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The representation of Christianity in popular American films from 2000-2005

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THE REPRESENTATION OF CHRISTIANITY
IN POPULAR AMERICAN FILMS FROM 2000-2005

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of
Television, Radio, Film and Theatre
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by

Lara T. Sumera

May 2006

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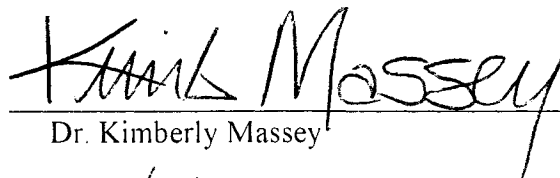
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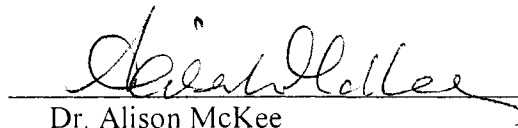
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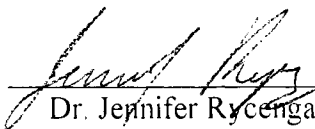
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ABSTRACT

THE REPRESENTATION OF CHRISTIANITY IN POPULAR AMERICAN FILMS FROM 2000-2005

By Lara T. Sumera

This thesis examines the representation of Christianity in popular American films of the new millennium. Processes of selection comprise of films chosen based on box office success, and the presence of Christian figures. Character analyses included questions such as how characters were identified as Christians and how characters used or viewed Christianity within the narrative. General findings consisted of a broad spectrum of characters, both negative and positive. The paramount issue of this thesis is how Christianity is socially constructed through film, and what those constructions implicate for the Christian identity. General themes of how Christianity was use or viewed at by the characters within narrative are: Religion as Restrictive, Religion as Ineffective, Religion as a Political Instrument, Religion as a Tool to Fight Evil, Religion as a Tool of Irony, Religion as a Mask, Humanity of the Divine, "Higher Purpose" Narrative, Religion as a Moral Guide, and Cyclical Christianity.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“Catholic clergy were once portrayed as jolly heroes in films. Not any more.”
– The Economist¹

Literature Review - Introduction

Much of how we see the world exists through a matrix of media images and messages, accumulating daily to create a sort of reality. However, that reality is not what is necessarily *real*, but meaning is constructed and accepted as reality. Media are constructions of the so-called real—a representation of reality, a portrayal of existence that is accepted on the basis of suspension of disbelief. But how long and how much can media influence people enough to make them believe that such constructions are true?

This study focuses on the construction of religion—specifically Christianity—in American society. Religion is an inherent part of culture. According to both Adherents.com and ReligiousTolerance.com, Christianity is currently the largest religion of the world followed by approximately 33% of the world’s population; Islam is the second largest followed by approximately 21%. Belief systems are innate to human nature. People make decisions based on what they believe to be true. Vicarious learning of systems of belief through the media can lead to empathy or apprehension, tolerance or fear. So when much of the world’s history has seen shades of blood shed in the name of religion, how is religion treated in the cultural conversation and public discourse of

¹ “The cheek of the church”

contemporary popular media and entertainment? What are the parameters of the social construction of Christianity as seen in popular American film in the new millennium?

A History of Religious Film in America

In Behind the Screen, Ron Austin makes the claim, “There has always been a Christian presence in Hollywood. In the golden age of Hollywood, a Christian sensibility was clearly evident in the films of John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, and Frank Capra—to name only the most prominent examples” (42). Margaret Miles even makes a case that film began with religion at the hands of Hannibal Goodwin, an Episcopal priest, who invented the photographic film. The Oxford History of World Cinema describes this novelty of the time as “photographic images printed on a flexible and semi-transparent celluloid base, cut into strip so 35mm. wide” (Usai 7), which is also attributed to the work of Henry M. Reichenbach, J.W. and I.S. Hyatt for further developments. Being more flexible led to the eventuality that film could be rolled, and the birth of motion picture was in its genesis. According to Miles in Seeing and Believing, the first subjects of film were religion combined with spectacle. A very early film from 1898 was based on a medieval Passion play of the trial and death of Jesus, *The Passion Play of Oberammergau* (Miles 6). However, in Religion as Entertainment, C.K. Robertson refers to earlier feature-length motion pictures as having little religious subject matter or motifs (222). According to Robertson, the silent era focused its subject matter on humanity and its frail conditions rather than the divine, even when dealing with religious subject matter (222). The Motion Picture Production Code (also known as the Hays Code after Will

Hays, then-president of the Motion Picture Producer and Distributors of America) was instilled in 1930 which forbade the ridicule of religion or religious figures. It is because of this that religious subjects were treated with sensitivity in the earlier part of film history. In 1967 the Code was replaced with the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) rating system.

As Philip Dye illustrates in the documentary, The Bible According to Hollywood, Biblical epics existed since the beginning of film, but the 1950s are generally considered the golden age of Biblical epics. Biblical epics and spectacles are characterized by their Bible-based storylines and heightened reality. The Oxford History of World Cinema attributes the Biblical epic as to having characters who “possess empirically impossible, superhuman qualities, and it uses special effects to figure the ‘miraculous’ event” (Sobchack 313). Dye’s documentary notes that films emerging out of World War II tended to have a “good overcoming evil” message. During the Cold War, when communism was perceived to be a threat to religious institutions, the filmmaker’s response was “faith and free enterprise.” The film industry in the 1950s was also in competition with the innovation of television, pushing filmmakers to use various tactics to stay alive as a business. Religious spectacle was a money-maker and Hollywood was happy that, in general, religious groups did not complain as much when renditions of Old Testament stories were made. Old Testament stories tended to feature more Hollywood-sensationalized elements (sex, violence, adultery, revenge, etc.), whereas the New Testament relied on the four gospels and mostly epistles (there were no epic battle scenes as in Old Testament material). Filmmakers and audiences were sensitive to the

depictions of Christ, a common figure in New Testament-related films. Most motion picture studios did not directly portray Christ and (as in the 1959 *Ben Hur*) only portrayed him from a distance, from the back, or peripherally. Concerning New Testament films, there was a worry over anti-Semitism as Jews were depicted as the cause of Christ's death (and there is still worry today as exemplified by popular debates surrounding Mel Gibson's 2004 film, *The Passion of the Christ*).

After the 1950s, the Biblical epic faced a decline. Dye remarks that after a decade of successful religious films, the epic *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) was remade in a reverential light, but received negative critical reviews and did not do well in box-office sales. Thomas Martin attributes this to the audience of its time. Where Biblical spectacles succeeded with past audiences who were attached to Biblical tales, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* failed to interest its contemporary audience (67). It was the biggest failure for United Artists at the time, says Dye. Ron Austin says, "The counterculture generation of the late sixties and seventies evinced suspicion of all institutions, especially of organized (that is to say, traditional) religion. The dissatisfied and rebellious baby boomers eventually became, and to some extent remain, dominant in Hollywood. Though now they *are* the establishment, they retain much of their anti-authoritarian posture" (42, emphasis in original). The closing of the golden age of the Biblical epic was at hand.

The Biblical epic broke down as a genre in the 1960s and 1970s with the Vietnam War and Watergate (Fraser 167). According to Robertson, regular attendance in places of worship declined towards the end of the 1960s and religious figures became more

irrelevant in people's lives (228). Suspicion of organized institutions spread to other outlets of popular culture, such as in music. There was "a noticeable shift from naivete [sic] to suspicion to outright cynicism," a cultural climate in which the innocence of America was beginning to crumble (228). Using examples from *The Godfather* (1972) and *M*A*S*H* (1970), Robertson illustrates "the irrelevance of the minister in a world he cannot possibly understand" (229) as the priests are "oblivious" and "out-of-touch" with the world and realities taking place around them (229). The world was changing, and with it religion in film.

Into the 1970s and 1980s, religious film tried to fit into realistic accuracy, placing the focus on the more psychological and spiritual aspects of narrative rather than the spectacular. This shift away from the spectacle, which previously defined religious film, caused religious film to become awkward (Fraser 170). Religion in the form of the spectacular and concepts of divine intervention did not appeal to audiences that have lived through America's times of war and turbulent political atmosphere. Peter Fraser notes important American Catholic directors such as Scorsese, Hitchcock (who came to America from Britain), and Coppola as having thematically religious elements in their films, but not working within a specific religious style (171). The era of Biblical spectacle was dead.

Miles compiles an overview of popular films of the 1980s and early 1990s that showed emerging themes in the treatment of religion in film. Some observations: there were no "old-fashioned reverential films" like *The Greatest Story Ever Told*; critique of society from a religious perspective did moderately well at the box office; a few films

showed religion as “helpless and ineffectual in the face of human suffering and social chaos;” religion was often shown as a social problem in the 1980s, shown as impulsive and imprudent; some films that included religiously-motivated characters did not do well at the box office; when ‘otherness’ was depicted, it was portrayed from the perspective of a dominantly Christian culture; and most films that contained a serious religious message were unsuccessful at the box office (Seeing 19-21). In 1980s films, C.K. Robertson notes that there is a “resurgence of priests and other religious figures, now emphasizing their human foibles and failings over obvious heroics” (230). He uses *Mass Appeal* (1984) as an example in which the priest (Jack Lemmon) is an alcoholic who is challenged by a seminary student, and as their friendship deepens, the priest becomes a more positive minister (Robertson 230). The student, says Robertson, “shows little respect for either his superiors or the institutional church. In this sense he represents an entire generation of Americans for whom age-old traditions honored by parents and grandparents no longer made sense” (230). The film shows the impact the priest and student have on one another: the personified Christian religion in the priest and the student who personifies his generation’s attitudes towards institutionalized religion.

In 1988, Martin Scorsese began a new era of religious film with *The Last Temptation of Christ*, an attempt to secularize the genre aiming at the mainstream (Fraser 171). Portraying a more human Jesus Christ and his struggle with his divinity, Scorsese’s film draws upon a non-gospel account of Christ’s temptation to choose a life with Mary Magdalene rather than bear the cross. According to Fraser, this film “replaces the standard Hollywood Biblical epic with a half-reverent, half-lampooning retold Gospel

story that seems to be designed primarily to produce dramatic and visual effect” (176). The Oxford History of World Cinema, says that the film caused many exhibitors to not show it due to the protests of religion groups (O’Neil 765). Controversy, accompanied with various boycotts and protests, surrounded the film to a point that led executives to become leery of any religiously-toned film in the 1990s, and avoid “any subject matter that could invite criticism” (Jacobs 205). Later the genre was replaced by fantasy and science-fiction epics that adopted Bible-like “heroic conquests and transcendent powers and experiences” like the earlier *Star Wars* (1977) , as well as dramas that used similar principles of the old style of historic or character narratives like *Chariots of Fire* (1981) (Fraser 177). These films represented the “secularization of popular religion in America” (Fraser 179). So what of religion in film in the new millennium? From a business perspective, it is an undertaking not to be taken lightly. Jacobs says: “Because of the way Christians have reacted to projects like *The Last Temptation of Christ*, executives see spiritual material as a risk. And even with the box office triumph of *The Passion of the Christ* and the critical success of *Joan of Arcadia*, that’s a risk many are unwilling to take” (200).

Trends and Treatment of Christianity through Character

In his book, Religion as Entertainment, Robertson gives examples of idealized religious figures such as the first “hero priest” (223), Father Flannigan, in Spencer Tracy’s 1938 film, *Boys Town*. Within the film’s narrative, “the sacerdotal duties of the priesthood are largely ignored on-screen, as we see instead a mission to reach troubled

young boys before their future becomes firmly set [...] Hollywood's first hero-priest clearly is 'a representative of a universal God with a universal gospel, concerned for the of whole life' [from David Moberg's The Church as a Social Institution]” (qtd. in Robertson 223). These priest characters are described by Robertson as having an “utter lack of guile, misdoing, or any kind of moral ambiguity” (224). From this trend of Christian figures of integrity, the screen went on to depict quite an opposite representation: “In the move from ‘Mr. Nice Guy’ (like Father O’Malley) to ‘Shock Value Minister’—which reached its apex in the 1995 British film *Priest*—perhaps Hollywood has simply reflected a growing disenchantment and diminishing trust on the part of the larger American culture with the ordained” (Robertson 235).

In Hollywood Vs. America, film critic Michael Medved analyzes 50 mainstream films and concludes that “The villainous figure, whether a priest, a rabbi, an evangelical, a Pope, a soldier, a nun is the figure associated with God” (as qtd. in Buckley). It is true that film critics may not hold so much credibility in the academic world, but Medved, critic for New York Post, views his films with a particular filter that proves to be a significant insight for the purposes of this thesis. He sees an overall negative attitude towards organized faith within the entertainment industry, mostly in the form of hypocrisy. This thesis will find out if those things are necessarily true for the films of the new millennium. Medved’s observation is that Hollywood produces anti-clerical films featuring the Roman Catholic Church as exemplified in his synopses of the following: *The Runner Stumbles* (1979), *Monsignor* (1982), *Agnes of God* (1985), *Heaven Help Us* (1985), *The Penitent* (1988), *Last Rites* (1988), *We’re No Angels* (1989), *Nuns on the Run*

(1990), *The Godfather, Part III* (1990), and *The Pope Must Die* (1991) (Medved 52-54).

His opinion is that these, among others, are films in which Catholicism—weather the institution as a whole, individual clergy, doctrine, or the religiously zealous—is in some form shown to be negative. In many of these films, Robertson also cites examples of portrayals of corruption within the Church (for examples, *Monsignor* (1982), *The Godfather Part III* (1990), *True Confessions* (1981), *Mortal Sins* (1990), *Leap of Faith* (1992), and *The Apostle* (1998)). Medved also cites examples of negative portrayals of Protestant born-again in *Crimes of Passion* (1984), *Children of the Corn* (1984), *Poltergeist II* (1986), *The Vision* (1987), *Light of Day* (1987), *Salvation!* (1987), *Pass the Ammo* (1988), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1990), *The Rapture* (1991), *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (1991), and *Guilty as Charged* (1992) (55-61).

Medved gives an example of a double standard in Hollywood involving *Misery* (1990), *Cape Fear* (1991), and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Both *Misery* and *Cape Fear* contained villains of fanatical religious zeal, a “defamatory treatment of committed Christians” (Medved 67). A few months before the release of *Cape Fear*, *The Silence of the Lambs* was released which featured a transvestite villain as a brutal serial killer which aroused complaints from the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Discrimination (GLAAD) who alleged the film perpetuated “hateful stereotypes and slandered all gay people” (68). In Medved’s point of view, it was as if it were okay for Hollywood to show religious zealots as maniacs, but not homosexuals. He also points out that *Cape Fear* was financed and promoted by Universal Studios, the same company that produced Scorese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

Some examples Medved gives of box-office successes which show religious characters in a sympathetic light are: *Chariots of Fire* (1981), *Tender Mercies* (1983), *Places in the Heart* (1984), *Witness* (1985), *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989), *Ramblin' Rose* (1991). These were both commercially and critically successful (76). Yet, the settings of all these religious-friendly films held religion at a distance in what Medved terms “The Museum-Piece Approach,” meaning that these particularly religious-friendly films were all set in some “exotic setting, far removed in space or time (or both) from today’s big-city realities” (75).

