’s “Purple Rose of Cairo” serves his purposes well as he goes on to make a point about the “leaking” of “ideas and images” from the screen to the street. But what follows from that strikes me as problematic on a number of levels. First, one observes that Plate has wedded himself to a variant on a functionalist account of religion and film. The problem lies in reducing religion, as Plate’s example here, to an ascribed function. Functionalism by definition prescinds on the matter of truth and truth claims, e.g., Plate states that “religions” provide “prescriptions for a better life…promises, warnings, and compelling narratives for behaving in a particular (and often peculiar) ways.”

What’s the problem with this line of inquiry? For one thing, it drops all religions into a single vast stew pot, going on to suggest that “religions” are primarily about codes for behavior. Here Plate’s analogy between religion and film falters yet again. Although the work of many hands, films begin as the vision of a particular person. Religion, or to be more precise, Christianity, the religion I know best, predates film by nearly two thousand years, and every single day for all these years, Christians have been drawn into community as they re-create Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection. There is a solidity to this world of real presences and saturated symbols signifying deep and mysterious truths for the believer. I am not the “author” of any of this although I re-authorize beliefs and practices through my actions.

Toward the conclusion of his essay, Plate offers us Clifford Geertz’s “extensive definition of religion.” As much as I loved and respected my late friend, Cliff Geertz, I find his definition of religion not quite up to the mark. Even as Geertz’s “thick description” hermeneutic could and has been brought to bear fruitfully in the study of cultural phenomena, his definition of religion (“moods and motivations”) suggests emotivism, an epistemological claim that is most often part and parcel of a desiccated positivism.

At the conclusion of his essay, Plate further analogizes by equating the making of religion and film. Surely, however, this is too anthropomorphic a move that heroizes an anthropocentric narrative, dismissing or ignoring thereby the challenges human beings confront when they are brought up short by a great mystery, a breaking into the world of unexpected and even unwelcome moments of transcendence: What should we do? What does this mean? Why have you come to torment us? Aren’t you leading us into danger and confounding our comfortable lives? The New Testament is filled with this sort of thing...

Finally, before I turn to my short points, I want to raise questions about Plato’s terms of discourse, most importantly the by-now ubiquitous phrase, “socially constructed.” This locution is by now so overused that it has become a predictable, hence devalued, coin of the conceptual realm, often obscuring more than it reveals. When someone queries me, as people are sometimes wont to do, “Don’t you believe that x or y is socially constructed?” my response is: “I cannot begin to
answer that question until you explain to me what you are talking about when you say x or y is socially constructed.” This can mean a number of things, from the unexceptional and common-sensical to the implausible. There are soft, hard, and in-between variations on social constructionism....Note as well that a tacit anthropology lurks within each meaning to social construction.

So how is Plate using social construction? And what is his anthropology? We get some hints: human beings behave mimetically having absorbed images from films. Human beings have a need to keep “the threatening forces of chaos at bay.” There also appears to be a need for some sort of “fantasy” life. It would be useful were Plate to spell out in detail both his anthropological presuppositions and his working definition of social construction.

Now to the ‘quick and dirty’ points:

1. Plate references both Kant and Durkheim as lying “in the background” of his work. These are two very different sorts of thinkers, to put it mildly. Kant’s is a world of universally applicable, invariable duties. Durkheim, often called an organicist, melts the individual person into the collective, suggesting thereby a version of social determinism. How and in what ways did these thinkers serve Plate’s purposes?

2. The “performative” drama of cinematic “world making” is, yet again, quite different from religion in this sense: the entire auteur debate about film critics and theorists figures here. World-making requires a maker. In film, although many hands are involved, the project begins as the vision, to be instantiated, of an auteur, a director—that is why we recognize immediately a John Ford or Martin Scorsese film. Religion offers no such line of world-making: it is far more dense, more saturated with the dust and lore of centuries, more the outcome of the actions of millions of believers worshipping faithfully over the centuries.

3. I doubt very much there is any causal link, or even inverse correlation, between church and synagogue attendance and movie-going. For one thing—and this is relatively minor—religious services are overwhelmingly in the mornings, so unless one lives in a metropolis with 24/7 film screenings, there is no direct competition. (Our local Cineplex in Nashville offers its first Sunday screenings between 12 noon and 1 p.m.) More important by far to challenge the assumption is the fact that the pinnacle of film attendance and church going in America occurred at the same time, in the 1950s, when fully one-third of the American population, in any given week, went to the movies. If Plate’s thesis held, we would expect to see church attendance in decline given this massive flocking of folks to the movies. Not so.

