

Thesis
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Religion and Film in American Culture:
The Birth of a Nation

Krzysztof Jozajtis

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Dedicated to the memory of both
my father, Bohdan, the first movie buff I ever knew,
and
my grandmother, Zinaida,
who showed me the power of faith and the meaning of history.

Contents

Abstract	iv
Acknowledgements	v
INTRODUCTION	1
<i>Thesis Outline</i>	7

PART I

Religion and Film in American Culture: The Scholarly Context

CHAPTER ONE

Researching Religion, Media, and Culture: An Evolving Paradigm	10
Existing Research into Media and Religion	12
<i>Religion as the Blindspot of Media Theory</i>	12
<i>Media Blindness in Religious Studies</i>	14
<i>'Religion' and the Modern World</i>	16
<i>Researching Media and Religion: Initial Trends</i>	18
Religion, Media, Culture: An Evolving Paradigm of Research	20
<i>'Religion and the Media'</i>	21
<i>'Religion and Mass Media'</i>	22
<i>'Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture'</i>	25
<i>'Selling God': Religion, America, and Commodification</i>	37
<i>Recent Developments in the Evolving Paradigm</i>	38
Conclusion	43

CHAPTER TWO

Approaching Religion and Film in American Culture	46
Film Studies and Religion	47
<i>The Biblical Epic</i>	51
<i>Hollywood as 'Melting Pot': Issues of Ethnicity and Race</i>	55
<i>Catholicism, Censorship, and the American Film Industry</i>	60
<i>Religion and the History of American Cinema</i>	67
<i>Religion in the History of Early and Silent Cinema</i>	69
Religious Film Writing	81
<i>Theology at the Movies</i>	81
<i>Developments in Religious Film Writing</i>	88
Conclusion	97

CHAPTER THREE

America Redeptor: Religion, Culture, and National Identity	100
Religion by Other Means? Culture, Power, and National Identity	102
<i>Theorizing National Identity</i>	102
<i>Culture and Hegemony</i>	105
<i>Culture and Modernity</i>	109
The Category of Religion	113
<i>Religion and Social Theory: Marx, Durkheim, and Weber</i>	115
<i>Religion and Legitimation: 'The Sacred Canopy'</i>	121
<i>Geertz and Asad: 'Religion as a Cultural System'?</i>	123
Religion in America	130
<i>Tocqueville: Religion as the Base of Civil Society</i>	131
<i>Religion and US National Identity: Bellah and the American Civil Religion</i>	132
<i>'Like a City Upon a Hill': The Puritan Legacy</i>	138
<i>Civil Religion and its Discontents</i>	142
<i>National Identity and Religious Difference</i>	146
Conclusion	150

PART II

Religion and Film in American Culture: *The Birth of a Nation*

CHAPTER FOUR

'An Uneasy Presence': Revisiting <i>The Birth of a Nation</i>	153
'Like Writing History with Lightning':	
A Beginner's Guide to <i>The Birth of a Nation</i>	156
<i>'The Birth of a Nation': A Brief Description</i>	158
<i>'The Birth of a Nation' as Cultural Event</i>	161
<i>Assessing the Political Impact of 'The Birth of a Nation'</i>	166
Critical Perspectives on <i>The Birth of a Nation</i>	171
<i>A Racist Masterpiece?</i>	174
<i>Racist Content, Racist Form?</i>	180
<i>Literary and Cultural Influences</i>	190
<i>The Dark Soul of White America</i>	194
<i>Blinded by the Light?</i>	200
Conclusion: <i>The Birth of a Nation</i> and the Evolving Paradigm	203

CHAPTER FIVE	
<i>The Birth of a Nation: An Event in American Religious History</i>	206
Modernization, Morals, and Motion Pictures:	
Progressive America and the Growth of Cinema	208
<i>American Protestantism in Crisis</i>	209
<i>The Quest for Order: 'Disestablishment', Revival, and the Progressive Babel</i>	214
<i>Progressivism as Accommodation to Change</i>	217
<i>'Democracy's Theater': Progressive America and the Movies</i>	220
<i>Pictures, Profits, and Social Change</i>	221
<i>The 'Nickel Madness'</i>	224
<i>Cinema, Class, and Culture: The Struggle for Respectability</i>	225
<i>Uplifting the Movies</i>	232
<i>The American Cinema: An Alternative Public Sphere?</i>	234
Redeeming the Movies: Griffith and the Lost Cause	237
<i>D.W. Griffith: Methodism, Modernity, and the Movies</i>	238
<i>Redeeming the South</i>	246
<i>The Lost Cause: A Southern Civil Religion</i>	249
Blood Sacrifice: <i>The Birth of a Nation</i> and American Civil Religion	258
<i>Race in Progressive America</i>	259
<i>Violence and the Sacred</i>	261
<i>Violence, Rape, and Civil Religion</i>	263
<i>Violence, Sacrifice, and Civil Religion in <i>The Birth of a Nation</i></i>	266
Conclusion: Rethinking <i>The Birth of a Nation</i>	274
CONCLUSION	278
<i>Suggestions for Future Research</i>	280
Bibliography	282
Filmography	308
Appendix - <i>The Birth of a Nation</i>: A Thin Description	309

Abstract

This research addresses an emerging scholarship examining relations between media, religion, and culture in contemporary society. Whilst it acknowledges the value of this growing body of work, the study is based on a recognition that an overwhelming concern with the contemporary scene has resulted in a neglect of the history responsible for the conditions of the present. Given the prominence of America as both a source and an object of this scholarship, moreover, the particular national context in which the institutions and practices of the US media have developed has been taken for granted somewhat. Oriented towards these perceived lacunae, this thesis examines the interaction between religion and film as an influence upon the development of American culture in the twentieth-century.

The dissertation is divided into two main parts. The first of these is devoted to an extended discussion of the scholarly background to the research, and argues that the historical dimension of the interrelationship between religion and film in America is worthy of more attention than it has hitherto received. In particular, it stresses the fundamental importance of religion within the discourse of national identity in the United States, and posits the notion of a non-denominational American civil religion as a useful theoretical tool with which to examine Hollywood as a distinctively 'American' form of cinema.

Part Two develops this position through a case study of *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D.W. Griffith, and one of the most famous films of all time. Discussing the picture as a response to a crisis in American Protestantism, the study argues that the race controversy prompted by its Southern viewpoint was, to some extent, a function of Griffith's ambitions to revive the traditional religious bases of U.S. national identity via the medium of film. Furthermore, it suggests that the impact of *Birth* helped enact a broader transformation of American culture, wherein the cinema became instrumental in sustaining the belief that the United States was a nation uniquely favoured by Providence.

Acknowledgements

Prior to its submission here, some of the research for this study has already begun to appear elsewhere. The origins of Chapter One can be found in book reviews for the *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* (Spring 1997) and *Media, Culture, and Society* (July 1998), whilst elements of Part II, and Chapter Five in particular, have been previously used as the basis for a number of conference papers. One of these has been revised for a forthcoming article in *Culture and Religion*.

This dissertation is, in truth, a little overdue, and apologies are due to all family, friends, and colleagues affected by my profligacy in this regard. Because the fact that it even came close to completion is due in large measure to the encouragement, advice and support I have received from them and others, I welcome the opportunity to express my humble thanks.

While the fateful decision to further my undergraduate interests and begin a research degree was mine, I was encouraged to do so by a number of people at the University of Stirling, several of whom gave fine advice on drafting my initial proposals, most notably, Nancy Morris, John Izod, and Brian McNair, all then in the Department of Film and Media Studies, along with Richard King and the Reverend Mary Maaga, now both departed from the Department of Religious Studies. The practical support I have received from the staff of the School of Arts office began at this early stage also.

It would have been impossible to pursue my research, however, without the generous full-time financial support, over four years, of the Humanities Research Board of the British Academy. Receipt of funds from such a prestigious source was not only a material benefit but gave me confidence in my own potential as a scholar.