The Economist describes the church as a rich source for characters: “Like the cowboy or gangster, nuns and priests long made for popular cinematic icons, bringing with them instant dramatic baggage of a moral and economic divide, notions of sin and sacrifice—and all that guilt” (“The cheek of the church”). The article reminisces on early films such as Bing Crosby’s *Going My Way* (1944) which showed clergy in an idealistic light. This is drastically different from the “lapsed priest as a central dramatic figure” in films starting in the 1980s including *True Confessions* (1981), *Priest* (1994), *El Crimen del Padre* (2002), and *The Magdalene Sisters* (2003). According to the article, “Over the past decade, films about the Catholic church have become more anarchic in tone and intensity, highlighting institutional abuse and showing priests in explicitly sexual relationships, often graphically depicted on screen” (63). Child molestations and abuse are very real issues, and especially cases that have emerged from the last decade or so can be attributed to these depictions. However, the case of this thesis would like to explore if religion is one-sidedly treated with suspicion and doubt, or if attitudes in popular films

towards religious figures show more balance in portraying both negative and positive characters. Is Medved correct in his conclusion that Hollywood has an anti-religious agenda? Religious figures offer easy stereotypes: the fundamentalist Christian that casts judgment on the “heathen,” or the hypocritical Catholic priests that preys on young boys, or the Islamic terrorist that blows up buildings and hijacks airplanes.

Miles notes religious characters in film “may adhere to religious belief passionately and mindlessly, usually causing personal and social mayhem and damage” (Seeing 17). Robertson addresses this issue and gives an example in a 1980s film: “Certainly, there have been many alcoholics, womanizers, and hypocrites among on-screen ministers ... or, on the other end of the spectrum, puritanical tyrants such as the preacher played by John Lithgow in the 1985 teen hit *Footloose*, a man virulently against dancing” (Robertson 236). Such depictions show characters being completely void of religious value, or on the other end completely intolerant to other ideas outside their own principles.

Bryan Stone analyzes the film *Contact* (1997) in which the themes and relationship of science and faith are explored. These themes are represented by the atheist Ellie (Jodie Foster), and the ex-Catholic priest, Palmer (Matthew McConaughey). According to Stone, the character Palmer was an attempt to “not yield to the standard Hollywood convention of trivializing religion by presenting persons of faith as misinformed, confused, ineffective, fundamentalist, or fanatic. But it is not all clear that it succeeds in doing this with Palmer” (“Religious Faith and Science”). Stone goes on to describe three other religious characters within the film. One is the priest that

consoles a young Ellie after her father's death, but he "is left with a helpless, confused stare on his face." The second is Richard Rank who, says Stone, is an obvious parody (by casting Rob Lowe in the part) of Ralph Reed. During the making of the film, Reed was the current leader of the Christian Coalition. The third religious figure is a cult member that hangs a crucifix on his neck and blames science for the problems of the world. Such representations make their way into public discourse, shaping a certain image of religion for audiences that Christianity is ineffective, insubstantial, and untrustworthy.

Miles makes observations of other films in which the treatment of religion marginalized religious commitment:

In films of the last decade [her book was published 1996], religious characters were often represented as sinister, devious, or crazy. A priest's collar came to signal questionable morality; a nun's habit was the first visual clue of hypocritical innocence (*Agnes of God*), or of masochistic craziness (*Thérèse*). Protestant ministers fared little better; pastors and evangelists were represented as ineffectual at best (*Testament*, *The Day After*), and, at worst, as greedy frauds (*Leap of Faith*, *Poltergeist II*). Or religious commitment is caricatured, as in *Alien 3*, in which a group of incorrigible violent criminals is represented as a monastic community. (Seeing 48-49)

The concern for this thesis is not that all negativity is a horrible lie, but that if all there is to know of Christianity from popular media is either one-dimensional, insubstantial, or useless as a religion whose followers are criminal or crazy, then that large community of people who call themselves Christians are less likely to be viewed empathetically. Any group that is portrayed with biased attitudes towards it is always more than just the fictionalized figures portrayed in popular media. Whether ethnicity, sexuality, or

religion, there is always more sides to the story than a one-sidedness of what popular fiction may show.

Significance and Purpose - Religion in America

The most important goal for this thesis is to bring into the cultural conversation an awareness of how religious characters are being used in narrative. How does one read religious characters within the context of the popular culture? Are stereotypes the only driving factor of religious figures within a film text? The work of this thesis will endeavor to thematically categorize those uses within the narrative. The representation of Christianity is looked at in terms of Christian character identity and the function of Christianity. Identity and representation are inherently linked, one fueling the other. Representation in media shapes the views of identity and self-perception.

According to Karen and Jim Covell, “Only about 2 percent of media professionals go to church or synagogue. Hollywood is an isolated society, ignorant of—and often hostile to—Christianity” (83-84). As it is important to be aware of how any group is represented in media, the representation of Christianity becomes patently important, due to the number of people who claim to be affiliated with some form of Christianity (76.5% of the U.S. population in 2001 according to [Adherents.com](#)²). The significance of religion found in media is addressed in an article by Michael Leo Budde of [World Policy Journal](#). According to this article,

² Conducted by the National Survey of Religion Identification and the American Religious Identity Survey in 2001 with a sample size of 50,000 Americans

In the course of a year, most American Catholics will read no books on contemporary or classical Catholicism, will subscribe to no Catholic periodicals, [...] will do nothing, in short, to familiarize themselves with contemporary expressions of the faith, diverse theological insights into contemporary problems, or developments concerning their religious tradition and community. The major source for news on Catholicism for American Catholics is the secular media [...]. When the news media do cover religion, they usually focus on controversy, scandal, the unusual or freakish.

Such stereotypes reflected in popular media become part of how people perceive religion.

Berger and Luckmann say, "Identity is formed by social processes. Once crystallized, it is maintained, modified, or even reshaped by social relations" (173).

One may wonder, if there are so many Christians, then do negative portrayals really affect Christianity? This study is the first rung on the ladder to addressing this larger issue. However, the present focus is, what portrayals are actually out there? Mary Cagney says, "Hollywood is guilty for ugly and cheap stereotypes of people of faith. If they tried those stereotypes with sexual orientation or gender or race, they would be justifiably castigated" ("Why Hollywood doesn't like you"). The example she uses is the film *Contact* (1997) (recall Stone on page 10) in which a "Christian fanatic" is the villainous character in the film who tries to destroy scientific work and progress. But despite the numbers of Christians and the negative representations in films, Kris Jozajtis says that the serious undertaking of religion and cinema studies has had little impact on mainstream film, media or religious studies though it has been studied since the 1960s (239). When trying to reconcile the mass appeal of certain popular American films and the use of Christian symbols, Joel W. Martin looks both to the academic realms of film criticism and religious studies. His findings resulted in his co-work with Conrad E.

Ostwalt in producing Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular

American Film in 1995. Martin says:

I expected to find models of how to analyze the relationship of religion and film. What I found was disappointing. Scholars engaged in prevailing modes of film criticism have had almost nothing to say about religion. And scholars who study religion have had almost nothing to say about Hollywood film. Instead of encountering an ongoing and stimulating dialogue about religion and film, I encountered silence. (2)

For the few that have undertaken the study of religion and film, Martin observes that any serious research on the subject has been extremely limited (3). Much of the research of religion and film has to do with religious motifs or allegorical or mythological references found within film narrative and structure (whether the film is secular or religious).

However, for the purposes of this thesis, the specific treatment and representation of the Christian religion in popular film will be the central focus.

Miles attributes to film the ability to “reveal how a society represents itself to itself” (Seeing 10). As any art form has its own unique beauty and quality of expression, film has a certain liberty that brings a particular visual and aural reality unlike other art forms like the novel or a painting. Though other media such as television, theatre, and books transcend the need to be visually or aurally explicit to represent reality because of each of their particular conventions, film’s lack of restriction gives it its distinction from other media—it provides visuals and sounds unlike the novel (which rely on the imagination), has a distinct visual style unlike theatre, and is meant to be projected on a large screen unlike television. That is not to say that film does not have its limitations, but as Miles claims, “Films represent the most intimate and private confrontations of values—such as lovemaking—as well as the most public moments in which values come

out into the open, clash, and are violently or peacefully negotiated” (*Seeing* xv). The negotiation of meanings brings the viewer to the forefront of such confrontation. The audience member is at the front line of a war of images, ideas, and ideals. Portrayals in film become even more significant if reinforced in other media in terms of the social construction of reality. For example, in Barry Glassner’s book, *The Culture of Fear*, he describes the various images of pedophile priests perpetuating the negativity in the media surrounding priests and the Catholic Church (35-37). This, according to Glassner, misled Americans to “privately distrust and consider mysterious” the Church (36). As distrust is valid in such a very serious issue as pedophilia, Glassner’s point was how much America had relied on media for their source to make biased judgments of a group far larger than only the criminals caught in scandal. There is no doubt that criminals must be held accountable and scandals exposed. Nonetheless, the reinforcement of these images in *fictional* narratives, such as popular film, continue to reinforce the negativity. Michael Medved calls film “the most prestigious expression of the popular culture,” insists on the significance of filmic portrays of religion (16). Deletion of these portrayals is not so much the goal. The objective for this study is first and foremost to advocate awareness, again, of how the Christian identity is being represented.

With a majority of Americans claiming to be Christian on some level, it would seem that Christianity is not significantly impacted by negative portrayals in media. But according to Berger and Luckmann’s conception of the social construction of reality, we learn about ourselves through a variety of influences, which include the media. Miles says, “Popular film both reflects a popular consensus that traditional religion is deeply

untrustworthy and reinforces our public rejection of religion” (Seeing ix). Is it not fair to assume that even those that claim a religious identity would be touched by the same negativity, even of their own faith? Stereotypes can easily lead to intolerance and negativity towards the institutions that are portrayed in a popular form of entertainment such as film. Covell says, “All this talk of Hollywood’s depravity has only deepened the rift between the church and the entertainment industry. It’s no wonder that when Christians do appear in the movies or on TV, they’re portrayed as hateful, judgmental people” (84).

The paramount issue of this thesis is identity. How is the Christian identity constructed in popular film? Every film is an interpretation on somebody’s part. All “true stories” are “*based* on a true story.” This thesis explores the interpretation of Christianity as portrayed in contemporary American film and how Christians are viewed by the popular culture in the new millennium. Portrayals will be looked at in terms of the characters themselves and how they use or treat their Christianity within the narrative.

CHAPTER 2

QUESTION AND METHODOLOGY

“We must be aware, then, of the cultural and ideological assumptions spectators bring to the cinema” – Robert Stam and Louise Spence¹

Question

Speaking to the impact of the visual arts, Conrad Ostwalt in Screening the Sacred says, “Whereas in the nineteenth century popular novels and presses held the imagination of the American public, it seems that for contemporary Americans images are replacing texts in the ability to capture the imagination and to shape worldviews [...] Visual images are replacing written texts as the conveyors of information and meaning” (153). This thesis explores the cultural image of Christianity in a popular medium, film.

For the social constructionist, the focus is not on right or wrong but rather on what message is actually being conveyed. How do people perceive anything when a lot of what they know of something is filtered through media? C.K. Robertson looks at the treatment of religion by filmmakers and studies the portrayal of religious characters such as clergy (222). Similarly, this thesis will inductively examine the treatment of Christianity² in popular film. What is being constructed as the Christian religion and the Christian identity, in popular American films?

¹ “Colonialism, Racism, and Representation: An Introduction”

² Any of the Christian religious branches that follow the teachings of Jesus and the Bible

The Purpose of Character Analysis

Christianity is a kind of ideology in which ideas are abstractly formed into doctrine, then exemplified in the people that claim to adhere to those teachings. Characters are the personified form of ideas created within narrative and embody the abstract ideas of, for example, religion, with whom audiences can identify or relate (identity). There is an expectation of people who claim certain faiths to carry it out in their lifestyle; therefore a character content analysis of films will be the central focus. By looking at characters' attitude towards faith, and the circumstances in which they exercise their religion, general themes will hopefully emerge as to how Christianity is used in narrative. Since it is not to be assumed from the beginning what exactly will be found among these films, the label of "Christian" must understandably be used fairly loosely, in the sense that any association to the Christian religion will be regarded as some form of Christianity, and therefore the persons attached will be considered on some level a Christian. (See Content Analysis on page 25-26).

Darrol Bryant describes popular religious characters as "larger-than-life figures that [a viewer] can emulate, while instructing him in the values and aspirations of his culture" (113). This becomes more important in context of media effects theory, which is addressed later in this chapter. It is because of the cultural conversation and resulting accepted "truths," or stereotypes, that make representation in popular media so pertinent. LaViolette and Silvert address the notion of stereotyping in terms of Plato's "Fable of the Cave." They call stereotypes "distortions," "caricatures," and "institutionalized misinformation" (258). Groups and institutions are stereotyped by the real or fictional

people that portray them in media, religion and the religious are no exception. Portrayals of religious figures in popular film help to form opinions about religious institutions.

Bryant writes,

As a popular form of the religious life, movies do what we have always asked of popular religion, namely, they provide us with archetypal forms of humanity – heroic figures – and instruct us in the basic values and myths of our society. As we watch the characters and follow the drama on the screen, we are instructed in the values and myths of our culture and given models on which to pattern our lives. (106)

Bryant alludes to the public discourse in which people find themselves as we continually interact with and consume media. Thomas Martin says of film theorists' view of audience impact: "They speak of the power of the film to shape the human identity because of the power of the medium. The audience and the film mutually enrich or impoverish each other" (134-135). Symbols and figures are used to generate the conversation, to feed the discourse of how things are understood. In Visual Literacy: Image, Mind & Reality, Paul Messaris expounds on the importance of images as "a distinct means of making sense of reality and that visual education will give students an alternative, but equally valuable, form of access to knowledge and understanding" (Messaris 21). Messaris uses ad campaigns as examples of visual communication—the juxtaposition of images that makes the visual claim of a certain outcome (23). Meanings are made simply by the placement of images together. Messaris notes Lev Kuleshov, known for the "Kuleshov effect," a theory based on an experiment in which Kuleshov places different images after the same close-up shot of a person's face. The face, which is the same shot every time, is interpreted differently based on whatever object is juxtaposed to it (Messaris 16). It becomes contextual. When soup is juxtaposed to the

face, the meaning becomes “hunger.” When the face is juxtaposed to a coffin, the meaning becomes “sadness.” On a broader scale, it can be said that the nature of film is such that when persons are also placed in certain contexts, certain messages or emotional interpretations can be made, such as a priest found in the midst of a crime. Messaris says, “The idea that the representational conventions of a culture’s images might shape the worldview of the members of that culture [...] The notion that a representational system might shape its users’ world-view is contingent on the presence, within that system, of a particular way of ‘carving up’ an area of reality” (25). Looking at religious figures in the context of popular films within the culture of the new millennium in America, for example, is one reality that is represented to the viewers of those films. A world view is, if not shaped entirely, influenced to show religion in a certain light (or darkness). Messaris points heavily to the cultural context of a visual image. This thesis examines religious figures within the framing of American popular films.