4. It would be helpful to know what public opinion research Plate consulted to underwrite his claim that, in the view of “public opinion,” the Sabbath is “a state of passivity.” Contra this “public opinion” Plate describes wonderfully an active view of the Sabbath in the Jewish
tradition. I agree with his “active” characterization, but I am not convinced that “public opinion” points in another direction.

In an essay in which there is much that is well-said, I want to affirm, in concluding, two more points:

5. Plate’s characterization of studio logos is a lot of fun. The logo that dominated my childhood was the MGM Lion, that terrific beast that roared at the world.

6. Finally, I am pleased that Plate reminds us of the extraordinary power of the close-up, the marvelous physiognomy of the human face in large. Here what leaps to mind are images of the breath-taking physical beauty of the faces of the young Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift in severe close-up (and in black and white, the true ‘language’ of film as an art form), in George Stevens’, “A Place in the Sun.” When Taylor whispers into Clift’s ear, “Tell Mama. Tell Mama all,” hearts melt as they have melted for half a century.

Film is a potent medium. It stands on its own as a subject for creative interpretation and critical analysis. One does not require analogies to religion or anything else to do this, although human beings are analogizers and much is illuminated via the ‘analogical imagination.’ Much can also be obscured or confounded, as I have argued. I look forward to reading Plate’s forthcoming book. I’m certain that his book will prove as stimulating as this essay. Thanks for the preview or, as we said when I was a child, the “teaser.”

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Jean Bethke Elshtain
University of Chicago

Anonymous

Posted: 26 Jun 2008 19:30    Post subject: Brent Plate’s response to commentary

Thank you to Drs. Paden, Downing, Johnston, and Elshtain for taking the time to write your excellent and stimulating responses, and to the work of Debra Erickson for putting this all together. I hope more and more of our intellectual work as academics may take the form of “public forums.”

I wanted to follow up on a few comments and criticisms made of my essay. The good responses here allow me to clarify and condense, but also to expand what I’ve written. However, I simply cannot respond to everything written by the four respondents.

As a scholar invested in interdisciplinary analyses, I am attempting to bridge film studies and religious studies in ways that I do not believe have been thoroughly worked through. Scholars like Rob Johnston, Clive Marsh, and Gaye Ortiz, among others, have offered excellent
works that correlate and juxtapose Christian theology with film. I’m trying to think about this broader, more nebulous category of religion in relation to culture and its productions. My primary academic home is religious studies, but I will be publishing this book with a film studies press (Wallflower Press in London), a press that has no other books in its catalog dealing with religious studies. In the same way, I recently published the book “Blasphemy: Art that Offends” with an arts press (Black Dog Publishing, also in London). I am actively trying to move back and forth between fields, and especially to show the relevance of religion for a deeper understanding of culture and cultural products.

My key follow up is the simplest, and that is to emphasize again that my essay was an extraction of lengthier arguments made in my forthcoming book, “Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World.” Some of the argumentation made in “The Altar and the Screen” is followed up with several chapters of detail in the book. I worked to make “The Altar and the Screen” a coherent, stand-alone piece and I remain happy with it, but as always pieces fall through the editing cracks and can only be explained in a longer format.

Therefore, the longer argument of the book first speaks a bit to Paden’s emphasis on the repetitious aspect of ritual in contrast to my emphasis on the re-creative aspect. Johnston and Elshtain similarly hone in on my hyphenation of “re-creation,” asking whether film cannot be (merely) “recreational”; indeed it can but I am here sounding a warning against the “merely recreational” and trying to reinsert that other side of the dialectic: re-creation. We already know about the escapism of film, that is the default approach to film. I’m trying to revive its other dimension.

Indeed, these dual emphases are part and parcel of those things we call rituals. In my overall research, I am increasingly interested in the dialectic of ritual: the felt human need to be repetitive and thus to foster strong identity formation, comfort, etc., but the equally felt need for new stimuli to occasionally kick rituals out of their routine, to upgrade them, and make us again say, “wow!” Thus, I believe an understanding of the arts, how they operate, and their affects on people is crucial. In much of my work on film, I have stressed the symbolic metaphor of the spiral to describe this (the spiral crops up throughout filmic images, from “Wizard of Oz” to “Happy Feet”): everything returns, but if the ritualizing is done “right” the event (a crucifixion, an exodus, a journey to Mecca) will return in a way, as T.S. Eliot poeticized, in which we will “arrive where we started and see the place for the first time.” The second chapter of my book (“Ritualizing in Space and Time”) takes up some of this, and further develops the ways rituals and films are analogous in such dialectic constructions.