As one might expect, major thanks are also due my two supervisors, Mike Cormack from Film and Media Studies, and Keith Whitelam from Religious Studies, who have remained unstinting in their support, often with no good reason. I have gained much from their thoughtful responses to my work and constructive suggestions as to its further development. But while their advice has been important,

their patience has been truly remarkable. Particular thanks are due to Keith for continuing his supervision despite a move to Sheffield last year. At the same time, I appreciate that this has meant Mike bearing the brunt of the administrative duties, not to mention regular student crises, which attend the latter stages of such a project. I have also benefitted from the efficiency of staff working in the respective departmental offices and the university library. Similarly invaluable help with regard to computing has come from Oron Yoffe and Marilyn Scott.

Studying at a relatively intimate institution such as Stirling has also given me the chance to discuss my work with members of the academic staff on a less formal basis. Both departments have proved supportive and stimulating environments in which to work in this respect, with Philip Schlesinger, Mary Keller, Jeremy Carrette, Raymond Boyle, and Malory Nye all warranting a special mention. However, particularly thanks go to Colin Nicolson from the Department of History, whose generosity in terms of time, advice, and reading materials has helped broaden my understanding of American history and culture considerably. I would also like to thank my fellow postgraduate students for lightening the load over the past few years, especially Matthew Hibberd, Kathryn-Jane Hazel, Jacqui L'Etang, Will Dinan, as well as Nicki Page, Rita Torrao-Lago, Julie Kelso, the Reverend Arnold Temple, and all others with whom I was pleased to work on the good ship D21.

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INTRODUCTION

The Hollywood film now rules the entertainment culture of our planet, and seems well on the way to becoming a universal secular religion, the first to offer its devotees anything they want and ask for nothing in return, other than the admission price of their tickets. Night after night, its congregations gather in their neighbourhood cineplexes, eager to worship the harsh gods of violence, sensation and spectacle.

(Ballard, 1998: 14)

To borrow a phrase used by Keith Whitelam (1996: 2), this study 'is an attempt to articulate an idea': that there exists a symbiosis between American religion and American film. Arising out of interests developed at undergraduate level as to the nature of relations between religion and the modern mass media, it began as an effort to understand the religious aspects of American cinema. In general, and despite the manifest and widespread mobilization of religious ideas, imagery, motifs, and stories across the whole spectrum of American commercial film production, by directors as famous and influential as, for example, D.W. Griffith, Cecil B. DeMille, John Ford, King Vidor, Michael Curtiz, Frank Capra, Alfred Hitchcock, Francis Ford Coppola, and Martin Scorsese, scholars of film have been peculiarly disinterested in pursuing the 'religious' dimension as a line of enquiry, especially as it might relate to the broader social context. Nor was there much evidence of curiosity from students of religion with regard to the impact upon their field of interest of the most important and influential medium of the first half of the twentieth century. A desire to address the perceived neglect of what seemed to be a self-evidently important strand of meaning within American movies provided the initial impetus and motivation for the study presented below.

As work progressed, however, it became increasingly clear that the visibility of the religious in American films was but one consequence of the widespread

significance of religion as both a symbolic and practical resource within the broad cultural processes of US national life. Writing in 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville (1966: 269) observed that in spite of the formal constitutional separation of religion and the American state, 'religion...should...be considered as the first of their political institutions.' Religion, he argued, was fundamental to the life of the national community. The United States may have changed somewhat over the last one hundred and sixty six years, but the Tocquevillean perspective has remained a relevant and influential one. Moreover, a persistent religious presence has been one of the distinctive hallmarks of the modern mass media as they have developed in America. So much so in fact, that it leads one to suggest that the establishment and development of the America nation as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991) has, in its particulars, been profoundly influenced by the relationship between religion and the media. In continuing to pursue American film as an object of study, therefore, the research presented herein begins to explore the nature and extent of that influence upon the national community.

Originally, the project was to have taken the form of an historical survey which would have examined religious themes in a range of films from the silent era to the present day. Such a broad conception proved to be unmanageable; not least, because there was no pre-existing theoretical framework from which one might move to examine relations between religion, film and the national culture. This state of affairs prompted a reorientation of the research, away from the films themselves towards an exploration of theories and methods which might lend themselves to the study of religion and film in American culture. The idea was to indicate the potential value of this hitherto neglected area to other researchers, and suggest ways of going about such work. Nevertheless, the interdisciplinary (and interdepartmental) character of the project posed an even more fundamental problem which needed to be addressed if the study was to develop in a coherent way: who, exactly, was the intended audience for the research? Was this to be a discussion of film for scholars of religion who, like most people, were likely to have an interest, albeit non-

academic, in movies? Or was it an attempt, possibly futile, to remind media scholars of a set of cultural activities and resources they had, in the main, learnt to ignore? For a researcher, the question of to whom their work is being addressed is an important one as it determines not only the aims and objectives of one's work but also the kind of arguments which might develop out of it.

Thankfully, any confusion regarding the intended audience for this study began to dissolve with the discovery of an emergent interdisciplinary scholarship similarly interested in relations between media, religion and culture. As Chapter One elaborates in more detail, this work has begun to move beyond bipolar conceptions of religion and culture, media and culture, and/or media and religion, to suggest instead that 'media, religion, and culture should be thought of as an interrelated web within society' (Hoover and Lundby, 1996: 3). Challenging the assumption that secularization represents the inevitable death of religion, this broad triangulation of theory and research offers rich possibilities for those seeking a greater and more sophisticated understanding of the cultural dynamics at play in contemporary society. As one might expect, moreover, much of this work focuses upon the United States. The process of 'rethinking' relations between media, religion, and culture cannot help but be informed by a recognition of America's current global hegemony in matters of politics, economics, and culture (Hoover, 1996). At this still early stage of development, however, the overwhelming concern with the contemporary scene, whilst understandable, has resulted in a neglect of the history behind the conditions of the present. Indeed, despite the prominence of the American example, the particular national context in which the institutions and practices of the US media developed, as well as the theoretical issues raised by questions of national identity, have all been taken for granted somewhat. Reflecting these twin lacunae, the development of motion pictures in America, both as an industry and a cultural institution, has received scant attention from within the 'evolving paradigm' (Hoover, 1996) of work 'at the intersection of media, culture, and religion' (Clark and Hoover, 1996). This study addresses that gap.

The upshot of the considerations outlined above is a thesis organized around a critical, interpretive, historical, sociological, and cultural, case study of D.W. Griffith's epochal motion picture, *The Birth of a Nation*. Released for the first time in 1915, *The Birth of a Nation* is probably the single most important, influential, and widely discussed movie ever made. Exerting an influence and fascination extending into the present, and still screened to this day, the film remains one of the great landmarks of world cinema. Crucially though, it was also the first American motion picture to have a genuinely national impact; something, the study argues, which the film itself prefigured in explicitly religious terms. An enquiry as to the nature of the film's appeal to national sentiment and notions of 'Americanness' provides the focus for this research. That is not to say, however, that this thesis is about Griffith's picture or even the extensive literature engendered by that movie's release eighty-six years ago. Rather, *The Birth of a Nation's* legacy as a multi-faceted but self-evidently important 'event' in the cultural history of the United States, 'the incontestable keystone movie in the history of American cinema' as Phillip French has described it (quoted in Robinson, 1993), suggests it to be an obvious point of departure for research seeking to explore the history of the complex relations between media, religion, and culture in America.

Although the intended audience for this research is, in the first instance at least, the emerging scholarship into media, religion, and culture, the project cannot help but address concerns which will be familiar to students of American cinema. This constituency has hitherto displayed little interest in the relationship between religion and the movies. To them, the salience of *The Birth of a Nation* might appear to make Griffith's picture a less than inspiring choice around which to organize a doctoral thesis. Much, too much perhaps, has been written about *Birth* in the last eighty-six years. The emergence at some time in the future of any major new factual information about the film is unlikely, and there is little discussion of the film itself within this study which is not based upon existing critical and historical writing about it. Nevertheless, the movie's importance, both as a cultural event and an object of

critical debate, makes it a logical choice for this project given the overall aims of the research.