Social Construction of Reality and Symbolic Interaction Theory

Thomas Martin says, “The film participates in the interplay or dialogue between the self and the others that encounter the self” (46). Film has its way to form attitudes of one's self and of others. In his book, Images and the Imageless, like other scholars that make connections with film and religious studies, Martin makes claim that the visual arts are much like religion (46). Both reflect our own experiences and in turn help us to grow and direct our path to meaning. For this, two particular theories will be applied to make an effects argument of the texts included in the analyses of this thesis: the theory of the

social construction of reality and symbolic interaction theory. Symbolic interaction is the theory “that people give meaning to symbols and those meanings come to control those people” (Baran and Davis 238). It is a theory for the study of how culture is used to learn. From mutually agreed-upon meanings comes the construction of reality. (See Appendix 2). More heavily used in this thesis is the former, the theory of the social construction of reality to which symbolic interaction theory is closely related.

Social construction of reality is the “theory that assumes an ongoing correspondence of meaning because people share a common sense about its reality” (Baran and Davis 245). Reality is only what people make of it to mean. Berger and Luckmann say in the introduction to their famous treatise on the subject, “Reality is socially constructed and [...] the sociology of knowledge must analyze the processes in which this occurs” (1). There is no absolute—just signs and symbols which are meaningful only because culture mutually agrees that it is. This is one of the very first things I ever learned in media studies, and as an example, my professor introduced to us the idea of money. We all recognize the value of the dollar bill only because we all agree upon that value. Without an agreed standard to measure currency, our whole economic system breaks down. Similarly, signs and symbols are constructed in media culture and ongoing public dialogue, without which meanings are lost and communication breaks down. Berger and Luckmann say, “‘Sociology of knowledge’ will have to deal not only with the empirical variety of ‘knowledge’ in human societies, but also with the processes by which *any* body of ‘knowledge’ comes to be socially established as ‘reality’” (3).

The social construction of reality is not significant because of a single message, but the accumulation of messages and, according to Berger and Luckmann, “whatever passes for ‘knowledge’ in a society, regardless of the ultimate validity or invalidity (by whatever criteria) of such ‘knowledge’” (3). It is not the one-time exposure, but the exposure over time that allows ideas and influences to linger in the air of our public discourse. Under this theory, impressions of mediated reality shape a culture due to repeated exposure of certain images and ideas which, over time, become part of the thought processes of the people to which they are exposed. In symbolic interaction theory, the meaning of symbols become significant because from these meanings stem assumptions, and from assumptions come stereotypes, and from stereotypes, the perpetuation of continued misrepresentation. There are various representations of any form of religion, but the goal of this study is to learn what those representations are in regards to Christianity.

Methodology

Methodology comprises content analyses of popular American films released from 2000-2005. The domestic box office figures from www.boxofficereport.com (which cites movies that made more than \$10 million) and www.boxofficemojo.com (which cites the top 100 grossing movies), will be used for film selections. Box office figures are considered for this thesis the most efficient way to track those movies that were seen by the most people. Popularity will be determined by domestic box office success—that is, films that made the Top 50 of each year. The films will also be chosen

according to basic genres of drama, action, and comedy. Again, films will be chosen based on the presence of Christian characters and box office success. Films for content analysis include (in order of biggest box office gross)—for Drama: *The Passion of the Christ* (2004)*, *Signs* (2002)*, *Walk the Line* (2005), *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), and *Mystic River* (2003); for Action: *Van Helsing* (2004), *Daredevil* (2003), *Constantine* (2005), *Sin City* (2005), and *The Count of Monte Cristo* (2002). And for Comedy: *Bruce Almighty* (2003)*, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002)*, *Wedding Crashers* (2005)*, *Chocolat* (2000), and *The Whole Nine Yards* (2000). (See Appendix 1 for box office figures).

Process of Selection

Films are separated by these three basic genres for the simplicity it affords in organizing the films, as well as a useful way to analyze attitudes towards religion within a particular narrative context. Religion viewed in the context of a comedy is presumably different from how a dramatic or serious text would treat it. The process of selecting films began with first determining the Top 50 of each year from 2000-2005. Of each year's 50 top films, the films that portrayed Christian characters were noted and categorized into one of the aforementioned genres. The five top-grossing movies for each of the three genres from all six years (2000-2005) were selected to be part of analyses for a total of 15 films (see Appendix 1).

* Made Top 100 of All Time according to Box Office Report

Content Analysis

Questions include: 1) What Christian-affiliated characters are in the film? 2) How are these characters symbolically attached to Christianity? 3) What level of Christian is the character categorized? (Core, Level 1, Level 2, Level 3; see below) 4) How much is the character on screen? (e.g., one scene, a few scenes, most scenes) 5) In what context is the character shown and how does the character impact the story in any significant way? (e.g., reverses events, acts as a catalyst of decisions to other characters, acts as a confident or counselor, is a main character, is a reoccurring character, etc.).

To answer question 3, characters are categorized as appearing in one of four category levels. The reason for this methodological categorization is in the given assumption that the closer to the Core the character is, the more significant of an impact that character has on the representation of Christianity and the Church. For example, it would be more significant for a priest to be portrayed as a murderer than someone who may call himself a Christian, but is not a member of any church—the priest bears more responsibility in representing the Church.

Category Levels

The primary level will be referred to as the Core. Core Christians will include those figures most responsible for the representation of the church—the divine and supernatural (such as angels or Jesus) and the clergy (“those ordained to perform pastoral or sacerdotal functions in a Christian church”³ such as priests, pastors, the Pope, bishops,

³ Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary

cardinals). “Church” and “Christianity” are often used as synonyms, but more specifically “the Church” refers to the Christian religion as an institution including the people and doctrine attached to it. Level 1 Christians include those appointed by any of the Core group or elders to carry out the Church’s work, or elders themselves (“any of the various officers of religious groups,”³ in this case, the Christian Church, such as deacons or those appointed to hold any kind of official authority for the Church after the clergy). Level 2 Christians will refer to the congregation (any official member of the church not clergy or an elder) or any individual thereof. Level 3 Christians, the last level, will refer to proclaimers of Christianity (those not affiliated as a member of any specific church but are associated with Christianity, either verbally or symbolically). After analyzing these characters within the context of a film text, reoccurring themes will be formed into categories. These themes are the goal of this study: those ways in which religion is represented and used in the narrative.

CHAPTER 3

FINDINGS: ANALYSES OF DRAMA FILMS

“In the future, then, it may be that the only ministers that many people will every encounter will be the ones on, and behind, the screen.” – C.K. Robertson¹

Dramas are generically serious in tone. Genres do have the tendency to blend as there can be moments in which a comedy includes an emotionally-driven scene, or when action includes parody. So these definitions of genre do not mean to say that neither a comedy nor action film can provide any sense of profound commentary on religion. However, drama is evidently distinct from the conventions of either comedy, whose focus is parody or irony, or action, whose focus is spectacle (special effects, action sequences). Yet, in such broad categorization as this thesis uses with the films (drama, action, comedy), drama is defined as a film whose sense of realism is most the focus, that is, the psychological and emotional aspects of narrative. The films of this chapter include *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), *Signs* (2002), *Walk the Line* (2005), *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) and *Mystic River* (2003). The latter two, both Clint Eastwood films, portray Christianity as ineffective and empty. The other three are generally positive portrayals of Christianity. Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) is one film that could be argued as a biblical spectacle, but for the purposes of this thesis, and due to its psychological and emotional focus of Christ on the eve of facing the cross, it is categorized as a drama.

¹ “Ministers in the Movies.”

The Passion of the Christ (2004) grossed \$370.77 million while in theaters according to Box Office Report. Even with its success, its controversial content (the alleged blame of Jews for Christ's death) has made finding a television distributor a difficult task (Forhnen 380). Gibson chooses to focus on one part of the gospel story, the 12 hours before Christ is crucified, and this thesis will look specifically at the portrayal of Jesus Christ. This representation of Jesus is one devout Catholic's interpretation. Jesus, of course, is part of the Core as he represents the religion named after him. In the Bible, he is known as the Son of God and the Christ (which is Greek; in Hebrew it is "Messiah"). Gibson shows us a snippet of the gospel whole, and we come into the film in the middle of a bigger story. Using various film techniques like flashbacks and slow motion, the movie shows not only Christ's divine passion, but his humanity as well. Several scenes of his arrest and trial cut to his earlier ministry days, or even the hours just previous to his arrest. One scene contains a tender moment between mother and son, Mary and Jesus; another covers his sermon on the mount; another shows a last supper scene when Jesus and his friends, the disciples, would all be together for the last time before Jesus is betrayed and tried. His recollections of his time on earth are indicative of his attachment to his life here.

The Passion represents the Christian religion in a very direct and unabashed way. It is in a sense a historical epic recounting how the Christian religion began. Again, this thesis is an inductive study, searching for what is being represented as Christianity. What perception of this religion are people seeing when they view the movie? Bruce Forhnen, an Associate Professor of Law at Ave Maria Law in Ann Arbor, Michigan says,

[*The Passion*] refuses to present Jesus as a nice fellow who tells us to love one another, then has the courtesy to fade from view. Because the job of religion is to make us all feel that we are loved, no matter what we do, Gibson's presentation of the Christ as Himself a sacrifice—a hated, tortured victim of inhumanity and injustice—is intolerable. That we clearly are to see Jesus as the victor, not in spite of, but because of, his suffering, pushes the story (and whatever quibbles one may have, this clearly is the Gospel story) over the edge, making it a ripe target for ridicule. (376)

Forhnen comments on the film's message of Christ's suffering for the sins of the world, that people dislike looking on themselves as sinners. But because Gibson focuses so deliberately on the suffering of Christ, it causes critics to reject its message of suffering in the name of love, contrary to the notion, "Religion, you see, is suppose to be all about love, not suffering" (Forhnen 378). The Christ figure of his film is the embodiment of "what the God-man did for us, on what was necessary to make possible our salvation" (Forhnen 379). Gibson ideologically demonstrates Christianity as a vehicle to save souls. The cross is the centerpiece to redeeming the world.

The journey to the cross include much gore with the willing punishment endured by Jesus and point to Gibson's focus on just *how* much God loves his creation, us: Jesus is willing to suffer and die for us as the ultimate and perfect sacrifice. The film portrays the God-man Jesus as the perfect man. Rev. Herbel says of Jesus' perfection:

"Somehow, by suffering more than anyone else, without sinning, he becomes the savior."

Herbel is unconvinced by the portrayal Gibson's film affords, saying that by separating the cross and the resurrection, the full meaning of salvation is missed. But nonetheless, the Christ figure as is in the film becomes an idealized religious figure, one who suffers

for even those who hate him, who cries out, “Father, forgive them” even as he is being crucified.

Symbols are important tools to motivate stories. Aside from the cross as a symbol to drive narrative, the use of the synagogue in this instance is worth noting. As the historical event of Jesus’ crucifixion obviously takes place before the genesis of formal Christianity, Jesus’ trial does not take place in a church, but in the Jewish building of worship. Thematically, buildings of worship, specifically Christian churches, are usually associated with feeling safe. As Christ is tried and judged unjustly (according to Gibson’s version) in the building of worship, it creates an antithesis of the idea of “sanctuary.” Christianity symbolized by the cross and Jesus is an unconditional love; Christianity symbolized by the synagogue in which Christ is tried is a place of uncertainty. Even as a deliberately Christian film, *The Passion* shows religion as ambiguous and ambivalent.

M. Night Shyamalan’s 2002 alien-invasion film, *Signs*, also demonstrates Christianity as ambivalent. Instead of focusing on the invasion, like 2005’s *War of the World*, Shyamalan’s film is on faith. Mel Gibson is Graham Hess, a former Episcopalian minister who denounces his calling after his wife is killed in a car accident. In Graham’s bedroom, Shyamalan places a faded outline of a cross on the wall, symbolic of Graham’s now-faded faith. Instead of embracing faith in tragedy, he bitterly blames God for it, and refuses to acknowledge God any longer (“I will not spend one more minute on prayer!”).

Graham is an example of Robertson’s description of religious people frequently represented as thus: “When ordained persons *have* appeared in the spotlight, there has

usually been a focus on their humanness, as if this is something separate from, and even at war with, their calling” (235). A reoccurring flashback of the car accident unfolds throughout the film and shows Graham with a clerical collar. His collar is clearly indicative of his faith; he does not wear it through most of the narrative, but it is clearly shown during the flashbacks. Throughout the narrative he struggles against his former identity as a minister: he tells a store clerk he is not a priest anymore when she wants to confess to him, and he asks Officer Paski to not call him “Father” anymore.

As part of the Core, Graham is an example of the faithful turned faithless, or as Robertson describes, one whose humanity has gotten the better of him. His wife’s death affects Graham to the extent that he turns away from his calling to serve God. The film’s premise is that of faith, the loss and finding of it. Graham is sincere in his faith when his life is all good, but his idolatrous love for his wife (as he evidently places her before God) turns him from Him. His wavering faith in times of hardship is an indication of his conditional love for God.

However, Graham’s character is one that makes a full circle of faith. As a minister, he is shown as being highly disappointed by God, enough to leave his position in the Church. As a result of renouncing his faith, and not his wife’s death, his family life breaks down. Both his son and brother looked up to him, but when he is consumed with fear and faithlessness, there is only disappointment. But when he recognizes God’s hand in the events of his life, when he is the only one that believes that his son, Morgan, has not died, his faith is restored. It is the beginning of rebuilding his family life. In the last scene, there is indistinct laughter and playfulness in the background to the visual of

Graham in a clerical collar. The outline of the faded cross is replaced by pictures of his family, and Graham's reaffirmation of religious faith is clear.

Another example of cyclical Christianity (belief-fall-redemption-belief) is in James Mangold's *Walk the Line* (2005). Like Graham Hess, Johnny Cash is depicted in Mangold's movie as first being born into a Christian family (his mother and brother are noticeable figures of faith), and who shows evidences of that faith later in life. But along the way, he loses control of his life to external negative forces, but finds redemption again, and in this case through the woman he loves, who is also a noted Christian. Nothing in the film is overtly religious, but there are instances where Christianity is introduced as a motif. John is indirectly affected by Christianity through June. John does clean up his life, and the woman that helps him, whom he is in love with, exudes Christian values and character. More of June is discussed later.

We are introduced to a young John Cash (called "J.R." by family members) as he is listening to the radio while his brother reads the Bible. John Cash's older brother, Jack, is considered the better son by their father, something that will stay with John his whole life. Jack, even at so young an age, wants to be a preacher, making him a Level 3 Christian (we never see enough of him to know if he actually attends church, which would have categorized him in Level 2). Throughout his brief time on screen, Jack is an idealized figure as the better son, and made more so after his death. He is a stark contrast to their father who dotes on Jack while verbally bashing John. Jack as an ideal Christian in his desire to be a preacher, and his kindness to John, cannot be challenged after he dies, and John is made to live in Jack's shadow his whole life.