And while my book’s chapters one and two take up the formal issues of myth and ritual, respectively, chapters three and four turn to reception, and thus speak in some ways to both Downing’s and Johnston’s concerns about performativity. Chapter three incorporates the avant-
garde films of Maya Deren, Hollis Frampton, and most specifically, Stan Brakhage, making clear that the world-creating impact of the film is felt in the embodied response of viewers as well.

Meanwhile, I have consistently argued against the deeply disconcerting notion that film viewing is “passive,” as Downing suggests for this activity. (See, among other places, my co-written essay with Margaret Miles, “Hospitable Vision,” available at: http://www.crosscurrents.org/MilesPlateSpring2004.htm ) The passive view imagines that film’s only impact can take place at the movie theatre/living room couch. Perhaps the “text” might have the same beginning, middle and end, but what ultimately matters is what people do with the texts. Films work—as do our everyday conversations, our meals, our temple services, our walks in the park—to quite literally change the future outlooks of our lives. Which is of course not to say all films do this to the same extent. Such a reception-oriented perspective is why I ground the film-religion analogy in “worldmaking” enterprises, to show the participatory necessity of worlds. That films, and religious myths and rituals, change our worlds may be a “modern” viewpoint, but one that has never been surpassed in the “postmodern” environment. As I see it, it is one of the constants with which postmodernism, if that is still a useful term, is still grappling. (And, for the record, I am not interested in doing a theological take on film, so “postmodern theologies” tack onto a wholly other analogy.)

Filmic reception is part of the subject of the final two chapters of my book, especially the fourth (“The Footprints of Film”; a shorter version appears in "The Revealer," available at: http://www.therevealer.org/archives/timeless_002109.php ). There is a “call” in film (label it “messianic,” “iconic,” or “sacramental” if you will), and yet there are numerous responses that have already occurred to those calls. However, they are often not what theologians would typically call transcendent. People (and here I mean actually ritualizing and mythologizing people) have been deeply affected by films and had aspects of their lives changed by them, or change parts of their lives to fit in with films. That couples organize their wedding rituals around “The Matrix” or “Star Trek” themes, that tourists make pilgrimages for “Sex and the City” tours of New York or “Sideways” wine tours of Santa Barbara county, that bar and bat mitzvot rituals take up themes based on “Titanic” or “Star Wars,” are all realities in our society. There are groups of people now establishing themselves as part of “Matrixism,” and of orders of “Jedi Knights,” and in every metropolis in the United States, on Saturday at midnight, we can find adherents in line for their 3rd, 39th, or 300th screening of “The Rocky Horror Picture Show,” dressed with full regalia and ready for ritualized responses. This is the way many people are today actually living their religions and making meaning in their lives. Such scenarios foil our academic work on trying to define religion, because the way people are living religion doesn’t often mesh with what anthropologists and theologians are saying it is.
Indeed, Elshtain is correct in suggesting the perennial problems with how to explain and define religion, and for these reasons I have not chosen to take a particular definitional stance herein. Certainly not all religions are alike; though this critique needs to be applied to so-called singular traditions such as Christianity and Islam as well; i.e., there is no such thing as Christianity, there are only “Christianities.” But there nonetheless remain analogous activities across times, cultures, and religions. Even the attempt to affirm anything called Christianity must have its basis in analogy; the tradition can only carry forward because it has an analogous relation to the past.

Nor have I given any final descriptive narrative definition for film—a point none of the religion/theology-oriented respondents make, since their concerns have been clearly weighted toward the "religious" side of my analogy. My analogy between Geertz and Souriau was, as clearly indicated, not intended to explain either religion or film. For the record, my words were, "And while [Souriaus] seven layers [of reality] are each of individual interest, the full implications complicate the more general analogous relations I am attempting here. One could, I suppose, discuss each of these layers in ways that relate to Clifford Geertz's extensive definition of religion . . . " (italics added). I said this in order to indicate the futility of coming up with one-to-one correspondences, and to somehow praise the messiness of analogy as an important, bricoleur way of doing comparative studies. And nowhere did I say that Souriau was the ultimate authority on defining film, nor Geertz on defining religion.