In broad theoretical and methodological terms, then, this study aims to move beyond existing understandings of *The Birth of a Nation* by reconsidering that truly remarkable motion picture, from a vantage based in the evolving paradigm of scholarship rethinking media, religion, and culture. Indeed, it is a basic contention of this thesis that our understanding of the movies and their significance within (and beyond) the culture of the United States would be substantially enriched by a serious discussion of religion in the life of the nation. The extensive literature on American religion, a wide-ranging body of work predicated on the recognition of how important religion has been in shaping the attitudes and actions of Americans throughout their history, is all but unread within film studies. Hence, the key difference between the case study around which this thesis is organized and previous work on *The Birth of a Nation* is that, here, religion is taken seriously; as something integral to notions of American national identity and the narratives of chosenness, righteousness, transformation, and redemptive violence around which Hollywood came to represent 'the land of the free and the home of the brave'.

Previous writing on the picture has tended to revolve around two main issues. The first is *Birth's* status as a landmark in the history of the medium. Whilst not really an example of what has become known as the classical Hollywood cinema (e.g. Bordwell *et al*, 1985), Griffith's movie was an important precursor of what was to come. Crystallizing many of the developments which had taken place within the American film industry in the previous years, the success of *The Birth of a Nation* helped lay foundations for the emergence of one of the most powerful cultural institutions of the twentieth century. The other main point of debate, is the picture's racism. Representing African-Americans in a derogatory and inflammatory way, the film spawned a fierce debate which continues to this day. In recent decades, scholars have come to treat these two issues as rather more closely connected than was previously thought. This study follows that trend. However, it seeks to do this

by relating such issues to the broader processes associated with modernization, and the concomitant transformation of American religion.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, immigration, industrialization, urbanization, and the rising intellectual authority of the scientific worldview undermined the cultural hegemony hitherto enjoyed by American Protestantism. One of the key aims of this study is to relate *The Birth of a Nation*, and, by extension, the development of the US film industry, to this religious crisis. Within film studies, the particular national context of the American cinema, whilst not ignored, has in many accounts been overshadowed by the portrayal of Hollywood as a 'global' phenomenon. Moreover, scholars of American film have, in the main, predicated their work upon an implicit assumption of secularization. But for a few instances, the question of religion has simply not figured in their deliberations. Yet, as the politically significant resurgence of conservative Protestantism in post-Vietnam America demonstrates, religion as a social force within national life may have changed but it never really went away. This recognition undergirds the thesis presented below. Furthermore, as global a phenomenon as Hollywood rapidly became, the considerations, largely commercial, which have shaped the American film industry have always been firmly rooted in the national context.

The issue of nationhood suggests another potential audience for this research; scholars of American religion. As has already been mentioned, much has been written with regard to religion in America and its significance within the life of the nation. Despite the constitutional separation of church and state, and its position as the most modern and powerful nation on Earth, America is still characterized by a popular religiosity of considerable variety and vitality. For all the economic benefits deriving from the application of a scientific worldview, and a political tradition based in Enlightenment rationalism, many of the distinctive features of American culture continue to be shaped by a widespread belief in the supernatural and active expressions of faith. This apparent paradox is one of the key issues in the study of American religion. Yet although this has prompted a substantial discussion of US

national identity in terms of 'civil religion' (e.g. Bellah, 1967), little effort has been made to examine the media's use and inevitable transformation of those (religious) ideas, images, and stories through which American national identity is articulated. Along with its other aims, therefore, the case study of *The Birth of a Nation* presented below addresses that neglect also. Whilst it leaves open the question of how far the medium of film can be thought of as being properly 'religious', it argues that Griffith's picture was quite explicit about staking a claim on behalf of the film industry for those aspects of the national imagination which had hitherto been the preserve of historians, political orators, and the Protestant churches. Indeed, the unprecedented success of *Birth* was a sign that, in practical terms, the narratives via which Americans continued to understand their significance as a 'chosen people' or 'New Israel' would derive less from the pulpit and the Bible, and ever more from the 'stories in picture' produced in the studios of Hollywood.

Thesis Outline

In terms of its structure, the thesis is presented in two parts. The first of these offers an extended discussion, over three chapters, of the scholarly context(s) within which this research is located. Elaborating some of the concerns already indicated, Chapter One offers a critical overview of existing writing on religion, media, and culture. Indicating the value and potential of this emerging body of work, it nonetheless highlights a somewhat ahistorical neglect of the cinema and its crucial role in shaping American culture in the twentieth century. This provides a point of departure for Chapter Two's review of the existing writing on film and religion in American culture. Whilst there is some evidence which suggests a complex interrelationship between religion and the movies in America, mainstream film scholarship has shown very little interest in this area. Where writing on film and religion exists, moreover, it has most often been prompted by concerns rooted in theology and hermeneutics. It has thus tended to ignore the social and historical (e.g. national) contexts, in which film production and consumption takes place.

Responding to this perceived neglect, Chapter Three establishes some of the key theoretical bases for the rest of the study by discussing the role of religion in shaping American culture and national identity. Whilst it acknowledges some of the problems associated with the concept, it posits the notion of an American civil religion as a useful tool with which to explore the ways in which the idea of the nation has been invoked within the American cinema.

Part II takes up the issues raised in the first three chapters through an in-depth examination of *The Birth of a Nation*, over two chapters. The first of these serves as a re-introduction to the film and the vast literature prompted by it. Whilst highlighting those aspects of the picture, its production, and reception suggestive of a deeper connection with the traditions of American religion, it argues that these aspects to the film remain largely unexplored. Building on this, Chapter Five, discusses the film as an event in American religious history. Locating the picture in relation to the religious bases of American national identity, it argues that Griffith's highly problematic representation of African-Americans should be understood as something more than just a powerful expression of white supremacy, and that the picture's legacy needs to be rethought accordingly. In particular, it stresses how the southern viewpoint of the film not only reflected the director's own cultural background, but also suited his ambitions for the cinema as a vehicle of moral reform. Despite, or perhaps even because of, the controversy prompted by *Birth*, moreover, the impact of the film helped enact a transformation of the ways and means in which Americans thought of themselves as members of a national community uniquely favoured by Providence.

PART I

Religion and Film in American Culture: The Scholarly Context

CHAPTER ONE

Researching Religion, Media, and Culture: An Evolving Paradigm

Introduction

This chapter discusses the condition of existing research into religion, media, and culture. By doing so, it locates the present study in relation to an emerging scholarship interested in the nature and place of religion within mass-mediated, postmodern, western culture.

Like the project to hand, the basic subject matter for much of this work is America; a fact which reflects the background of many scholars working in this field as well as the hegemonic position of the United States within the broader global culture (Hoover, 1996: 290-91). The attention afforded the U.S. can also be explained by what some might hold to be the paradoxical status of religion there: despite being as self-consciously 'modern' in terms of its economy and politics as any nation could be, symbols, stories, and institutions based in traditional notions of religion continue to exert a significant influence throughout American culture. Even with the constitutional separation of church and state, it is by no means entirely fanciful to suggest, for example, that being a woman or black is less hindrance to those who would seek the US presidency than a confession of atheism. In many instances it may indeed be 'less difficult to come out of the closet as homosexual in America today than to declare yourself an atheist or an agnostic' (Ellen Johnson quoted in Reed, 1999: 11). America has proved itself resistant to the once

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widespread assumption of secularization as the inevitable accompaniment to modernization, something often ignored in discussions of the US media.¹

The chapter begins by examining the broad trends which have, until fairly recently, characterized work on media and religion. This is followed by an account of an 'evolving paradigm' (Hoover, 1996: 285-87) of theory development and research in regard to religion, media, and culture. Whilst the fairly comprehensive triangulation of theory proposed and elaborated by Hoover and Lundby (1996) and others is welcomed, particularly as a basis for addressing contemporary American culture, three main areas of concern are identified. The first is the general lack of attention afforded the historical dimensions of this theoretical triangulation. Related to this, the second area of concern stems from insufficient consideration of the particular national background to what Hoover and Lundby (1996: 10) describe as the 'convergence of religion and media within contemporary culture', and the consequent under-examination of power relations within this convergence. The global hegemony of American media and popular culture is the furthest extension of a national culture which cannot help but bear the marks of tensions and conflicts rooted in issues like economics, gender, race, region, religion, sexuality and social class, all played out amidst the historical transformations and upheavals wrought by modernity. That those attempting to rethink media, religion, and culture in the present appear to have little interest in reconsidering the past is, moreover, reflected in the third area of concern identified below; the lack of attention scholars in this field have afforded the medium of film, especially as an agent for, and product of, the profound social, religious, and cultural changes which transformed America during

¹ Affirming the commonly held assumption of its apparent inevitability prior to a re-appraisal of the place of the supernatural in modern life in *A Rumour of Angels* (1969), Peter Berger (1967: 107) offers a widely cited definition of 'secularization' as 'the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols'. Challenging such assumptions, however, more recent statistics suggest that as many as '95% of Americans profess belief in God' (Gallup Poll results quoted in Ostling, 1995: 72). For a useful recent discussion of the secularization thesis in relation to contemporary American society see Harper and LeBeau (2000).

the first part of the twentieth century. These three basic issues inform the rest of the study.