Another Christian character to note is a lady in a store who chastises June Carter.

The lady is considered a Level 3 Christian for only verbally spouting doctrine (albeit misused). First she seems friendly, praising June's parents as being "good Christians." However, the lady tells her, "I'm surprised they still speak to you." Taken aback by this sudden change of attitude, June is clearly confused. She has just gone through a divorce, which is public knowledge as June is a celebrity, and this lady tells her, "Divorce is an abomination." The portrayal is one of a cruel and unforgiving fundamentalist. June does not even know this woman and tells her, "I'm sorry I let you down, ma'am." Here are two portrayals of Christians, however subtle. The lady is judgmental while June exudes a more positive Christian characteristic of humility in response to such spite. And while the woman is disapproving of June when she has no right to be, this same woman is seen later that night attending June's concert. The sight of the lady's smug look causes June to flee the stage while singing a duet with John Cash at his request. To June's credit, she is reluctant to sing with John the song she recorded with her ex-husband, and her hesitance is clear, but John continues anyway and she goes along with it. She understands how "inappropriate" it is, and when she meets the eye of the lady from earlier, she runs off-stage, guilt-ridden.

June can be considered a Level 2 Christian by her cross necklace and her attendance of church, as well as that she apparently comes from a Christian family. But more than just symbolically associating with Christianity, she and her parents embody a Christian creed of helping the helpless. When John becomes dependent on his prescription drugs, they intervene and help him recover.

The film has little to do with religious faith, but there are small bits that do allude to it such as when he is offended by Sam Philips who says its not believable when John sings about God. Again, his faith is not a central focus of John's growth, but he is considered a Level 3 Christian for the purposes of this thesis for his mentions of God. John as a man with a broken past, his life shattered by drug abuse, and who is then redeemed again by his soul mate, June. When John does overcome his addiction, his triumph is signified by his coming to church. June holds his hand and as they approach the church building, she tells a shy and hesitant John, "It's okay." In part, Christianity through June is a positive influence by helping John overcome his addictions and regain stability.

The Passion, *Signs*, and *Walk the Line* are three films that offer positive portrayals of Christianity. In *The Passion*, Jesus is the God-man whose perfect sacrifice provided a vehicle for which to save the whole world. *Signs* is an example of a man who loses his faith, but finds it again. Without that faith, there is evidence of Graham's family life breaking down. When his hope in God is restored, symbols point back to his family life becoming stable and happy again. In *Walk the Line*, June is John's savior-of-sorts, turning his life from prescription-drug addiction. June is a well-meaning Christian girl who literally brings John back to church. In June, Christianity's positive forces of love and life-affirming values are demonstrated. However, in Eastwood's Oscar-winning *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) and Oscar-nominated *Mystic River* (2003), Christianity is insubstantial or symbols that point to it signify corruption.

Million Dollar Baby offers a view of the clergy as essentially ineffective, as either counselor or comforter. Frankie Dunn (also Eastwood) is a man tormented by his past. In one scene we see him kneel besides his bed and pray for what the audience can only presume to be a daughter and ex-wife. In the scene that follows, Frankie visits Father Horvak (and we learn this is a daily visit) and Horvak asks if he writes his daughter. In this same scene, Horvak accuses Frankie of coming to Mass only to “wind me up.” What follows is an exchange about some point of doctrine and there is a sense that Horvak is tired of this routine. He tells Frankie in patronizing tones, “Frankie, most people figure out by kindergarten it’s about faith.” Pushed to his limits about Frankie’s question about Jesus as a demigod, Horvak bursts, “There are no demigods, you fucking pagan.” First his impatience is a case for hypocrisy, then his language. He knows Frankie has defeated him by his rhetoric, and Horvak quickly returns to his priestly duties. He inquires after Frankie’s daughter, if he writes her or not. Frankie says he does and Horvak, again impatiently, accuses him, “Now you’re lying to a priest. You know what? Take a day off, don’t come to Mass tomorrow.” Not believing Frankie and once again patronizing him by attacking Frankie’s sincerity (whether or not he is right), Horvak is portrayed as unsympathetic and irritated. Not once does he demonstrate a loving and kind demeanor. We are led to believe by the dialogue that this may be a daily custom on Frankie’s part to purposely rile up the priest, and that may be so to some extent, but Frankie’s prayer prior to this scene, and another scene in which we see boxes full of returned letters to his daughter, indicate his genuine search for comfort and counsel, of which Horvak cannot give him.

Towards the end of the movie, Frankie goes to Father Horvak one last time for advice about Maggie's request to die, her entire body completely paralyzed, and she wants Frankie to help her die. Frankie tells Horvak, "It's committing a sin by doing it. By keeping her alive, I'm killing her." All Horvak can tell him is to "leave her with God." These hollow words cannot comfort a desperate Frankie: "She's not asking for God's help. She's asking for mine." Frankie's despair is too much and he weeps before Horvak, incapable of composing himself. Horvak replies, "Frankie, I've seen you at Mass almost every day for 23 years. The only person comes to church that much is the kind who can't forgive himself for something. Whatever sins you're carrying, they're nothing compared to this. Forget about God or heaven and hell. If you do this thing, you'll be lost. Somewhere so deep, you'll never find yourself again." Horvak walks away and Frankie is left alone in the empty church, a reflection of his now-empty faith if ever he had any.

Brian O'Byrne as Father Horvak seems distant from his priestly piety. His portrayal in direct interaction with Eastwood's Frankie shows a lack of genuineness. There is no indication that his priestly position is that of faithfulness, since there is no time we see him outside of his dialogue with Frankie. But when Frankie faces the most difficult moments of his life, Horvak leaves him just as lost and alone as when he came to him for help. In the Introduction of this thesis, C.K. Robertson was quoted as pointing to "the irrelevance of the minister in a world he cannot possibly understand" (see page 5). *Million Dollar Baby* echoes this same theme of the complete inability of a Christian

figure to be more of a friend than a judge. There is nothing that Horvak can do to help a despondent Frankie Dunn but lay at his feet cold guilt.

Similarly, in Eastwood's 2003 film *Mystic River* about a father seeking revenge for his daughter's murder, Christianity plays no significant role in helping any of the characters in positive ways, but serves more as a backdrop to the narrative. Charlene Burns looks at Oscar nominated *Mystic River* (2003) as a "Parable of Christianity's Dark Side." She notes that though religion is not a foremost focal point of the film, many Christian icons appear—most notably the Christian cross. Senn Penn received his first Oscar for his portrayal of Jimmy Markum, faithful husband and father of three, murderer, thief. Driven to vengeance for the death of his most beloved and favorite daughter, Katie, Jimmy's search for her killer leads him to an old friend, Dave Boyle. So consumed with his thirst for revenge, Jimmy kills Dave, but learns only a few hours too late that Dave is the wrong man. At the end of the film, Jimmy stands at his window with his back to the camera. On his back is tattooed a large cross. Just as crusaders carried up symbols of the cross to wage their war, Jimmy's tattoo is indicative of his justification for revenge: God is on his side. Though he feels guilt, it is not for the murder, but for murdering the wrong man. Burns observes, "The symbols of Christianity have been adopted by our culture, but its substance has not. Christianity has become so culturally conditioned that it verges on moral bankruptcy." In her article, Burns further analyses the presence of Christian icons in other instances in which the cross appears, and the context in which we see the characters in church. Jimmy and his family go to church to see Jimmy's young daughter receive her First Communion. For them, "The church is nothing more than a social

institution; its teachings have no impact in their lives [...] Were the church adequately manifesting its primary aims in the world, we anticipate that the emotion attached to this spiritual event ought to spill over into a lived spirituality for these people” (Burns). The treatment of religion is one that is detached from a more personal embracement or enrichment.

There is another image of a cross in the beginning of the film, and though brief, is very significant. The start of the movie takes place 20 years before Katie’s murder. The three main characters—Jimmy, Sean, and Dave—are just boys playing outside when two men that pose as police officers stop them for writing in wet cement. They take the young Dave Boyle with them to “tell [his mother] what her punk kid’s been up to.” Dave is put into the backseat, and the man in the passenger side turns around, puts his hand on the car seat, and smiles at Dave. On his hand is a distinct cross imprinted on his gold ring, presumably a priest’s ring. They drive off with young Dave and the next we see him, Dave is in a dark basement. The man we know as the driver of the car silently walks down the stairs with the man with the cross ring behind him and Dave pleads, “No more, please.” In a brief glimmer of light, we see the man with the ring also has a cross necklace. The pedophile either dresses like a priest or is one; given the brevity of his time on screen, there is no way to be sure.

Burns asks, “Where is God in a world of sexual predators who feel no discomfort wearing the symbol of Christian redemption?” The sign of the cross has become washed-down in significance while “when the cross does appear most visibly, it is worn by the most heinous of the victimizers: Jimmy and one of the men who sexually abused Dave”

(Burns). When the symbols of Christianity are associated with the crimes of those who so lightly wear them, those same symbols and what they represent, such as redemption, are corrupted. Burns declares, “What was once a symbol of triumph over tyranny has itself become a symbol of oppression.” Christianity, with the cross, comes to mean nothing more than an empty symbol.

Mystic River and *Million Dollar Baby* show Christianity as less-than-sincere expressions of faith. The emptiness of the cross in *Mystic River* (Jimmy’s tattoo and the pedophile’s ring and necklace) are indications of hypocrisy. The immorality in *Mystic River* is not affected by religious presence; if anything, it makes the wrong-doing more evil. Religion is a background to the narrative. As Jimmy’s young daughter is taking her first communion, they are beaming; their little girl is growing up. Christianity is not otherwise discussed in the film. In *Million Dollar Baby*, religion is more present with Frankie’s encounters with Father Horvak, but still, Horvak does not prove to be a significant figure as far as Frankie’s decisions. There is nothing useful that comes from Father Horvak. His only significant role is to add to Frankie’s distress with the prospect of Maggie dying, with or without his help; she has proven that if he does not help her, she will find a way to do it herself. Religion as a restrictive entity plays into the narrative here, but no where else does Father Horvak propel the story significantly. More or less, he, too, is just background. Except to set up Frankie’s dilemma, Father Horvak could be absent and the narrative would be the same. In *Walk the Line*, the lady that confronts June is hypocritical in her neglect of the Christian tenets of love and kindness. But June herself is kind and loving and helpful to John, especially in his time of greatest need.

John is one that has lost his way in the maze of fame, but June becomes his savior on earth. Similarly, Graham Hess is lost after the death of his wife. He is a mess and no source of hope for his family when the world seems to be coming to an end. When he nearly loses his son, he curses God, saying “I hate you.” But in the climax of the movie, when he realizes that all the events that have happened to him were really for a higher purpose, his faith is restored. In both *Walk the Line* and *Signs*, John and Graham face hopelessness, but return back to their faith in God and life.

The two Eastwood films contextualized religion in the way in which the characters are negative representations of Christianity. In *Baby's* Father Horvak, religion offers no useful counsel for Frankie when the reiteration of God's law can do little to comfort him. *Mystic River* shows Christianity as insubstantial and corrupt, and when it is shown in a positive way (by bringing the Markum family together for the daughter's first communion), it is merely for a traditional rite of passage. Outside of tradition, there is no spiritual substance for the characters. In the other three films in this chapter, Christianity is used in a way to propel the narrative forward. Though there are instances when religion is portrayed as ambivalent, ultimately, at the conclusion of the film, there is redemption: for Graham Hess it the restoration of his faith, for John Cash it is his improvement through June, and for the people of earth, it is salvation through Christ.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS: ANALYSES OF ACTION FILMS

“The exchange of bigger-than-life celluloid gods for the preached God of scripture makes it clear that the messages presented on Saturday night will likely be more memorable, and thus more effective, than those proclaimed on Sunday morning.” – C.K. Robertson¹

In a drama film, the use of religion focuses on the spiritual and psychological aspects. In the action films, there are instances in which the same thing is true. Often with action, there comes a psychological motive that drives the narrative. For example, in *Constantine*, he is hunting demons to save his soul, but there is a spiritual detachment from what he is doing as work versus what he is doing because he loves God. However, *Constantine* is considered an action film in this thesis due to its tendency for spectacle (special effects, fighting scenes, divine intervention). Among the film selection for this chapter, there are instances when characters reflect or react on the spiritual aspects of religion, in how religion affects them personally such as in *Dardevil* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*. But there are also instances in some of the films in which characters use religion as a weapon, an instrument to fight evil, something they carry in their tool belt for a day's job as in *Constantine* and *Van Helsing* where the spiritual implications of religion are addressed, but not so much embraced on an emotional or psychological level.

Van Helsing (2004) is writer/director Stephen Sommers' version of the hunt for Dracula. Van Helsing (Hugh Jackman) is introduced by putting him opposite Mr. Hyde from the story Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. He says he is sent by the Knights of the Holy Order to bring Mr. Hyde in. Van Helsing is considered a Level 1 figure for this thesis, as

¹ “Ministers in the Movies”

an appointed authority for the capture of evil beings under the Church. As he defeats Mr. Hyde, Van Helsing makes a sign of the cross and says a Latin prayer for Dr. Jekyll. In the next scene, we see him racing through Vatican City and entering a confessional. Cardinal Jinette, familiar with Van Helsing's work ("Bless me, Father for I have--" "Sinned. Yes, I know."), reprimands him for letting a rose window break in the church in which Van Helsing fights Mr. Hyde. Without any sign of thanks for getting rid of the known murderer, Jinette laments the lost of the 600 year old piece of window art and tells Van Helsing, "I wish you a week in hell for that." As Van Helsing has done his duty for the Church, it is suspicious that Jinette values the material over "God's work." As a cardinal, Jinette is a Core Christian figure. He eventually continues by approving of Van Helsing's results, but says it nonetheless "attracts far too much attention." The Order for which Van Helsing works for is not supposed to exist. *Van Helsing* puts the classic forces of good and evil against one another in the holy man/murderer (what he says of himself as "a little bit of both") and the great evil that is Dracula.

David Wenham plays Van Helsing's sidekick, Carl, a friar and arsenal inventor in the service of the Holy Order, and is considered a Core Christian as a friar, and soon-to-be monk. He equips Van Helsing with various weapons to go after Dracula, but when Van Helsing says he wants him to come with him to Transylvania, Carl curses, "The hell be damned that I am." At this, Van Helsing reminds him he is a monk and should not curse at all. Carl replies, perhaps bordering hypocrisy, "Actually, I'm still just a friar. I can curse all I want. Damn it." Under the orders of the cardinal, Carl now has to accompany Van Helsing to Transylvania, but not before complaining about leaving the

alley. His duty to God seems to be conditional to his comfort zone. When he saves a villager from Dracula's progeny, she asks Carl if there was any way to repay him. He whispers something in her ear and, shocked, she tells him, "You can't do that. You're a monk!" He corrects her, and says, "Actually, I'm just a friar." The girl then suggestively smiles back at him. The next we see them they are on a couch in the Valerious house, half-dressed with the girl he saved. When it comes to religious piety, Carl casts it off (as well as his clothes) only too quickly. But when it is time to fight Dracula, Carl then takes up his cross. His sincerity in fighting evil and serving Van Helsing's mission to do so does make his character a positive figure for the purposes of the narrative. But as for his religious devotion, it is questionable. Though we are to assume he is on his way to becoming a monk, and therefore has technically not violated any vows yet, his treatment of sexuality suggests that religion is only an instrument, a tool when it serves a purpose, and disregarded when it is an inconvenience. The same can be said of his attitude when assigned to accompany Van Helsing for God's work, as he is so unwilling to leave the familiarity of the monastery.