The analog (as opposed to the digital) brings with it scratches and hisses, approximations grounded in material media. In a digital age, scholars are wont to find the bytes of relations between one and the other, to reduce all to a singular code—and to suppose everyone else wants the same. Thus, the conclusion in my essay was meant as a foil to all that, to bring us back, modernist as it may be, to the analog, to rough relations (and the possibilities that we might skip grooves) between non-stable objects: films, music, persons, or religions.

The analogy is, I believe, the only true approach left for comparative religions, and for interdisciplinary studies. To criticize the religion-film analogy by claiming that Christian practices or theatre productions are richer than film, as Elshtain and Downing intimate, is a no-brainer. Of course they are. Things do not need to be equal to show relations between them. My three-year-old daughter and my forty-something partner have many striking similarities, but my partner has a Ph.D. and is three times the height and weight of my daughter. It is silly to suggest I cannot note relations between them because they are of differing sizes, ages, and intelligences.

As I continue to query religion in a mode of what some might label/critique as an warmed over post-Jungian/Eliadean/Geertzian approach, religious studies still has to answer simplistic questions like:
Why do the Touareg of West Africa, the Buddhists of Thailand, and the Roman Catholics of south-side Chicago all continue to use incense? Why are stones critical for Zen Buddhist gardens, Jewish memorials, and constitute a core at the corner of the Kaba? Until these analogous, materialistic questions can be answered (and, finally, they can't be in any comprehensive way) there can be no real respite from the critical queries of comparative religions. The analogous nature of comparative religions continues to nag us, to ask about how unoriginal is the symbol of a Christian cross; for centuries before Christianity, the Egyptians used the Ankh, the South Asians used the swastika, and the Chinese used the crossed-sign for perfection, and eventually the number "10."

There is no need to resort to a universalistic "archetypal," or other mode of final equation. Nothing is universal, and yet any self-respecting scholar interested in religions around the world must be at least curious about why crosses (and faces, and a few other primal graphic markings) are so prominent in the visual symbols of religions.

The neurosciences may be the latest, greatest approach to answer the questions, but such answers must also always answer to the cultural conditions in which they arise: i.e., the material nature of incense is crucial to religious rituals across the world, yet it is made symbolically significant in and through distinct traditions: sometimes for protection from the jinn, sometimes for a marker to indicate one's presence in a place, sometimes for setting a mood. Analogies get us thinking, in a fresh way, about the nature of rituals and myths, of doctrines and texts, and most importantly, why they are humanly relevant.

One other key issue is the latent, and sometimes manifest, "auteur theory" creeping up in a few of the responses, especially seen in Elshtain's claim that, "Although the work of many hands, films begin as the vision of a particular person." This claim is not really correct. Auteur theory struck in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, was important for realism and the French New-Wave, and continued to be insightful after that, but today is only one of many approaches standard to film studies. It is a method, but it is like saying that to understand Christianity we have to interpret it through a Neo-Orthodox lens: It may be a good one, but not the only one. To say, as Elshtain does, "we recognize immediately a John Ford or Martin Scorsese film" is inherently false. I cannot even imagine, though perhaps I'll perform such an experiment on my students next Autumn, an audience of intelligent viewers to be offered five minutes of "The Last Temptation of Christ" (Scorsese, 1988) alongside five minutes of "The Departed" (Scorsese, 2006) and have them say these are by the same director.

The more problematic part of this critique is one that continues to be authoritative particularly in "religion and the arts" circles, and that is the Romantic view of the singular artist/author—stemming directly from a late-18th/19th century view, and equally from a singular, monotheistic Creator God that has reigned for a couple millennia in
western cultures. Monotheism directly underlies what is perhaps the greatest living myth of the United States, though elsewhere as well: the myth of the individual, directly stemming from a single God. This emphasis on the individual stands in the way of so much real, communal creativity being undertaken today and through history, not to mention standing in the way of serious forward movement in interfaith dialogues and comparative religions, when faced with other configurations of goddesses and spirits and otherworldly creatures. To ask "who" is the author—of religion, of film—might offer a few insights, but is ultimately uninteresting and unhelpful as a guiding question.

In the end, my book is about some of the formal and functional dimensions of films and religions. My point is to show the ongoing creative processes that take place in both religion making and filmmaking, and to suggest that we might learn something about films—their uses of time and space, narrative development—by studying the myths, rituals, and symbols of religions. And vice versa: religious studies scholars need to more fully embrace an understanding of the re-creation that is constantly forging religious traditions.

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