Existing Research into Media and Religion

Despite obvious differences in terms of their specific lines of enquiry, it is a relatively simple matter to describe certain basic similarities and common interests between research into the media and academic studies of religion. Both are inter-disciplinary fields examining notions of collective identity and community, the social significance of symbols and stories, structures of power, etc. Both offer insights into the nature and purpose of that quintessential human activity, the generation of *meaning*. Yet, for all that, the relationship between these two broad areas of scholarship has, until fairly recently at least, been characterized by a somewhat surprising lack of communication. Indeed, taking Cultural Studies as the most obvious arena in which Media Studies and Religious Studies might productively overlap, the near total lack of interest afforded religion there contrasts sharply with the more traditional discipline of Anthropology. Clearly, some cultures are more popular than others (Frow, 1998).

Religion as the Blindspot of Media Theory

In a bold critique of this state of affairs, Stewart M. Hoover and Shalini S. Venturelli (1996: 251) suggest that ‘the realm of belief, spirituality, ontology and deep meaning conventionally constructed as “the religious”’ represents ‘the blindspot of contemporary media theory’. Re-reading the roots of contemporary social theory in the legacies of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber, ‘the theorists who have most directly addressed and constructed religion as a legitimate field of inquiry’ (1996: 251), Hoover and Venturelli (1996: 252-58) point out that despite the widespread assumption that secularization would inevitably accompany the rationalizing processes of modernity, and the observable decline in the power, influence and attendance of the formal religious institutions of Europe, ‘non-rational’ beliefs and practices persist as fundamental components of meaning-making in

contemporary western society. Moreover, whilst they acknowledge the privatization and commodification of social and cultural life under capitalism, a supplanting of 'religious consciousness with a world of objects' (1996: 256), Hoover and Venturelli interrogate the traditional analytical distinction between the sacred and the profane, and propose secularization as 'a transformation in religious – not extra-religious – consciousness' (1996: 255), thus radically relocating the category of 'the religious' within the realm of 'the secular', especially the mass media.

Although Hoover's and Venturelli's terse discussion of what is meant by the categories of 'religion' and the 'religious' needs to be unpacked somewhat if it is to be fully exploited, it does indicate how re-examining these terms might provide a useful means of addressing the relationship between religion and media. What is of more immediate concern, however, is that the re-conceptualization of 'the religious' proposed by Hoover and Venturelli carries implications both for media practice and, more crucially here, media research.

For one thing, Venturelli and Hoover highlight the profound tension between the maintenance of political and moral community on the one hand, and life in a modern media-saturated environment on the other:

The "religion of secularism" with its canons of rationalism, practical action, and values constructed as commodities, presents, via the media, a totalizing worldview intended to obscure multivalent ontologies and sensibilities. Only in the private sphere of the self does the possibility of moral feeling unencumbered by the demands of the rational order, persist.
(1996: 263)

Furthermore, they observe that the uncritical adoption of Enlightenment secularism by media researchers and theorists has led to 'an almost conscious distancing from the realms of deep meaning' (1996: 258). Given the persistence of religious worldviews around the globe, this leaves those involved in Media and Cultural Studies open to the charge of arrogance, hubris even, and calls into question the relevance and meaning of their work. Hence, Hoover and Venturelli (1996: 263)

conclude their essay by calling for 'a new attention to be paid to the category of the religious within the field of media theory and research'.²

Media Blindness in Religious Studies

In parallel with Hoover's and Venturelli's notion of a 'blindspot' within media studies, though addressing the academy from the other side of the inter-disciplinary divide, Chris Arthur (1996a&b) has commented on the 'media blindness' (after Masterman, 1985) which afflicts religious studies. Highlighting points drawn from the work of John Hinnells (1990), Gregory Schopen (1991), Margaret Miles (1985), and William Graham (1987), Arthur emphasizes the extent to which 'media-blind' studies of religion tend to privilege the written word at the expense of other forms of expression.³ The assumption 'that the written word is natural, normative, [and] authoritative' (Arthur 1996b: 4) leads to an unsatisfactory and elitist understanding of religion which plays down the significance of 'the person as the most important medium of all' (1996b: 7). Indeed, Arthur (1996b: 4) acknowledges the parallel between 'media-blindness' and 'gender-blindness' citing June O'Connor's (1995: 48) recognition that 'the epistemological significance of feminist research in religion lies in its asking questions about how we know what we know, what the sources of our knowledge are and why we trust them.'

2 A similar argument is made by John Frow (1998: 207) who comments on 'the failure of cultural studies—with rare exceptions—to come to terms with, to theorize in any adequate way, what is perhaps the most important set of popular cultural systems in the world, religion in both its organized and disorganized forms'. He suggests that cultural studies needs to move beyond its 'embarrassment' with regard to religion, abandon the secularization thesis and 'take religion seriously in all of its dimensions because of its cultural centrality in the modern world' (1998: 208).

3 John Hinnells (1990: 257) stresses the importance of examining the arts as a 'major form of religious expression', especially if one is to avoid 'plugging in to a level of religion which most of the practitioners are not, or have not been engaged in'. Schopen (1991) points out how 'Protestant presuppositions' have privileged writing as the locus of 'real' Buddhism in the study of Indian Buddhism. Miles (1985) demonstrates the extent to which it has been 'images rather than words' which have informed the identity and sense of purpose of many millions of historical subjects outwith an atypical and privileged minority of those able to read and write. Graham (1987) discusses the important but often neglected oral aspect of scripture.

Moving towards a plea for 'a more media-conscious approach in religious studies' (1996b: 7), Arthur develops this basic position by utilizing some of the ideas of Walter J. Ong (1969; 1982), and Jack Goody (1986; Goody and Watt, 1968) to highlight the transformative impact of writing on consciousness and, thus, religion. For Ong, writing enabled societies to move away from the 'highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind that inhibits intellectual experimentation' (1982: 41) which derives from oral societies' need to continually repeat information and stories to avoid forgetting. Instead, Ong argues, writing set up 'conditions for "objectivity" in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing' by separating 'the knower from the known', thus allowing the possibility of 'new speculation' (1982: 46). Similarly, Goody and Watt (1968: 53) suggest that oral cultures find it hard to conceive of a word like "God"...as a separate entity, divorced from both the rest of the sentence and its social context. But, once given the physical reality of writing, it can take on a life of its own'. For Goody, therefore, the relationship between writing and religion is one in which literacy facilitates the growth of 'world' as opposed to local religions, 'religions of conversion, not simply religions of birth' (1986: 5).⁴ Whilst such discussions of the profound importance of writing are suggestive of why scholars of religion might have tended to focus on written texts, Arthur is also mindful of suggestions of 'a media revolution, involving a move from a typographic to a televisual epistemology' (1996: 8). Thus, his main concern is with reminding us that 'media are not just inert channels through which religious information flows in aseptic conditions, wholly uninfluenced by what carries it. They profoundly affect the way in which religious thinking operates' (1996a: 1). It follows, therefore, that 'if religious developments are significantly shaped by available media, then looking at the impact which such media have on religions may help us to understand the dynamics of religious change' (1996a: 2).