Thematically, religion as a tool is a motif repeated throughout the film text. For example, to open the door to Dracula's secret lair, "In the name of God, open this door," must be spoken. God's name is used like a key to expose evil (the door to Dracula's lair), and to repel evil creatures (holy water kills one of the Dracula's brides). Utilizing the conventions of action, it makes for a better film in that way, as oppose to fighting evil with spirituality. It would make little sense to preach the Word to an enemy to defeat him

on a psychological level. It makes better sense within the conventions of an action film to use symbols, like the cross to repel the vampires, or any other evil spirit/being.

Christianity as a tool to fight evil is extended to the church as an institution to defend the world from so-called evil. Jinette tells Van Helsing, "Without us, the world would be in darkness." The cardinal believes it is the Order's station in the world to protect it ("We have kept mankind safe since time immemorial. We are the last defense against evil, an evil that the rest of mankind has no idea it even exists."). Jinette tells him that these trials of vanquishing evil men are "all a test of faith," and immediately gives him a new mission to protect the family Valerious, sworn arch-enemies to Dracula. As a kind of world police, the church as an institution defines itself as the ultimate definers of good and evil. It endeavors to rid those evils that would not only threaten the world, but the authority of the church itself. Van Helsing himself is born with this responsibility, and though at times he seems tired with it, ultimately he does what he needs to in order to carry out the church's mission. It is his job, but not his conviction.

Similar to the character of Van Helsing is in director Frank Lawrence's *Constantine*. Constantine is one that has the power to fight evil, but grows restless of his responsibility, much like Van Helsing. As an overtly religious movie, *Constantine* has a plethora of religious figures, both good and evil. Constantine himself (Keanu Reeves) is described in the promotional tagline as: "Hell wants him. Heaven won't take him. Earth needs him." As a detective of matters of heaven and hell (like the church as police in *Van Helsing*), John Constantine was born with the gift of seeing things of the two unearthly realms, driving him to suicide as a youth, a mortal sin according to the Catholic

doctrine. He comes back to life after two minutes in hell, and is very determined to never go back (as he is bound due to his suicide). He spends his life utilizing his supernatural vision and ability to “deport” the hell-bound below—but this is only his attempt to buy his way back into heaven.

His association with God is one that is forced (arguably upon himself), but nonetheless, by working for God, he represents the God he knows of, but does not have faith in. For this, he is labeled a Level 1 Christian, despite his reluctance. However, Gabriel the archangel reminds Constantine that he cannot buy his way into heaven, but rather, what God requires is self-sacrifice and belief (which Gabriel says is different from knowledge). The angel Gabriel is played by a woman, Tilda Swinton. Making the angel asexual emphasizes Gabriel’s otherworldliness, outside the human race. Categorized as part of the Core of Christianity, Gabriel is of divine nature and appears in two key scenes. The first is a meeting with Constantine near the beginning of the movie where he tells Constantine the impossibility of buying his way into heaven. In frustration, Constantine tells Gabriel, “I never asked to see. I was born with this curse.” Gabriel calls this “curse” a gift, one that Constantine has “squandered on selfish endeavors.” Gabriel’s importance is in fueling Constantine with heavenly advice. By the end of the film, however, the audience learns that Gabriel is jealous of humans and he is behind the conspiracy to bring the devil’s son to earth. An angel with human emotions, Gabriel is punished for his consuming jealousy and is turned into a human himself.

Constantine does good on God’s behalf, by ridding earth of what he calls half-breeds that disrupt the balance, but all of it is for selfish reasons, not for the greater good.

He makes for himself a job without conviction. When Constantine meets Angela Dodson, his road to redemption is underway as they together set out on a quest to solve the seeming suicide of Angela's twin sister, Isabel (both played by Rachel Weisz). Isabel is considered a Level 2 Christian, as she was once part of the congregation of the Catholic Church. Her sister, Angela, like herself, is born with the ability to see realms of other-worlds, such as angels and demons. She kills herself to prevent the devil's son from using her as a means to enter the earth's plane, but is sent to hell for her act. Here, the Catholic Church is demonstrated to have ambivalent doctrine. Isabel saves the earth, but on a technicality, she is condemned. For this, one might see religion with suspicious eye if a strict adherence to religious law is held above the lives of people. Of this, Jeffrey Mallinson says, "Much of the plot depends on a caricature of Roman Catholic theology where one is damned on a technicality or redeemed through a loophole" ("Film Review: *Constantine*").

In *Constantine*, religion is represented as what one is born to be; there is little choice in the matter for the Dodson sisters, Constantine, or the angel Gabriel. Constantine was born with a gift he calls a curse—to see the supernatural, the divine, the devils. Gabriel is created as an angel and falls to humanity. Human suffering, says Mallinson, is portrayed as the result of a wager between God and Satan, God being like "a kid with an ant farm." Yet the Christian value of redemption through self-sacrifice is evident in the final scenes where Constantine willingly takes Isabel's place in hell. For this he is awarded a place in heaven. Again, Christianity is ambivalent in awarding Constantine heaven for his self-sacrifice, but Isabel's act of suicide was also one of self-

sacrifice. This implies working for one's place in heaven, rather than heaven being the free and willing gift of God.

The powers of heaven are in some ways forced on both Constantine and Van Helsing, but they maintain attitudes that are more human than heavenly. They are straddlers between the realms of heaven and earth (Constantine engages in face to face conversation with Gabriel and Lucifer; Van Helsing is also known as Gabriel, "the left hand of God"). At times this power is not something they want, but in the end they use it for good. In some ways, *Van Helsing* and *Constantine* demonstrate Christianity in negative portrayals, by both the title characters and the angel Gabriel. Van Helsing and Constantine do not fully embrace Christianity as a religion they live their lives by, and at times resent it as a burden. And Gabriel is a fallen angel by the end of the film, who is a co-conspirator with the devil's son. Even in the condemnation of Isabel by church doctrine emphasizes Christianity's duality. However, Gabriel does get punished by the end, and Isabel is restored to heaven; Van Helsing does defeat Dracula, and the family Valerious is redeemed. These films may show their characters in ways that undermine the value of spiritual Christianity, but in these films, good always triumphs over evil even if the hero is not pious. But in the example of *Sin City* which, contains Core Christian figures, the characters wear a mask of Christianity, a façade of Christian devotion, but underneath is evil. In *Van Helsing* and *Constantine*, the heroes are not devout Christians, yet defeat the most monstrous forms of evil beings using Christianity as part of their armor; in *Sin City*, the Christian characters are clergymen, but display the most nefarious forms of corruption using Christianity as their cover.

The clergymen in Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez's *Sin City* (2005) are categorized as Core Christians, one priest and one cardinal. The priest is not as significant as Cardinal Roark, but his position is still one of certain power. Robertson supposes, "Perhaps this is why Catholic priests have captured filmmakers' attention much more than other ministers or rabbis, for the priest's collar is a powerful visible symbol, much like a wedding band. It is a symbol that conjures up images of dark confessions, vows of celibacy, and otherworldly rites." (235) In a brief scene in which the film's co-director, Frank Miller, plays a priest who is part of a government conspiracy and is interrogated by the protagonist, Marv. The scene takes place in a confessional box which separates them—Marv as the sinner confessing, the priest as the Father to forgive. The confessional is a powerful symbol here. In this context, the two roles are actually reversed. Marv is forcing the information out of the priest. As Robertson points out, "Ministers have rarely occupied the seat of honor as Hollywood heroes. Instead, it has often been given instead to on-screen detectives, scientists, and even attorneys" (235). Marv, here, is playing detective. He find out, that is the priest "confesses," that the murdered girl whose death Marv is investigating was a prostitute that "worked the clergy." This is a minor detail to the plot, but in another transgression of vows, the vow of celibacy as noted by Robertson, the corrupted Church is again exposed—it's not called Sin City for nothing. More significant to the narrative (and this thesis), Marv gets the priest to tell him that the Cardinal Roark is at the top of the scandal. After all this, Marv kills the priest, true to action film convention. By killing the priest, Marv is symbolically

trying to rid of the religious corruption, but he cannot escape the blood that so stains Sin City.

Marv makes his way to the Cardinal in the priest's Mercedes (so much for the vow of poverty), and in a voiceover/montage, we hear Marv's introduction of him: "Patrick Henry Roark, man of the cloth. Could've become president, but chose to serve God. Along the way, he happened to become the most powerful man in the state. He's brought down mayors and governors like they were nothing. He even made his rotten brother a US senator without breaking a sweat. And here he's gonna get killed in the name of dead hooker." Roark displays corruption on every level. When Roark is first seen, he is in his pajamas, in bed, reading a book with a cross on the cover—a Bible? When Marv brings him head of Kevin, Roark calls Marv a demon and monster—ironic considering Roark helped Kevin eat his victims. Kevin (Elijah Wood) is the boy that commits all the murders, including of the girl Marv is investigating, but Roark covers up for him, and they both hide behind his dark cloaks of corruption. Roark, grieving Kevin's death, says, "He's dead now because of one stupid whore." Marv proceeds to start his slow killing of Roark, but not before Roark picks up Kevin's decapitated head, kisses it, and says, "We're going home." After all he has done, Roark believes he is still going to heaven. Here the role of the Church and religious figures in general become ambiguous, especially since Roark is a man so high on the ladder of religious authority. Christianity is only a political instrument, not a faith-based institution, and in the case of Roark, Christianity is his mask to hide the evil beneath.

Positive priestly figures are found in Mark Steven Johnson's *Daredevil* (2003) and Kevin Reynolds' *The Count of Monte Cristo* (2002). In *Daredevil*, Derrick O'Connor portrays Father Everett as the Daredevil's confident, friend, and counselor. As Daredevil, Matt carries out his own justice for the people of the community. When he goes to confession, Everett chastises him, "What the hell are you playin' at, Matt? You didn't come here for forgiveness. You want permission, and I can't give you that, son." Matt replies, "Justice isn't a sin, Father." "No, but vengeance is," the priest tells him. Matt feels because he is able to defend the helpless, it is his job to do so. More than that, it is his conviction to do so. Everett tells him, "A man without fear is a man without hope." Not believing this until his girlfriend dies at the hands of his enemy, Matt later tells Everett, "You were right, Father. You were right." The priest figure in *Daredevil* offers the hero advice which he does not take, and only learns later after losing so much that he should have heeded to Everett's counsel. This same motif of the priest figure as a moral guide for the hero is found in Kevin Reynold's *The Count of Monte Cristo* (2002). As Everett discourages Matt from seeking happiness in revenge, Abbé Faria discourages Edmond Dantes in *The Count of Monte Cristo* from believing that revenge would satisfy him.

Richard Harris is Abbé Faria, Edmond's mentor and friend. As a priest he falls under the category of the Core. Faria and Edmond meet just as Edmond has given up hope on God. When Edmond first comes to the Chateau d'If, the prison to which he is unjustly sent, he first affectionately carves out the inscription on the wall "GOD WILL GIVE ME JUSTICE," tracing it over with bits of rock over the years. His first day, he

argues with the prison keeper who tells him, “God has nothing to do with it,” that is, has nothing to do with Edmond being in prison. Edmond replies with naïveté, “God has everything to do with it. He’s everywhere. He sees everything.” When Abbé Faria, who Edmond calls just “Priest,” comes upon his prison cell, having spent the last five years digging an escape tunnel in the wrong direction, he asks about the inscription. Edmond replies, “It’s faded, just as God has faded from my heart.” The priest suggests that the revenge that has replaced God will ultimately serve God’s purpose.

When a collapse fatally injures the priest, before he dies, he tells Edmond of a great treasure. Edmond knows that he will use the treasure for his revenge, but the priest tells Edmond, “Do not commit the crime for which you now serve the sentence. God said, ‘Vengeance is mine.’” A now desperate Edmond replies, “I don’t believe in God.” And with his final words, the priest tells him, “That doesn’t matter. He believes in you.” A Level 3 Christian, Edmond is one to experience a cyclical faith (recall *Walk the Line* and *Signs*). Edmond believed that God would get him out of the jail, knowing that he was innocent, but when justice was wrongly served, Edmond’s faith is lost. As he is coming to terms with his revenge, many things point him to the priest’s instruction to abandon his vengeance, to turn to God, and to do good.

Abbé Faria gives Edmond an education, a life-altering friendship, and seeds of faith that are planted so deeply in Edmond, that after he has finished his revenge, he comes back to the jail, and in memoriam of his dead friend, he finally admits, “You were right, Priest. You were right.” It would seem that from then on, the Priest’s spiritual teachings have finally come to fruition in the Edmond. This last scene is similar to Ben

Afflecks' Matt in *Daredevil*. Both Matt and Edmond acknowledge that their priest mentors were right all along about their lessons of justice and revenge. Matt loses his lover in pursuit of justice; Edmond learns that his vengeance is not as important as his family. Matt and Edmond are both child-like characters to Father Everett and Abbé Faria. Ultimately these films demonstrate religion positively because both Matt and Edmond first seek vengeance, but learn that the teachings of the faith are ultimately what is good and right, and that vengeance belongs to God. However, beyond their acknowledgment of Everett and Faria's teachings, there is no way to tell if each of these characters really embraced their spirituality. The films fulfill action film conventions, allowing the narrative to be driven by vengeance and purveyance of the heroes' own justice, the very thing that the priests discouraged.

All of these action films utilized religion in a way that drove the narrative forward. Religion was either as a tool in the form of religious symbols (the cross, holy water) in *Van Helsing* and *Constantine*, or as a foil to the motives of the hero's quest for justice in *Daredevil* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*. However, spiritual Christianity is not embraced by any of the protagonist leads. They all are at a distance to fully surrendering their hearts to God. Constantine and Van Helsing both work as employees of God, but do not accept that they are children of God. As supporting characters, the clergy of *Daredevil* and *Monte Cristo* have spiritual faith in God. Both Father Everett and Abbé Faria implore their pupils to abandon their revenge and leave it to God. In the case of *Sin City*, Roark is a terribly vile cardinal. His use of his religious position gains him political clout, clout which he uses to manipulate the government in his favor. The

corruption of the Church is most blatant in *Sin City*. Roark condones Kevin's cannibalism, claiming it filled the eater with "white light." By that light, presumably Roark equates with divine light. Right before he is killed, he has the audacity to claim his place in heaven, knowing the terror he has inflicted and allowed.

In examination of the particular uses of religion in these action films, the characters react against religion. Van Helsing and Constantine do not embrace spirituality, but use Christianity in practical ways. They are resentful to what religion has done to them: Van Helsing cannot remember his past and is made to work for the Order, Constantine is condemned to hell based on a religious technicality of law. Matt and Edmond carry out their vengeance even as their priest friends discourage it. They are emotionally driven to carry out their own justice and do not heed to the priests' warnings until the very end, until after they have satisfied their revenge. In *Sin City*, corruption is abounding to the outer-most reaches of religion and politics. Cardinal Roark abuses his power, and even justifies his evil as some profound spiritual and divinely-anointed act. Many of these reactions against religion stem from a psychological misgiving, but that is not the selling-point of these films, which makes them different from drama. These films satisfy action film conventions in their special effects, battles, and blood. Put religion in them, and the heroes have a supernatural weapon against evil, but the villains embody the ultimate, sometimes supernatural, evil.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS: ANALYSES OF COMEDY FILMS

“Mention something out of a Charlton Heston movie and suddenly everyone is a theology scholar.” – Metatron, Kevin Smith’s *Dogma*

Not every film with religious figures has to be serious. There is a saying that God created the platypus to prove to people that He has a sense of humor. Taking on God in a comedic light is Jim Carrey in Tom Shadyac’s *Bruce Almighty* (2003) in which Carrey’s character, Bruce, takes on God’s job. God is first introduced as the janitor, then the electrician, then, as he sheds his work clothes, we see he is wearing an all white suit. Representing the Core with Freeman’s portrayal of God and, to some extent, Bruce’s attempt to stand-in for God, the film shows that God is more like us than we realize. Aside from owning powers of God, Bruce is not really affirmed to be a Christian figure in any verbal or symbolic way. However, his girlfriend does pray and does play some role in Bruce’s transformation as a life-affirming human being. The film comments more really on spirituality than doctrinal Christianity. For this, Freeman’s God portrayal is the focus for this film analysis.

We are introduced to God as being the everyday man and worker. Appearing in five scenes spread throughout the film, God, as portrayed by Morgan Freeman, becomes a being simply “handling a job.” As God, He is considered part of the Core of the Christian faith. Freeman’s God portrayal shows him to be more down-to-earth rather than the holy and set apart version found in other narratives. He is essentially more human and more of a jester in this film. In the narrative, God takes Bruce up on his

constant complaints (“God is a mean kid sitting on an anthill with a magnifying glass, and I’m the ant!”) and endows all his powers upon him to do whatever Bruce wills, to see if he can do better. He tells Bruce he is taking a vacation, to which Bruce calls out, “God doesn’t take vacations, does he? Do...ye?” God replies, “Did you ever hear about the Dark Ages?” After this initial meeting with God, and after Bruce realizes that he has indeed gained God’s powers, he comes home singing Joan Osbourne’s “If God Was One of Us.” At first Bruce is perfectly content in wielding the power of the Almighty, but when voices of millions of unanswered prayers start flooding his head (“That was just Buffalo between 57th Street and Commonwealth,” God tells him), he soon realizes he cannot do it.

God tells Bruce, “People want me to do everything for them. But what they don’t realize is they have the power. You want to see a miracle, son? Be the miracle.” Freeman’s God portrayal suggests that people are in control of their own lives. God can help, but ultimately people’s will to change must come from within. As God leaves—presumably earth—into a ceiling shaft that is emitting blinding, white light, Bruce calls out to him, “But what if I need you. What if I have questions?” To this, God laughs and replies as he disappears into the light, “That’s your problem, Bruce. That’s everybody’s problem. You keep looking up.” The audience is given a humanistic view of God and through Bruce we are made to sympathize with the Creator of heaven and earth.

Earlier in the film, when Bruce’s girlfriend, appropriately named Grace, leaves him, he asks God, “How do you make somebody love you without affecting free will?” To this, God scoffs and replies, “Welcome to my world, son. You come up with an

answer to that one, you let me know.” It would then seem that even God Himself does not always know everything. As Bruce quotes Osbourne’s song, the movie ultimately wants to portray the Almighty as more or less one of us, and therefore for all the good and bad things that can happen in life, people should be more sympathetic to the Creator.

Not quite portraying God Himself, but one that would make himself as holy as the Holy Father, *Chocolat* (2000) begins with the mayor of Lansquenet, the Comte Paul de Reynaud, greeting villagers as they come into the church. He is seen as a Level 1 Christian, as he makes himself a kind of religious authority for the Church. He even writes the sermons for the Sunday mass. He strives to lead the villagers by his example of “hard work, modesty, self-discipline.” The narrator tells us, “If you lived in this village, you understood what was expected of you. You knew your place in the scheme of things. And if you happen to forget, someone would help remind you. The villagers held fast to their traditions, until one day...” Directed by Lasse Hallström, the film is set in a small 1959 French town of Lansquenet whose conservatism becomes the backdrop of the arrival of two vagabonds, Vianne Rocher and her daughter Anouk.

Upon their first meeting, the Comte is taken aback by Vianne’s refusal, although sweet, of his invitation to join the town for worship the next Sunday, as well as her unashamed admittance of never being married, even though she has a daughter. The Comte’s uneasiness with this new stranger and her reluctance to embrace the traditions of his beloved town is more evident when he displays his disapproval of her opening a patisserie just in time for Lent. He then begins to sow the seeds of mistrust among the citizens towards the new resident, as he hides behind his self-righteousness. His outward

appearance, as he would have people believe, is one of a moral and disciplined Christian man. Compared to himself, he only see Vianne's sins, as it were, rather than the attributes that make Vianne a lovely person just as she is. Carol Miles points out, "Vianne's strength is not in her recipes, rather it is in her ability to give unconditional love and acceptance to others in spite of their flaws and foibles" ("Film Review: *Chocolat*"). This is opposite of the Comte who wishes to be seen as an example of righteousness, but lacks love. Vianne is an example of love, but without the religious piety. In the middle of the spectrum is Père Henri.

Père Henri is the priest who stands between the Comte's and Vianne's ideologies. Though so young in his priesthood, he endeavors to reconcile old traditions to new ways, never stepping away completely from his religious convictions as he very much wants to bridge this gap between the conservative and more modern attitudes. Throughout the film, Père Henri's naiveté is very much taken advantaged of by the Comte, who desires to maintain the town's conservatism.

Even in the way Vianne dresses, with her low-cut blouses, non-black shoes, and above-the-ankle skirts, she represents an alternative to the conservative attitudes and traditions the townspeople have upheld for so long. The Comte sees this as the work of the Enemy and is sure that Vianne is present only to weaken the faith and convictions of the townspeople. He is the self-appointed vigilante of morals, but it is his driving away of those to whom he condescends that widens the space between himself and the people he so sincerely wishes to lead in uprightness. "Yet, *Chocolat* is not a typical story of good versus evil. Vianne and the count, in spite of their personal and ideological

differences, are both hostages to their respective heritages and traditions” (Miles, C.). As Vianne comes from a family line of nomads, the Comte is also the ancestor of many other Comtes before him and he feels it is responsibility to maintain moral standards. Miles observes, “Interestingly, the two icons that seem to give him the most comfort, and simultaneous torture, are the photographs of his wife and the crucifixes that he surrounds himself with” (“Film Review”).

It is not that the Comte is necessarily the “bad guy” of the film, but his hesitance to change makes him the antagonist of the film. But because Père Henri is in fact so young in his priesthood, the Comte is able to manipulate the church’s station to implement what he personally feels is best for the town he so passionately governs. He is like a father that never wants to see his daughter grow up into a woman. To the Comte, the village is like a child that he never wants to see change. It is his baby girl. But because of this, Père Henri as the religious Core figure, is portrayed as vulnerable to manipulation, and thus religion is inadvertently seen as a tool for maintaining a conservative social order. But by the end of the film, Père Henri is able to speak for himself and represent a more tolerant and all-embracing attitude for outsiders. The Comte is even changed once he embraces the kind of love Père Henri promotes in his last sermon. Carol Miles says, “In the end, the moral message that emerges is that the “miracle of our Lord’s divine transformation” is recalling the way he lived and in emulating that humanity. True freedom comes in accepting others as they are, and allowing them the freedom to be all that God has created them to be. It is not who we exclude that counts, but who we include that makes all the difference.”

In the Comte we see one extreme of Christian characters. He is more about the law than the Spirit, whereas Père Henri is the figure that seeks to more embrace the Spirit. It is Vianne, one who does not attend church, that inspires the Spirit in both men. The Comte eventually comes to tolerance and lessens his strictness. Père Henri learns to stand up for himself and becomes a religious leader teaching love and tolerance. When embracing a positive attitude in accepting others, Christianity in Père Henri is given back its right to stand on its own and not be manipulated by strict adherence to law over love.

Joe Zwick's *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* also presents the religious as needing to become more tolerant. The film is a love story about a woman from an orthodox Greek background that falls in love with an all-American, non-religious white guy. The Portokalos family as a unit represent Level 2 Christianity, as they are considered congregation members. When Toula meets Ian's parents, there is discussion about where the wedding will be. Ian's mother suggests the North Shore Country Club, and Ian replies, "We're going to get married in Toula's church, because we're not very religious, and her family is. Really is." To make Toula's family accept him, Ian converts to Greek Orthodox Christianity and gets baptized in the Church (complete with a blow-up, children-sized swimming pool as the immersion tank). Apparently, being Greek means being Orthodox and Ian embraces these traditions, all for Toula's love. After he is baptized, Ian wears a gold cross, symbolizing his conversion. "I'm Greek, now," he tells her. When religion is concerned, compromise abounds when the two worlds of Ian Miller and Toula Portokalos collide. As in *Chocolat*, love and acceptance is the overarching message.

In the last two films in this section, the Catholic figures in both films have somewhat ambiguous portrayals of religion. In David Dobkin's film, *Wedding Crashers*, Henry Gibson plays Father O'Neil, a quiet cleric. He is almost unnoticeable, mostly being in the background, but he is the catalyst to the entire narrative. In one scene, Vince Vaughn's character, Jeremy, is essentially confessing his and John's (played by Owen Wilson) routine of crashing weddings. That is, they talk their way into weddings, convince people they are somehow related to the bride or groom, then find some woman they can talk their way into bed with. On their last wedding crash, John falls for the Secretary of Treasury's daughter, Claire. But when Jeremy admits their escapades to the family priest, the whole house finds out. Though it was not in a confessional box, Jeremy did expect Father O'Neil to stay silent, especially when O'Neil does not say much to being with. As he is being kicked out of the house, Jeremy yells, "I told you that in confidence! That was a confession!" On one hand, irony makes the mostly mute Father O'Neil the means by which the master deceivers, John and Jeremy, are exposed. The comedic narrative is such that the audience sympathize with and even root for the two, but the audience still understands that what they are doing is wrong. On the other hand, O'Neil's tattling was in the best interest of the family and he did expose the many lies the two friends have masqueraded. However, the role of the Church becomes ambiguous. The priest does break confidence, but he does act on moral grounds to expose the two frauds. The fact that Jeremy is upset over the priest's breaking confidence is laughable, as the audience is never to believe that Jeremy is in any way a truly practicing Catholic. The priest is not important in any religious way, except that as a functional priest, he

marries a couple, and is only significant to the storyline in that he is the reason John and Jeremy are caught. This treatment of religion as irony is also illustrated in Jonathan Lynn's *The Whole Nine Yards* (2000).

In *Nine Yards*, Bruce Willis is Jimmy "The Tulip" Tudeski, a hit man with a conscience. There is nothing overtly religious in the movie or about Willis' character except perhaps Jimmy's odd way of measuring principles. He is a reputable contract killer by profession, but, as his wife, Cynthia, tells Oz (Matthew Perry), "Jimmy doesn't believe in divorce. He thinks it's a sin. A hit man with morals. Go figure." Cynthia knows that Jimmy has continually cheated on her, and rather than get a divorce, he now wants to kill her. In the Howard Deutch sequel, *The Whole Ten Yards* (2004), there is a scene in which Jimmy is praying. Oz asks, "Is that Hebrew?" "Yeah." "Aren't you Catholic?" "Devout." Verbally affirming his religious affiliation makes him a Level 3 Christian. Later, there is an issue with the cross he wears, which he first calls, "My good luck charm," and later, "This cross represents my Lord and Savior. The baby in the manger. I throw it away, I go to hell." Oz adds, "Coming from a man who's killed 21 people." Certainly vocal about his faith, Jimmy's actions would testify otherwise. In *Nine Yards*, Willis' character serves as a catalyst for the unfolding plot as he makes decisions to kill certain characters, or keep alive certain others. The fact that he makes any claims of faith is somewhat ridiculous, echoing a moment (albeit in a more serious tone) in *The Godfather* as Michael Corleone is renouncing Satan in church while his men are murdering his enemies at that very same moment.

These five comedy films represent Christianity in such a way that presents religion as a point of social commentary. *Bruce Almighty* poses the question that Joan Osbourne does in her song, "What if God was one of us?" Bruce's befriending of Morgan Freeman as God suggests that God is more like man as man was made in His likeness. In *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *Chocolat*, religion is used in the context of traditions that restrict both Toula in who she can marry and Comte Reynaud in who he can accept. Toula ultimately is portrayed as compromising between her family's wishes and her own desires to marry Ian Miller, a non-religious, non-ethnic man whose family first squints at with suspicious eyes. Only after he is baptized and absorbed into Greek culture is he truly accepted by Toula's family. Comte Reynaud is one who eventually accepts that he is not the ultimate moral standard for the town, and in his humorous loss-of-control in Vianne's chocolate shop, he comes to terms with compromising between desire and piety. *Wedding Crashers* and *The Whole Nine Yards* are absurd portrayals of religious figures. Except for his divulging of the protagonists' secret, he is in no other wise an affecting priest. As for *The Whole Nine Yards*, Jimmy's "devout" Catholicism highly contrasts with his occupation as a professional contract-killer. These representations of Christianity are insubstantial at best, and only serve the purpose for ironic humor. In general, however, when the comedy reflects the viewer (for example, has not everyone wondered about how it would be to be God? or have we all not experienced moments of indulgence like the Comte Reynaud, even when we felt it was wrong?), it makes the narrative more enjoyable. When identification on screen can be established, a viewer tends to be more engrossed in the story.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS

“And insofar as all human ‘knowledge’ is developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations, the sociology of knowledge must seek to understand the processes by which this is done in such a way that a taken-for-granted ‘reality’ congeals for the man in the street.” - The Social Construction of Reality¹

Ten Major Themes

As this thesis was an inductive study, the goal was to find what representations of Christianity could be found in popular American films. Using films from 2000-2005, general themes were found concerning the representation of Christianity. Analysis of each of character included assessment of specific Christian symbols that associated that character with the religion. The most frequent of these were the cross, the church building, and the clerical collar. Even more frequent was the verbal affirmation of characters of their association to Christianity. Of these characters, their use of religion in the narrative was evaluated in terms of representing Christianity or the Christian identity. An analysis of characters was the primary method of discerning these themes, which I have identified as: Religion as a Restrictive, Religion as Ineffective, Religion as a Political Instrument, Religion as a Tool to Fight Evil, Religion as a Tool of Irony, Religion as a Mask, Humanity of the Divine, “Higher Purpose” Narrative, Religion as a Moral Guide, and Cyclical Christianity. These are themes by which I now draw my conclusions, but these cannot be considered the only themes in which to generalize all films.