⁴ For critiques of Ong and Woody which examine the ideological assumptions embedded in their work see Street (1984) and Carruthers (1990).

'Religion' and the Modern World

Implicit in Arthur's work is an important question regarding the efficacy of disciplinary boundaries and the extent to which they help or hinder any attempt to understand the interplay of media and religion within actual lived experience. As Arthur (1996c: 187) writes elsewhere,

an assumption about what religion is, whether expressed explicitly in a definition, or implicitly as a media-bias that leads us only to consider one type of material, can have the effect of directing our inquiries away from the actual religiousness of those who constitute the living reality of a faith toward abstract formulations whose claim to be representative of such faiths is open to question

In the jargon of media studies, one might describe Arthur as proposing a reception based understanding of religion. Such a position tends to lead away from the notion that the meanings of religious rituals, stories, and symbols are inherent or fixed, emphasizing instead the active and historically contingent role of individuals and religious communities as creators of meaning as they encounter religious phenomena. Returning to Hoover and Venturelli's (1996) notion of a 'blindspot', however, one can extend Arthur's argument by indicating the way received assumptions regarding 'religion' (as an irrelevance) and 'secularization' (as the inevitable and, some would say, welcome 'death of religion') result in a near-total absence of the 'religious' within much media studies, and the subtle denigration of what is a fundamental aspect of many people's lives.

The irony in all of this though, is that such blindspots were more or less inevitable once 'religion' became a distinct object of study. As Talal Asad recognises, the emergence of 'religion' as an '*analytically* available' (1993: 28, emphasis in original) category within Western scholarship implies an essentialist definition of religion 'as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon' (1993: 28). Addressing Clifford Geertz's (1973) well known and widely cited definition of 'religion as a cultural system', Asad (1993: 29) rejects any such essentialist or universalist notion of religion 'because its constituent elements and relationships are historically

specific, [and] because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.’ Noting that a universal definition of religion fits neatly ‘with the liberal demand in our time that [religion] be kept quite separate from politics, law, and science—spaces in which varieties of power and reason articulate our distinctively modern life,’ Asad (1993: 28) argues that ‘this separation of religion from power is a modern Western norm, the product of a unique post-Reformation history’.⁵

Asad’s trenchant critique of Western scholarly conceptions of religion is revisited in Chapter Three’s discussion of religion in the American context. Here though, Asad’s (1993: 27-54) problematization of ‘religion as an anthropological category’, as an index of ‘a particular history of knowledge and power...out of which the modern world has been constructed’ (1993: 54) is certainly suggestive of why scholars in media and cultural studies might perceive the ‘religious’ as something marginal within contemporary society. It also indicates why scholars of religion contend with the prospect of their endeavours being dismissed as largely irrelevant to an understanding of how modern society functions by those outwith the field. Furthermore, particular difficulties arise in following the process of religious change if such a transformation involves, or gives rise to, phenomena not conventionally categorized as religious. In an environment so devoted to the production and circulation of meanings in carefully structured and disciplined written forms as the academy, there is a somewhat inevitable problem of scholarly credibility which attends attempts to ascribe religiosity to such banal phenomena as a rosary hanging from the rear-view mirror of a cab in Manhattan, say, or the purchase of a replica Manchester United shirt replete with ‘Red Devil’. Faced with this problem, this study argues that the question of whether or not such things are authentically ‘religious’ is largely irrelevant to the development of a broad sensitivity to the proliferation of resources and strategies via which humans create meaning and negotiate power in

⁵ Indeed, Asad introduces his discussion by noting how ‘Victorian evolutionary ideas’ led to ‘the rationalist notion that religion is simply a primitive and therefore outmoded form of the institutions we now encounter in truer form (law, politics, science) in modern life’ (1993: 27, parentheses in original).

our various 'lifeworlds' (after Habermas, 1987). Nonetheless, the persistence of those elements conventionally understood to be 'religious' alongside other nominally 'secular' aspects of day-to-day life indicates the utility of seeking out or developing theories and research methods which can cope with the religious aspects of contemporary life.

Researching Media and Religion: Initial Trends

Until fairly recently, writing on religion and the media was, in general, characterized by two main trends. The first is rooted in broader western Christian concerns regarding the effects of the mass media and popular culture on religious institutions, spirituality, and society in general (e.g. Nelson, 1976; Muggeridge, 1977; Bluck, 1978; Atkinson, 1979; Goethals, 1981, 1990; Fore, 1987; Coleman and Tomka, 1993). Often reflecting the influence of Marshall McLuhan (1964), but only rarely engaging with the subsequent theoretical development of mainstream media studies, such writing usually presents fairly negative understandings of the media themselves. Like the more secular, mainstream, but similar media criticism of Neil Postman (1987), for example, it tends to focus on television as the dominant medium of our time, seeing T.V. as a kind of all-pervasive 'substitute for sacraments' (Goethals, 1981) fundamentally at odds with a 'genuine' or 'authentic' religiosity. However, whilst there is a sub-strand of writing which emphasizes the positive potential of the media for disseminating Christian messages (for example, Armstrong, 1979; Benson, 1988), one suspects that pessimism is indeed an appropriate Christian attitude towards the difficulties facing the churches as a result of the communications revolution.

The second major strand of writing on religion and media also has its roots in the Christian criticism of the media outlined above but has grown into the now quite extensive literature on televangelism (e.g. Kuhns 1969; Owens, 1980; Hadden and Swann, 1982; Horsfield 1984; Frankl, 1987; Hadden and Shupe 1988; Hoover, 1988; Bruce, 1990; Schultze, 1991). Although televangelism is a somewhat obvious focus

for interest in media and religion, it has facilitated the development of more sophisticated theoretical and methodological approaches towards the field as a whole.

Certainly, the mushrooming of serious interest in televangelism during the 1980s can be attributed, at least in part, to its political significance. Recognizing televangelism's capacity 'to visualize and thus give public voice to the valences of the Religious Right, including authoritarianism, nativism, xenophobia, homophobia, and, in its extreme, militarism and the desire for a theocracy', Clark and Hoover (1996: 18) comment that 'televangelism is not only the place of origin of the Religious Right, but offers a form of its ongoing public discourse'. Yet, despite its clear relevance to a whole range of debates, and reflecting in part perhaps, Steve Bruce's (1990: 233-34) point that however it may appear, 'the first and most important point about televangelism...[is that] watching religious television is still an infrequent activity of a small part of the American people', the literature on televangelism is more an adjunct to, rather than a component of, mainstream media and cultural studies. This is a pity, for as Hoover and Lundby (1996: 10) recognize, there is a small but expanding body of work on televangelism which seeks to problematize the conventional view of religion and media as separate categories within contemporary culture (e.g. Hoover, 1988; Peck, 1993; Alexander, 1994).

Indeed, as work on religion and the media has begun to move out of the twin ghettos of religious criticism of the media and televangelism, the complex nature of the relationship between religion and media within culture has become increasingly apparent. For example, in addressing the widely supposed anti-Christian bias of the American media (Lichter, Rothman, and Lichter, 1986; Olasky, 1988; Carter, 1993), Mark Silk (1995) moves well beyond Dart and Allen's (1993) attribution of the lack of news coverage afforded religion to ignorance on the part of media 'elites'. Rather, Silk (1995: 11) argues that to the extent that they are concerned with religion itself, the news media approach the subject in ways which reflect and support religious and moral values 'embedded in American culture at large'. Such findings point to the

desirability of theory which can accommodate both religion and media as important and interwoven ingredients within the cultural process. It is towards the emergence of just such a 'triangulation' (Hoover and Lundby, 1996: 3) to which we now turn.