¹ Berger and Luckman, p. 3

The word “religion” comes from the Latin word “religio,” meaning “supernatural restraint,” or “religare,” meaning “to restrain” or “tie back” (The Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary). At the root of religion is this constant contradiction. It means to bind people together as to congregate in the purpose of worship, but it also binds people in a sense of being restricted by religious laws or traditions. In many of the films looked at in this thesis, this ever-present duality often gives religion a sense of ambivalence or ambiguity. Most apparently, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* and *Chocolat* use religion in both senses of the word. *Greek Wedding* centralizes the family as the binding force in Toula’s life. With family comes her sense of belonging, the traditions that her ethnicity afford, and with all that tradition, her religion as well in the form of Orthodox Greek Christianity. *Chocolat* also provides a view of religion and tradition compromising with new traditions. Like Toula, Vianne is a symbol of breaking out of the restriction of religion. Through Vianne, the town learns acceptance of and love for the Other, in much the same way that Toula shows her family that love is beyond mere religious, traditional, and even ethnic confines.

Religion as a restrictive can also be viewed to some extent in *The Whole Nine Yards*. In *The Whole Nine Yards*, religion is portrayed as a parody of doctrines. Jimmy will not divorce his wife because it is a sin. Yet he has an affair with his fan-turned-pupil, Jill, and is a hit man by profession. What’s more is that he wants to kill his wife to escape marriage. Even though framed within comedy, *Nine Yards* still emphasizes religion as restrictive, even if it is not taken seriously by the characters themselves. If

nothing else, the message surrounding Jimmy's devotion is of the restrictions of religion as being merely rules to be broken than rules that bring one closer to God.

Religion consisting merely of rules can be manipulated to serve one's own purpose. Religion and politics will always be intertwined, no matter how much people try to separate them. In movies such as *Sin City* and *Van Helsing*, religion is used as a political position of power and authority. In *Sin City*, Cardinal Roark is a corrupt Man of the Cloth who is in such a position of power that he can appoint his equally corrupt brother to be a Senator without opposition. The Senator's son is a known pedophile, but he can't be touched because he is Senator Roark's son, Cardinal Roark's nephew. The Roarks' political agenda involve corruption, scandal, and unimaginable evil. In *Van Helsing*, on the other hand, he is employed under the Knights of the Holy Order to vanquish evil monsters from the world. Cardinal Jinette is his superior to whom he answers for his assignments. Cardinal Jinette is the one that charges Van Helsing to vanquish evil in the name of God. The Holy Order is not supposed to exist, suggesting that they consider themselves an elite, superior institution, taking it upon themselves to police the world for whatever may threaten the spiritual realm or disrupt the good of the world.

In both the cases of Cardinal Roark and the Holy Order, neither establishes a standard by which to measure good and evil. Roark believes his cannibalism was justified by the "white light" it gives the eater; the Holy Order believes they set the standards of good and define evil. None of these forms of Christianity even comment on the Bible as a basis for moral standard, or any Christian-inspired text. Except for

Daredevil and *The Count of Monte Cristo* whose priest figures quoted the scriptural “Vengeance is mine,” and the Mel Gibson interpretation of the gospels, none of the other 12 films draw upon scripture in their representation of Christianity. Even in the overtly religious film, *Constantine*, there is a distorted version of the Holy Bible called Hell’s Bible. For many of these films, Christianity is a prop that is not explored scripturally, however spiritually meaningful religion may mean to the characters.

In both *Nine* and *Ten Yards*, religion is treated more as a characteristic quirk than a serious reflection of spirituality. In such instances, religion serves as a tool for irony. Religious notions are not taken seriously, especially as Jimmy vows against divorce, but cheats on his wife; he disapproves of friends engaging in “sexual congress with each other’s wives,” but looks to take care of his unhappy marriage by planning to kill his spouse. Though Oz definitely does not embrace any kind of specific religiosity, he is more Christian in that he seems to be the only one that does not want to see anyone killed (as Vianne was more Christian than Comte Reynaud in that she exhibited love, not judgment). Jimmy the Tulip’s “devout” Catholicism is also not necessarily practical as a point of ironic comedy. This tool of irony is used in *Wedding Crashers* as Vince Vaughn’s character yells at a priest who breaks confidence. Jeremy’s outrage at the priest who tells on him is not really supposed to be a seriously spiritual issue, but rather an absurd joke for the film. Putting aside the fact that both Jeremy and Jack deserved to be found out anyway, Father O’Neil is a very minor character, but offered no help or advice before divulging Jeremy’s “confession.” Father O’Neil does not say much, but when he does, it is off screen, and to the ruin of the two protagonists.

In the films *Bruce Almighty*, *Van Helsing*, and *Constantine*, divine beings are portrayed as beings with supernatural or divine power. In *Bruce Almighty*, Morgan Freeman as God is an Almighty being who takes a vacation, who has a sense of humor, and demonstrates it by finding a replacement in a regular human, that is, Bruce. Especially by using Joan Osbourne's song as the backdrop of the overall theme, the film represents God as being more like humans that we realize. He shares our same frustrations, joy, laughter, and even sadness.

In *Van Helsing*, he is "Gabriel, the Left Hand of God," the one destined to kill Dracula. No one has ever been able to kill Dracula, but when Van Helsing temporarily turns into a werewolf, he fulfills the prophesy of how Dracula will die. But Van Helsing is like *Constantine* in that he is all human, but happens to have special, supernatural powers that are used to fight evil (God's enemies) in the world. Constantine can cross into the realms of heaven and hell and exorcise demons from earth; Van Helsing is destined to kill Dracula. They have functions assigned for their jobs, but lack any sign of actual piety. Even Constantine's faith is sparing, even though he has a "knowledge" of God. But, as Gabriel tells him, he lacks self-sacrifice and belief. The angel Gabriel is another character that has divinely endowed powers, as well as divine origins. It is he that helps the devil's son almost enter earth's plane, motivated by his jealousy of God's love for an undeserving race of humans. His display of the human emotion of jealousy is punished, ironically enough, by his becoming human himself.

All these characters—God, Constantine, Van Helsing, and the angel Gabriel—have all been either part of the Core or Level 1 categories. The divine or those that can

commune with the divine can sometimes be regarded as more than human in the sense of religious piety. It is strange to see God, for instance, as “one of us,” or angels displaying humanity. And the fact that the divine are more human in popular films such as these only make me question if that is how we want to see them because we can never be perfect ourselves. Jesus in *The Passion* is biblically the literal God-man. But Jesus is regarded as the perfect man who never sinned. We as humans could never hope to achieve that. However, there are those that may believe themselves as the good religious. Often, as these films attest, self-righteousness is only a mask.

The obvious function of a mask is to cover up the face of the person who wears it. This implies hiding one’s identity, and in a symbolic sense, a mask of religion implies a person’s lack of religion. In *Mystic River*, the fact that Jimmy has a large cross tattooed on his back, or that he has his girl baptized in the church do not carry its spirituality for his character in the film. The priest-pedophile in the beginning of the film reveals a mask under which a deeper evil resides. In *Sin City*, the mask of religion is worn by Cardinal Roark and the priest who tries to cover up for him. Previously stated, religion has more to do with politics than God in *Sin City*, and Cardinal Roark truly is a monster beneath his outer-wear as a man of God.

In a less serious characterization, there is Carl in *Van Helsing*. He is a friar studying to become a monk in the monastery of the Holy Order, eventually becoming Van Helsing’s very effective sidekick. One scene which finds him sexually involved with a village girl reveals his religious aspirations (“just a friar”) as more or less something he takes on and off when it best serves (or not) his purposes. Similarly in *The*

Whole Nine Yards and more so in the sequel, *The Whole Ten Yards*, Bruce Willis' character, Jimmy, verbally affirms his devotion to his Catholic faith. Jimmy recognizes sin, but doesn't carry religious convictions to all aspects of his life. He wears a cross, claiming it represents "my Lord and Savior," and prays before he eats (in Hebrew no less), all the while fervently affirming divorce as a sin. However, by profession, he is a contract killer who shows no qualms about breaking the sixth commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." Religion here is used for comic relief, a point of ridiculing the hypocrisy of the so-called devout, and the emptiness of the symbol of the cross. Jimmy uses Christianity as a card, or a mask, that he brings out for show, but not for any real spiritual purpose. Much the same can be said of any of these characters mentioned in this section.

Chocolat reflects this theme of religion as a mask in the transformed Comte Reynaud. He wears his mask of piety well enough, but when it comes down to the Christian principle of love, he is unmasked fairly early. He treats Vianne as someone evil when it is she that brings love, joy, and laughter to the town. This stark contrast of Vianne and the Comte makes religious piety unattractive. He can embrace all other Christian principles, but, as the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, without love all things are empty.

As religion is used as a mask, it is also used as a tool. In the example from *Van Helsing*, Dracula is Van Helsing's current assignment, and within the film, Count Dracula represents the antithesis to what is holy. Classic symbols of the cross and holy water are used to fight Dracula and his three brides. In *Constantine*, the cross and various other religious pendants or relics are used to exorcise demons, or deport "half-breeds" to

Hell. In both Constantine and Van Helsing's cases, they use their religion quite literally as a tool to carry out their individual assignments (in the case of Constantine, his self-appointed assignment). However, even as Level 1 Christians, their attitude towards religion is light and not taken so much to heart. They are both trying to fit in their worlds, just trying to do their jobs, but Christianity is not spiritual. Constantine wants to get into heaven and is essentially trying to buy his way in by deporting half-breeds. Van Helsing doesn't know where he comes from, and under the shelter of the Holy Order, he more or less nonchalantly does his job. A "holy man/murderer," Van Helsing is a straddler of the realms of heaven and earth, much like Constantine, and in their frustration, they both show signs of embitterment towards their places in religion.

Some stories work themselves out for the better in the end, and as dire as circumstances may afford the characters, by the end, the narrative is satisfied in defeating whatever obstacle the characters may face. For every good story, there is conflict. But within that conflict, as with "High Purpose" Narrative, the circumstances, the struggle, the pain, all have God's working behind it. In the case of *The Passion of the Christ*, the gospel's purpose is to tell the story of how Christ, as the Ultimate Sacrifice, came to earth to save God's people. It was Christ's destiny to endure his shame and suffering and death in order to save a people who would reject him. The cross has a very significant meaning, and up until the cross, the circumstance of Christ's affliction points to a "higher purpose," that all of it is happening for God's reasons and purpose. In *Signs* as well, Graham returns to God when he realizes that everything—his wife's death and last words, his son's asthma, his daughter's water cup habit—all meant something and served

a purpose, even when he could not see it before. His wife's death, which led to those final words she spoke to Graham, was the ultimate instrument in the Hess family's survival of alien invasion. It was Morgan's asthma that kept the alien's poison from his system. And it was Bo's habit that gave Merrill the tool to at least defeat the alien at the end. All this leads Graham back to his faith and he begins to trust in God again.

Like Graham, Edmond in *Count of Monte Cristo* goes through a similar cycle with his faith. At first he vocally attributes his circumstance (his unjust arrest) to God's working and purpose. As the years go by, God dies away from his heart, and what replaces it is a stone. Consumed with thoughts of revenge, Edmond's priest friend, Abbé Faria, reminds him that it is God that said, "Vengeance is mine." In the end, Edmond comes to the realization that, "You were right, Priest" and vows to use his treasure for good from now on. In *Daredevil*, Matt learns the same thing and even acknowledges Father Everett in the same way Edmond does Abbé Faria, admitting, "You were right." Vengeance does not give either of them the satisfaction they thought it would, and the teachings of their priest figures warn them of that long before they could really understand.

In *Walk the Line*, June Carter is the woman who leads John Cash back on the straight path. June is minimally associated with Christianity in the judgments against her getting a divorce, and when she brings John to church after battling his addiction to prescription drugs. But in June and by her love, John can come back clean to the world. In *Chocolat*, though the Comte's desire is for his town to maintain their conservative traditions; he is not like June in that he uses love as a means to keep his town from "the

Enemy.” Vianne provides an appealing contrast to his severity and strict moral codes; she is not affiliated with any institutionalized religion herself. Her character shows a warmth so opposite from the Comte’s cold, religious formality that it gives reason to mistrust organized religions such as Christianity. The same coldness is demonstrated by the lady who chastises June for being divorced. The lady only lays guilt and judgment at June’s feet. Strict adherences to doctrinal laws can be a put off for anyone, as no one can keep the law perfectly. In any case, admonishments with good intentions can be ineffective if not accompanied with empathy, love, and friendship. What good could Christianity be if it only reminds you of your imperfection and neglects love?

In *Chocolat*, the Comte is the self-proclaimed standard of morality. Strictly speaking, he holds to the laws, but he is lacking in the Spirit. He stands to be a moral guide, but fails when he cannot bear fruit of love and acceptance. It is Vianne who teaches the town this, and so religion is not appealing, that is, until Père Henri is no longer under the Comte’s control. Père Henri embraces the same sort of spirit Vianne exudes. Though at first he is a naïve priest, susceptible to the manipulation of the overly self-righteous Comte Reynaud, Père Henri becomes a more effective religious leader with the town’s transformation (and eventually even of Reynaud himself) in embracing the spirit of love, tolerance, and acceptance.

Walk the Line, *Signs*, and *Count of Monte Cristo* all portray characters that begin with faith, lose it by some circumstance, and regain it by some event or person that points him in that direction. I call this cyclical Christianity. In the case of *Walk the Line*, John Cash had a devout mother and brother who sang hymns and read the Bible. But as John

grows up, fame gets the better of him and he becomes dependent on prescription drugs. Not only that, but he is haunted by the memory of his brother, whose shadow he could never step out of, especially when it came to their dad. It is the love of his life, June Carter, who leads him back to getting his life back in order. In a subtle way, by leading him by the hand to a church, does June symbolically brings him back to the Lord.

In *Signs*, Graham is an ex-priest who cannot “waste one more minute on prayer.” It’s not until his son is almost killed by an alien that he realizes that God has a plan, whether or not he had believed it all along. The same goes for Edmond Dantes in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Edmond had once been a believer in God, that is until he feels God has forsaken him in the Chateau d’If. It is through Abbé Faria’s friendship during his time in prison that Edmond comes to acknowledge God again. After his vengeance is over, he knows that it is love, not hate, that matters. The love of his life and his son come with him to the prison where he was for 16 years held captive, and as he walks away, there is a sense of his finally letting go of his past, ready to face the future with the priest’s teachings in his heart.