Religion, Media, Culture: An Evolving Paradigm of Research

Although the respective critiques of media studies and religious studies offered by Hoover and Venturelli (1996) and Arthur (1996a&b) were, at the time of their writing, generally accurate in their assessments, they were also indicative of a steady if still unspectacular expansion of scholarship in the field of media and religion. Over the last decade or so, this development has taken something of a slow but definite 'cultural turn' in its overall orientation. The acknowledgement of cultural context as being of fundamental importance in shaping relations between media and religion, has been accompanied by a growing recognition that the analytical distinction between religion and media may not be as hard and fast as convention would have us believe. Indeed, interest in the unexpected but continued presence of the religious within modern, mass-mediated culture has, in turn, prompted an interrogation of this theoretical distinction (Hoover and Lundby, 1996). Several conferences and conference seminars have been devoted to work exploring these long ignored interstices.⁶ There have also been a few anthologies of related writings published. While the quality, scope, and utility of the latter has been variable they do provide a useful indication of how work within the field is changing.

⁶ For example: 'Media-Religion-Culture' held at the University of Uppsala, Sweden, in 1993; the Media, Religion, and Culture conference held at the University of Colorado at Boulder, USA, in 1996; the British Association for the Study of Religions (BASR) 1996 annual conference devoted to Religion and Media held at University College of St. Martin, Lancaster, England; the 3rd International Conference on Media, Religion, and Culture, University of Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1999. Panels and round tables on Media, Religion, and Culture have also featured at a number of other major international conferences, within both the field of media studies and religious studies..

'Religion and the Media'

As an early attempt to pull together many of the issues implicit in the field, *Religion and the Media: An Introductory Reader*, edited by Chris Arthur (1993), tends to be more illustrative of the problems which attend such endeavours than the potential benefits available to interested scholars. Indeed, the editor opens his introduction to the book by noting the vast potential subject matter available to any study of media and religion: 'after all, every expression of human religiousness is, inevitably, a *mediated* expression' (1993: 1). Despite this observation, however, and the inclusion of some useful and thought provoking work, Arthur's collection lacks something in terms of balance and rigour, and fails to live up to the suggestion of breadth (if not comprehensiveness) implicit in its title.⁷ Some of these problems stem from a lack of religious perspectives from outwith Western Christianity.⁸ Of course, a Christian perspective need not be a problem in terms of the individual papers. For instance, even if we do not share her particular spiritual commitment, the inclusion of an essay by Dorothee Sölle (1984) provides a trenchant critique of the consumerism underpinning our media-saturated environment. Nevertheless, although the editor's introduction does make clear that 'the book is primarily intended for students of theology and religious studies and for those in training for the ministry' (Arthur, 1993: 3), the Christian bias of the collection only serves to undermine its credibility as a piece of media studies. So, although the book is consistent with the fairly extensive literature providing a Christian critique of the mass media discussed above, one wonders how well served the supposed readership is by pieces in which an assumed religious and moral authority is allowed to override argument based on evidence and theory which acknowledges the complexity of media-bound human society. Whilst it does not even mention religion, a paper discussing the role of television news in a

7 To be fair to Arthur (1993: 3), he does admit that his volume consists of 'selected papers on religion and the media rather than a systematic study of this area', commenting that although 'such systematic study is, of course, needed,...it is not the task of the present volume to provide it'.

8 The obvious exception in respect of the rest of Arthur's book is S.A. Schleifer's (1993) stimulating and historically grounded discussion of Islamic perspectives towards the news.

democratic society from John Eldridge (1993) of the Glasgow University Media Group only serves to highlight the discursive shortcomings of some of the other offerings.

Most disappointing in respect of this study is the book's predictable over-emphasis on television. Included are various essays on TV in general, the news, soap operas, religious programmes, etc. For Arthur (1993: 2), this merely reflects 'the extent to which television is the dominant medium in contemporary society'. Perhaps so. Yet, aside from Stewart Hoover's (1993) statistical study of American newspaper readers' attitudes towards press coverage of religion, little serious attention is given to any other medium. As a result, discussion tends to disregard the complicated and historically specific, socio-economic, political, and cultural processes which have shaped the technology, institutional structures, production practices, and consumption of TV within a multi-media environment. Moreover, because few of the writers see television as anything other than a (spiritual) problem (similar to an outdated 'hypodermic model' of media effects), the essays in Arthur's collection contain little discussion of the influence, both subtle and direct, of religious ideas and organizations on the media.

'Religion and Mass Media'

A little more sophisticated in terms of its theoretical and methodological orientations is Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum's (1996) collection, *Religion and Mass Media: Audiences and Adaptations*. The editors of this volume hope it represents 'a creative synthesis of ideas between mass communication research and the sociology of religion' (1996: 5) moving towards 'an audience-centered approach to the study of religion and media' (1996: 9). As Stout and Buddenbaum (1996: 6) note, 'scholars in both areas have worked in relative isolation, with no clear bridge of understanding between them', and that their 'book represents one of the first attempts to promote interdisciplinary dialogue on the subject of religion and media' (1996: 5). With this as a starting position one might reasonably expect a sustained

effort to develop theory which might provide that 'bridge of understanding'. Taken as a whole, however, Stout and Buddenbaum's compilation concentrates on empirical studies of *how* various contemporary American Christian denominations experience and use modern mass media. Much of the evidence gathered suggests that among the religiously committed there exists a more diverse set of attitudes towards the media than might commonly be supposed by those academics who see religion as little more than an anachronistic refuge for the conservative (e.g. Valenti and Stout, 1996; Buddenbaum, 1996). Like Arthur's volume, though, it is hard to imagine Stout and Buddenbaum's book reaching beyond the converted as it lacks the boldness to go on and exploit the discursive possibilities inherent within it with regard to politically charged issues such as race, class, and gender.

A basic problem of the book in this respect is the limited range of enquiry. Most obvious, perhaps, is the use of 'religion' in the title as a term to describe little more than the denominations of US Christianity. Within the crude political and economic consensus of American culture, religion has offered American citizens an alternative symbolic arena in which they might play out their differences (see Chapter Three). Even minor divergences in doctrine take on significance within such an essentially democratic religious environment. Suggestions of this expressive, 'bottom-up' religiosity emerge in the section of the book which deals with the role of religion in shaping audience behaviour, particularly in Thomas Lindlof's (1996) examination of letters to a local newspaper generated by the controversy surrounding Martin Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ*. In a book largely devoted to dry empirical studies of *how* certain audiences behave, Lindlof (1996: 148) is worthy of praise because he highlights the *meanings* generated by some of the participants in this particular episode of the 'culture war', which is still being fought out in the American news media around issues like abortion, gay rights, and school prayers, etc. He brings out the crucial difference between opinion and *belief* by asking what was at stake, and thus offers an explanation as to *why* individual members of the audience felt compelled to engage in such an emotive debate. It is

this 'why' question though, which flags the book's exclusion of religious groups outside of the mainstream. In an America where a majority still claim to be 'Christian', committing oneself to Islam for instance, or to one of the many new religious movements dismissed by the majority as 'cults', *means* something. Yet, there is barely a nod in the direction of the astonishing variety of non-Christian or non-traditional religious groups that do exist there, all staking a claim for American hearts, minds and pockets. By choosing to ignore the voices at the margins, the editors lost the opportunity to enter into a deeper, and perhaps more provocative, analysis of the problems facing contemporary American society.

The essential conservatism of Stout and Buddenbaum's anthology is compounded by its concentration on audiences and readily identifiable denominations. Leaving issues like ownership and content aside means the editors did not need to engage with the sticky theoretical problem of what 'religion' actually means nowadays. One looks in vain for a genuinely 'creative synthesis of ideas' (1996: 5). Adopting an unproblematic and rather narrow definition of the 'religious' may have enabled efficient and easily managed data gathering. But given the key role of both Christianity and the media in shaping the national culture, such an approach elides rather more interesting questions. Certainly, Stout and Buddenbaum (1996: 35-36) acknowledge Tocqueville's still relevant observations regarding the fundamental importance of religious voluntarism and press freedom in maintaining the social and political well-being of America. Meanwhile, pieces on Catholicism and Censorship (Jelen, 1996), and the 'uneasy alliance' between Evangelicals and the media (Schultze, 1996), indicate the difficulties and tensions generated within a modern media-saturated environment by attempts to reconcile belief in an absolute with the liberal ideals enshrined in the US constitution. Such efforts notwithstanding, however, Stout and Buddenbaum's book displays little interest in placing the circumstances which make the study of media and religion in America a worthwhile and relevant endeavour in a broader context.

'Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture'

In contrast to Stout and Buddenbaum, and as the title of their collection *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* suggests, Stewart Hoover and Knut Lundby (1996) recognise that the development of theory is crucial to the opening up of this relatively novel area of scholarship. With no sign of the reticence which prevents Stout and Buddenbaum from interrogating conventional notions of 'religion', *Rethinking* oozes a confidence befitting its ambition: the triangular linkage of theory, enabling us to think of media, religion, and culture 'as an interrelated web within society' (Hoover and Lundby, 1996: 3). Moving beyond 'the simpler, two-sided relationships between *religion and media*, *media and culture*, and *culture and religion* that up to now have characterized both theory and research' (1996: 3, emphases in original), Hoover and Lundby's volume represents an important ground-levelling exercise which seeks to open up the field and indicate its potential riches to other researchers. As the editors admit in their introduction, 'it is presumptuous to suppose that any theoretical perspective can ultimately account for the phenomena of concern here' (Hoover and Lundby, 1996: 8). In that sense, their project does not in itself imply the construction of a new meta-theory, although there are moves here to build on the notion of *mediation*, and develop 'a theory of mediated religion in culture' (Lundby and Hoover, 1996: 303). Rather, Hoover and Lundby (1996: 8-9) claim that instead of enforcing any unitary framework on their book, they and the various contributors 'attempt to raise the discourse to a new level by presenting material that either illuminates or challenges the received assumptions about issues of religion and media, media and culture, and contemporary religious and cultural matters'. As befits such an aim, *Rethinking* draws on a wide range of potentially relevant scholarship to present a wealth of ideas, leads, and possibilities in terms of theory. In this way, it effectively elaborates various ways and means of addressing both the 'blindspot' in media and cultural studies that Hoover and Venturelli (1996) identify and the 'media blindness' of religious studies highlighted by Arthur (1996a&b). With regard to this present study, therefore, the significance of *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* derives

from its broad articulation of hitherto disparate literatures. The book establishes a flexible but still coherent 'evolving paradigm' (Hoover, 1996: 285-87) for future research, theoretical development, and scholarly debate. Thus, it provides a much-needed point of reference for the various individuals, groups, institutions, and networks who might be interested in exploring and developing the possibilities of the field.⁹ In doing this, it represents a key constituency within the perceived audience for this study.

Especially important in this respect is a forceful 'bibliographic essay' by Lynn Schofield Clark and Hoover (1996) which builds upon the initial agenda set by Hoover and Lundby to propose that

Religion...is not limited to what happens in a 'sacred' realm, traditionally conceived, but is that part of culture that persuasively presents a plausible myth of the ordering of existence. In this sense, culture and religion are inseparable; and what is 'sacred' may be understood in Lundby's phrase 'as a variable, ranging from the substantial to the functional [Lundby, 1996: 161]. As it exists in the wholeness of human thought and practice, religion is thus an important consideration in theories of culture and society. (Clark and Hoover, 1996: 17)

Prior to a broad survey of relevant work in the areas of Religion and Media, Cultural Studies, Ritual Studies, and Religious Studies, therefore, Clark and Hoover (1996: 18) 'argue that the time is ripe for media scholars to begin to probe questions of religion in culture more directly'. As they subsequently demonstrate, such inquiries would represent an extension of 'recent trends in media studies that have foregrounded questions of meaning and being and have adopted methodologies that examine the everyday practices and discourses of individuals and groups (Clark and

⁹ Of obvious importance in this respect is the 'Uppsala Group' which was formed as a result of the 'Media-Religion-Culture' conference held at the University of Uppsala, Sweden, in 1993, 'both to encourage and to carry out research at the intersection of media studies, religious studies, and cultural studies' (Hoover and Lundby, 1996: ix). Connected with this and the Conference on Media, Religion and Culture are bodies such as The International Study Commission on Media, Religion, and Culture, (1999), 'a group of scholars and practitioners who have gathered to consider the shape and direction of both productive and reflective work in these three intersecting fields', and 'is intended to facilitate continuing dialog and to stimulate and support both scholarship and media production in the area'. Probably the most prominent research project within the field is the *Symbolism, Media and the Lifecourse* project (2001), nearing completion at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication of the University of Colorado under the aegis of Stewart M. Hoover

Hoover, 1996: 18).¹⁰ Indeed, although Clark and Hoover (1996: 28) note that scholars of religion are moving 'away from institutions and structures and toward studies of religion in private life', they write that 'trends in ritual scholarship highlight the public and procedural aspects of religious behaviour, contradicting the idea that religion is limited to the private sphere'.

Building on this point, Clark and Hoover (1996: 28) acknowledge the widely perceived decline of institutional religion within Europe, Canada, and the United States. Mindful of 'the significance of the North American case in media and religion' (1996: 15-16) they point out, nonetheless, that 'the majority of Americans still identify themselves as religious or spiritual' however much 'what is meant by the terms *religious* and *spiritual* has changed' (emphases in original). Addressing religion in relation to the issue of 'identity construction', Clark and Hoover (1996: 28) argue that 'authority over religious experience and expression is increasingly in the hands of the individual,' a relatively novel extension of something historically consistent with the voluntaristic principles of American religion (see Chapter Three). Given such 'postmodern' developments, 'the extent to which symbolic resources of the mass media are drawn into these processes' becomes 'an essential question' within the overall examination of media, religion and culture (1996: 29).

Despite this recognition, however, the relationship of those 'symbolic resources' to the overall political economy of the media is hardly dealt with at all within *Rethinking*. This is somewhat surprising given Hoover and Venturelli's (1996: 256) recognition of 'commodification' as one of the key transformative processes of modern capitalism. Moreover, the elision of supply-side issues of ownership and control and their influence on the provision of, and struggles over the 'symbolic resources' of the media, be they explicitly religious or not, signals a weakness within

¹⁰ Clark and Hoover (1996:22-26) draw particular attention to writing within the tradition of British cultural studies from the 'founding texts' of Richard Hoggart (1957), Raymond Williams (1961), and E.P. Thompson (1963), through to the work of Hall and Jefferson (1976), Stuart Hall (1973), David Morley (1980) and others associated with the Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, although they criticise the creeping neglect of religion within this tradition as it has developed.

the book as a whole; the lack of any explicit conceptualization and interrogation of *power*, a central concern within all the relevant contemporary scholarly disciplines Clark and Hoover discuss.

In concluding their essay, Clark and Hoover indicate six areas of work 'that seem worthy of further exploration' (1996: 31). Of these, the first two 'would refine and extend current research' into '*religion and the news*' focusing 'on producers, texts, and audiences', and 'studies of *televangelism*'. The third 'would examine the *interplay between religious thought and popular culture*'.¹¹ A fourth would take a look at '*new modes of spirituality*, and would examine how religious symbols are contested and constrained in the public sphere to create a public discourse of religion'. The fifth area covers 'work on *mediated therapeutic discourse*' whilst the sixth, 'and perhaps the least explored, is...examination of *the affective*' (1996:31, all emphases in original). Of these, the third, fourth, and sixth areas are, to varying degrees, addressed directly by this study. All six of them, however, offer potential insights into the nature and practical workings of power.