Religion is important because it gives people hope, comfort, and a sense of meaning to life. When that hope and comfort is not there, religion is just empty motion. In serious-toned films such as *Mystic River* and *Million Dollar Baby*, religion acts more like a foil than a source of hope. The ineffectiveness of religion in *Mystic River* is evident in Jimmy Markum’s lack of faith in God’s promise concerning vengeance. Jimmy takes it upon himself to carry out justice for his daughter, and in the end he kills the wrong man. As he contemplates this horrible mistake, his naked upper body bears the

sign of the cross from shoulder to shoulder. As a man, he stands before God, exposed by his crime. However, the cross also represents him taking the place of God, and as such, he kills the wrong man. In view of both *Mystic River* and *Baby*, it seems Eastwood is making a statement about religion: that it is essentially empty.

Father Horvak is a Core Christian figure in Eastwood's other film, *Million Dollar Baby*, which emphasizes more so than *Mystic River* the ineffectiveness of religious faith in the actual presentation of a minister character. In this case the religion is Catholic Christianity. When Horvak can offer Frankie nothing else but to tell him how "lost" he is, chiding him that "you'll never find yourself again," religion becomes as empty as the church inside which Horvak walks away from Frankie. The inefficiency of religion is the emptiness of religion. For 23 years, says Horvak, Frankie has been coming to mass, but all those years have not given Frankie any hope after losing his wife and daughter. It is in Maggie, not God, that Frankie finds meaning to life again. But when Maggie goes to Frankie for assisted-suicide, Horvak has no words to comfort Frankie's pain, even if not to condone Frankie's choice, but what Horvak offers is condemnation.

Million Dollar Baby's controversial ending about euthanasia is stressed in Frankie Dunn's desperation to find a way around Maggie's spiritual condemnation, but he also seeks a way to end her physical suffering. Frankie must choose between defying the church's doctrine of suicide and ending Maggie's pain, or letting her live knowing that he's "killing her" anyway. When he chooses to assist in her suicide, Frankie is as Father Horvak says: "lost." Catholicism's doctrines present the conundrum of religious laws that are supposed to bring us closer to God, even as they may also be technicalities that

further us from Him if we chose to break those laws. In similar fashion, *Constantine* deals with the same issue of suicide. Isabel Dodson knows that she is the potential host for the devil's son to enter earth, and in an act of self-sacrifice she kills herself that it will not happen. But Catholic doctrine condemns her to Hell. The inefficiency of religion in this case, and even in *Baby*, is the unrecognized effort to do what is right in context of the narrative, yet suffer the punishment for violations against God's law as a result of that effort. In these films, there is no room for what I believe to be the most beautiful thing about Christianity: grace.

Awareness and Media Literacy

The goal of this thesis was to look at those films which contained Christian characters, to look at how religion through those characters was represented. Among the films analyzed for this thesis, there were various ranges of the perfect religious man, as in *The Passion*, or the devout but intolerant religious leader, as in *Chocolat*, or the genuinely faithful, but human, Christian as in *Walk the Line* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*, to the monstrously evil Christian poser like in *Sin City*. It is far too difficult to put these films in strict positive and negative categories in relation to religion as there are so many variations and definitions of Christian figures. It is up to the viewers of these films, and the readers of this thesis for that matter, to decide on whatever positive or negative means to them. This thesis categorized films in a way that would show in what way Christianity is being portrayed and how it is used within the narrative.

In the conclusion of Screening the Sacred, Conrad Ostwalt makes the connection that religion and film share many of the same attributes in that they both create and search for meaning and life and values. Both religion and film “aid in discovering human understanding” (153). He also says, “Film, as a cultural standard-bearer, can communicate a society’s major myths, rituals, and symbols” (155). The importance of this thesis is in the exposure of how film projects certain attitudes about Christianity. Media literacy becomes the central component of analysis. There is a fine line between reality and the construction of reality—in between there is popular culture and public perception.

In the preface to Screening the Sacred, the authors write,

Film is an extraordinarily popular medium today, but films do much more than simply entertain. Films, as with other cultural forms, have the potential to reinforce, to challenge, to overturn, or to crystallize religious perspectives, ideological assumptions, and fundamental values. Films bolster and challenge our society’s norms, guiding narratives, and accepted truths. In short, films can and do perform religious and iconoclastic functions in American society. (vii)

Like in real life, there is a wide gamut of representation. There is the monster-masquerader like Cardinal Roark or the pedophile in *Mystic River*. There is the self-righteous, judgmental and fundamentalist Christian like the Comte in *Chocolat* and the lady that judges June in *Walk the Line*. But there are those who exude those “fruit of the spirit” characteristics of “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (New King James Version, Gala. 5:22-23) like June in *Walk the Line*, Abbé Faria in *Monte Cristo*, and Father Everett in *Daredevil*. These are

reflections of the spirit of Christianity—the evidence of unconditional love and life-affirming relationships that offer support and friendship no matter what the circumstance.

Future Research

This thesis used 15 American films specifically selected for their box-office gross and their contemporary productions. Had a larger sample be taken, for example of 150 films ranging in periods of production, box-office successes, and perhaps even nations, different conclusions are certainly to be found. But the findings here are a reasonable beginning to analyzing religious characters in film. Further research also might include the closer examinations of symbols. This thesis went more into the direction of the inductive study of themes, however, a more extensive investigation of Christian symbols and characters under the theory of Symbolic Interaction may reveal to a greater extent as to what certain Christian symbols mean to an audience. One way to go about this would be to conduct a survey on how people react to Christian symbols in comparison to how much media they consume. The correlation or lack thereof would be something of interest in relation to the subject matter of this thesis, a step further in seeing media effects on the level of cultural conversation.

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APPENDIX 1: MONEY FIGURES

Top grossing films were selected, and then only the top five of each genre were used for analyses.

	Drama	Action	Comedy
2000			<i>The Whole Nine Yards</i> (\$57.26) <i>Chocolat</i> (\$71.31)
2001			
2002	<i>Signs</i> (\$227.97)	<i>The Count of Monte Cristo</i> (\$54.23)	<i>My Big Fat Greek Wedding</i> (\$241.44)
2003	<i>Mystic River</i> (\$90.14)	<i>Daredevil</i> (\$102.52)	<i>Bruce Almighty</i> (\$242.59)
2004	<i>The Passion of the Christ</i> (\$370.77) <i>Million Dollar Baby</i> (\$99.53) * <i>Ray</i> (\$75.31)	<i>Van Helsing</i> (\$120.03)	
2005	<i>Walk the Line</i> (\$106.12) * <i>The Exorcism of Emily Rose</i> (\$75.07)	<i>Sin City</i> (\$74.10) <i>Constantine</i> (\$75.50) * <i>Kingdom of Heaven</i> (\$47.40)	<i>Wedding Crashers</i> (\$209.22)

Order of largest grossing film by genre (movies in **bold** are movies used for this paper):

Drama	Action	Comedy
<i>The Passion of the Christ</i> (\$370.77) <i>Signs</i> (\$227.97) <i>Walk the Line</i> (\$106.12) <i>Million Dollar Baby</i> (\$99.53) <i>Mystic River</i> (\$90.14) * <i>Ray</i> (\$75.31) * <i>The Exorcism of Emily Rose</i> (\$75.07)	<i>Van Helsing</i> (\$120.03) <i>Daredevil</i> (\$102.52) <i>Constantine</i> (\$75.50) <i>Sin City</i> (\$74.10) <i>The Count of Monte Cristo</i> (\$54.23) * <i>Kingdom of Heaven</i> (\$47.40)	<i>Bruce Almighty</i> (\$242.59) <i>My Big Fat Greek Wedding</i> (\$241.44) <i>Wedding Crashers</i> (\$209.22) <i>Chocolat</i> (\$71.31) <i>The Whole Nine Yards</i> (\$57.26)

* movies that contain Christian characters and were in the Top 50 of their year, but were not used due to a lower gross compared to other films of the same genre

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APPENDIX 2: TABLE OF CHARACTERS AND SYMBOLS

	Characters (Category)	Symbols/Association	Context	Implications
<i>The Passion of the Christ</i>	Jesus the Christ (Core)	Cross Synagogue	Crucifixion Where Christ is tried	Salvation Antithesis of “sanctuary” or the notion of feeling safe
<i>Signs</i>	Graham Hess (Core)	Cross Clerical collar	Faded outline of where one hung once Priesthood	Faith lost Sign of faith, worker of God
<i>Walk the Line</i>	Jack Cash (L3) John Cash (L3)	Bible Hymns, family background, Church	Wanted to be a preacher How he learned music	Genuinely faithful Fall and redemption through love
	June Carter (L2) Lady in store (L3)	Cross necklace, parents, church Verbal	June brings him there after he gets over his drug problem Brought up Christian Fundamentalist	Christianity (through June) as a positive force helping him through his addiction Compassionate, forgiving Judgmental, unforgiving

	Characters (Category)	Symbols/Association	Context	Implications
<i>Million Dollar Baby</i>	Father Horvak (Core)	Clerical collar, church	Protagonist seeks advice from him	Ineffective counselor
<i>Mystic River</i>	Jimmy Markum (L2)	Cross	Tattoo	Empty symbol, purveyor of justice gone wrong
		Church	His little girl gets baptized	Religion as a formality, empty spirituality
	Cop (L3)	Cross ring, cross necklace	Worn by a pedophile	Religion as a mask of deeper evil
	Van Helsing (L1)	Cross, church, holy water	Fighting monsters	Religion as a tool to fight evil
<i>Van Helsing</i>	Carl (Core)	Monastery	Protagonist's sidekick	Religion as a tool to fight evil
	Cardinal Jinette (Core)	Robes, confessional	Protagonist's superior	Religion as a tool to fight evil, religion as a business/institution
	Father Everett (Core)	Clerical collar, confessional, church	Protagonist's mentor	The church as a sanctuary
<i>Daredevil</i>				

	Characters (Category)	Symbols/Association	Context	Implications
<i>Constantine</i>	Constantine (L1)	Cross, exorcism, holy relics, Hell's Bible	Exorcist, detective of heaven and hell	Religion as a tool to fight evil
	Gabriel (Core)	Wings	Archangel	Angel with human emotion
	Isabel and Angela Dodson (L2)	Verbal	Possess the gift of seeing angels and demons; host for the devil's son to enter earth	There are angels and demons amongst humans on earth
		Condemned suicide (Isabel)	Catholic observer; willing sacrifice	
<i>Sin City</i>	Cardinal Roark (Core)	Robes, bible, church	Protagonist confronts him	Religion as a political position of power
	Priest (Core)	Clerical collar, confessional	Protagonist interrogates him	Corrupt religion used in politics God doesn't overrule a technicality even in the service of a greater good

	Characters (Category)	Symbols/Association	Context	Implications
<i>The Count of Monte Cristo</i>	Abbé Faria (Core)	Verbal	Protagonist's mentor	God is faithful, no matter how circumstances appear to be
	Edmond Dantes (L3)	Verbal	Circle of faith	Faith-Doubt-Redemption
	God (Core)	Verbal	God takes a vacation	God's humanity
<i>My Big Fat Greek Wedding</i>	Portokalos Family (L2)	Church, crosses, Christian holiday celebration	Religion as tradition	Religion (with tradition and family) as restriction, but also as a way to bring people together
<i>Wedding Crashers</i>	Father O'Neil (Core)	Clerical collar	Confidence	Breaks confidence as long as it serves for good
<i>Chocolat</i>	Comte Reynaud (L1)	Church, Christian holiday celebration	Conservatism vs. the modern world	Religion as restriction
	Père Henri (Core)	Cleric collar, church	New and young (naïve) minister	Bridging the traditional to the contemporary; embracing a new form of Christianity that stresses love over the law

	Characters (Category)	Symbols/Association	Context	Implications
<i>The Whole Nine Yards</i> (also <i>The Whole Ten Yards</i>)	Jimmy "The Tulip" Tudeski (L3)	Verbal	Divorce as a sin, murder as an occupation	Religion as a backdrop to ironic and comedic contrast

The word "Verbal" is used as an indicator of those figures who affirm only verbally an association to Christianity. Those associated symbolically to Christianity already (and presumably) verbally affirm their association as they are the more blatantly religious figures, but their verbal affirmation is not noted.

APPENDIX 3: TEN MAJOR THEMES**Religion as restrictive**

My Big Fat Greek Wedding
Chocolat
The Whole Nine Yards

Religion as a political instrument

Sin City
Van Helsing

Religion as a tool to fight evil

Van Helsing
Constantine

Religion as a tool for irony

Wedding Crashers
The Whole Nine Yards

Religion as a mask

Mystic River
Sin City
Van Helsing
Chocolat

“Higher purpose” narrative

The Passion of the Christ
Signs

Humanity of the divine

Bruce Almighty
Van Helsing
Constantine
The Passion of the Christ

Religion as a moral guide

The Count of Monte Cristo
Daredevil
Walk the Line
Chocolat

Cyclical Christianity

Signs
Walk the Line
The Count of Monte Cristo

Religion as ineffective

Mystic River
Million Dollar Baby
Constantine

APPENDIX 4: TABLE OF THEMES AND CHARACTERS

	Core	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Religion as restrictive		Comte Reynaud (<i>Chocolat</i>)	Portokalos Family (<i>My Big Fat Greek Wedding</i>)	Jimmy "The Tulip" Tudeski (<i>The Whole Nine Yards</i>)
Religion as ineffective	Father Horvak (<i>Million Dollar Baby</i>)		Jimmy Markum (<i>Mystic River</i>) Isabel and Angela (<i>Constantine</i>)	
Religion as a political position	Cardinal Roark (<i>Sin City</i>) Cardinal Jinette (<i>Van Helsing</i>)			
Religion as a tool to fight evil		Van Helsing (<i>Van Helsing</i>) Constantine (<i>Constantine</i>)		
Religion as a tool of irony	Father O'Neil (<i>Wedding Crashers</i>)			Jimmy "The Tulip" Tudeski (<i>The Whole Nine Yards</i>)

	Core	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Religion as a mask	Cardinal Roark (<i>Sin City</i>) Carl (<i>Van Helsing</i>)		Comte Reynaud (<i>Chocolat</i>) Jimmy Markum (<i>Mystic River</i>)	Cop (<i>Mystic River</i>) Jimmy "The Tulip" Tudeski (<i>The Whole Nine Yards</i>)
Divinity's humanity	God (<i>Bruce Almighty</i>) Gabriel (<i>Constantine</i>) Jesus the Christ (<i>The Passion of the Christ</i>) Jesus the Christ (<i>The Passion of the Christ</i>)	Van Helsing (<i>Van Helsing</i>) Constantine (<i>Constantine</i>)		
"Higher purpose" narrative	Graham Hess (<i>Signs</i>) Abbé Faria (<i>The Count of Monte Cristo</i>) Father Everett (<i>Daredevil</i>) Graham Hess (<i>Signs</i>)			
Religion as a moral guide			June Carter (<i>Walk the Line</i>) Comte Reynaud (<i>Chocolat</i>)	
Cyclical Christianity				John Cash (<i>Walk the Line</i>) Edmond Dantes (<i>The Count of Monte Cristo</i>)