Clark and Hoover (1996: 32) also indicate three basic themes of particular relevance to the overall project of research 'at the intersection of media, culture, and religion' (1996: 15). Firstly, there 'is the shift from *modernity to postmodernity*' a process 'which has foregrounded the roles of commodification, transnationality, and globalization, and in general the flattening of time and space occurring simultaneously in both media and religious practices'. Developing out of these conditions is the second theme, '*identity negotiation*, both individual and collective...[within] the *mediated public sphere*.' Hence the third theme: 'the postmodern question of the creative *reworking of the text at the site of the audience*' (1996: 32, all emphases in original). Explicating the enquiry in terms of the overall project, and articulating the reception-centered concerns which have characterized

¹¹ Clark and Hoover (1996:31) cite 'Hebdige's (1976) work on reggae and Jindra's (1994) analysis of *Star Trek* fandom' as indicative of the possibilities within this area and write that 'the former suggests the study of historical religious roots of particular genres and texts' while 'the latter examines the ways in which religion emerges in everyday life in unexpected forms mediated by popular culture'

the methodological orientation of their own work in the wake of *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* (Clark 1996, 1998; Hoover, 1998a&b), Clark and Hoover (1996: 32) ask,

How are people using existing media texts and converting them to stories of religious inspiration, for example? Do these stories have connections to deep myths of the Abrahamic faiths, or do they resonate with other traditions (perhaps civil religion, or other religious traditions)? How do these readings work themselves back into the production of media?

Despite the present study's focus on media development within the historical frame of 'modernity' rather than 'postmodernity', all of these themes and questions are relevant here. Yet, what is striking about Clark's and Hoover's articulation of the concerns which inform the 'evolving paradigm' is its overwhelmingly presentist orientation. There is little apparent interest in the actual (as opposed to assumed) historical background to conditions and events which have brought about, out of scholarly necessity, a convergence of theoretical perspectives on media and religion within postmodern culture, and the privileging of reception over production and distribution. That the history of this convergence is played down is of concern here, not least because the issue of power is implicit in, and central to, all three underlying themes Clark and Hoover identify. Following Jeremy Carrette's and Mary Keller's (1999: 22) contention that the developing 'interconnection of critical registers' within religious studies means that 'it is not possible to study religion without recognising the multiple forces which shape belief and practice, and even the study of religion itself'; and noting that the emergence of a predominantly American scholarship 'at the intersection of media, culture, and religion' (Clark and Hoover 1996) is taking place within a global context characterised by the political, military, economic, and cultural hegemony of the United States; one is drawn to ask whose interests are being served by this reconfiguration of theory and research?

Framing such an enquiry may appear unduly suspicious of a project clearly informed by serious concerns over the moral, ontological, and spiritual implications of a media-saturated postmodern environment. But it is by no means the intention here

to disparage scholarship that warrants wider support both within and beyond the academy. Rather, the question represents a means of addressing certain lacunae within the 'evolving paradigm' set out in *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*.

Inevitably, some of the concerns and sentiments expressed by the contributors to *Rethinking* echo those found in Arthur's (1993) volume and the other Christian critiques of the media detailed above. We should not be surprised that much of the impetus behind the convergence of work on media, religion, and culture comes from within the Christian faith community. There is, however, a much more explicit recognition of the need to underpin a sense of moral engagement with theoretical explication if work in this field is to reach a broader audience. Indeed, for several writers, academic understanding is merely a prelude towards activism. Thus, Clifford Christians (1996: 69) utilises Martin Heidegger's (1977) view of technology as 'a cultural process in which human existence is established in relation to natural reality', to argue that triadic theories of mediation must not only root understandings of religion and media in culture, but also account for the ontological implications of technology. From this position, Christians (1996: 76-79) outlines an attitude of 'prophetic witness', an explicitly religious mode of resistance to contemporary 'technological conditions radically opposed to human freedom' (1996: 76). Concern of this kind is echoed in Gabriel Bar-Haim's (1996) Durkheimian and rather pessimistic description of 'the crisis of ritual and the triumph of the spectacle' (1996: 145). Subsequent work, often addressed to the concerns of faith communities, merely confirms a 'flattening' of symbols: the authority of religious symbols is becoming submerged as audiences generate meaning from the resources available in the symbolic marketplace of the media sphere (Clark 1996, 1998, Hoover 1998b). This does not mean, however, that these same audiences are no longer concerned with questions of 'deep' or 'religious' meaning. It simply means that people are looking for answers to these questions outwith the bounds of traditional religion.

Hence, Jesús Martín-Barbero (1996) offers a more hopeful take on 'disenchanted modernity'. Recognising the media as 'a process of creating cultural identities...bringing individuals into coherent publics that are "subjects of action"', he points to transformations in Latin American religion over the last forty years or so, and argues that the Mass Media can function as a site for the 'resacralization of contemporary cultures' (1996: 102). Indeed, along with the diversity of opinions on the consequences of modernity offered in *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*, some of the conclusions found there present an explicit and sometimes surprising challenge to the presuppositions of post-Enlightenment scholarship. For example, Tomaselli and Shepperson (1996: 221-22) suggest that

televangelists seem to have a way of recovering compelling aspects of preliterate oral consciousness, thereby restoring the power of dynamic relations of cosmological force to names and labels that are lost to Cartesian literate consciousness through the objectification of meanings attached to words.

Although they note that this 'power has been harnessed...to the demands of the political economy of the electronic church' (1996: 222), they argue that the recovery of this oral consciousness within a mass-mediated environment could facilitate the empowerment of communities within a public sphere in which democratic and religious attitudes are reconnected from the bottom up.

To a limited extent, an engagement with practical issues of the present leads Robert White (1996) and Peter Horsfield (1996) to invoke history as a context for their particular discussions. White's theoretical exploration of 'Religion and Media in the Construction of Cultures' examines both religious studies and media studies as examples of the inherent 'reflexivity' within social theory (Giddens quoted in White, 1996: 41); finding their 'common ground as discourses that monitor, evaluate, and orient the integrated development of cultures' (1996: 40). Drawing on Klaus Bruhn Jensen's (1995) *Social Semiotics of Mass Communication*, a theoretical perspective which emphasises the key process of 'signification' as both product and constituent

of social reality,¹² White looks at the possibilities for a creative intervention from the practitioners of religious studies and media studies within the ongoing dialogue between secular and sacred out of which meaningful symbols of the sacred emerge into the public sphere. Arguing that ‘the creation of sacred symbols and the “poetic” construction of meaning are too important in the construction of cultures to be excluded from the public sphere’ (1996: 60), he recognizes that

the construction of cultures, especially the signification of the sacred, is always a contested process in which some groups attempt to affirm that their cultural capital is sacred, natural, and beyond question, and other groups attempt to delegitimize and desacralize these symbols of identity (White, 1996: 49).

White is thus explicitly mindful of power and ‘the issues of hegemony and ideological co-optation of the search for religious meaning’ (1996: 61) and sees research as a process which can address itself to them. Nevertheless, one is still left wondering exactly what this might entail in the real world beyond theory. How do religious symbols relate to more earthbound struggles? Is it realistic to hope that academics could take on the mantle of artists and actually help generate stories and symbols articulating the religious *zeitgeist*.

Like White, Peter Horsfield (1996) is also concerned with the reformation and development of moral structures in the present-day context of media change. For Horsfield, the impact of mass communications technology and institutions in the present is a key issue which needs to be addressed by the Christian community at both a theological and ecclesial level. Arguing that the media need to be seen not ‘as one social institution among others’ but as ‘the “web” of the culture, the matrix where most people now get most of their insight, influence, values and meaning’ (1996: 177), he recognizes that ‘religious organizations may no longer be the main source of religious information, truth, or practice, even for their own members’ (1996:

¹² Jensen (1995: 61) takes ‘as an initial premise, at the *theoretical* level of analysis, that societies come before media as generators of meaning. Meaning flows from existing social institutions and everyday contexts, via media professionals and audiences, to the mass media, not vice versa’ (emphasis in original).

178). Indeed, Horsfield's piece is unusual within the terms of *Rethinking* as it addresses the issue of power directly:

A central element of culture that is affected by changes in means of communication is the aspect of power. Communication underlies and shapes the recognition and exercise of sociocultural power. Access to information, the status and resources to construct meaning; and the ability to identify, muster and construct resources—all essential characteristics of communication—locate and sustain one within social power structures. The various media of social communication function competitively, in terms both of their association with recognized exercisers of power and of their ability to fulfill desired social functions. They coexist through a competitive process of ordering and by carving out a competitive place and function within a social or economic sphere (1996: 172).

Despite a critical discussion of consumer capitalism and the impact of what he terms 'commoditization, that commercial process whereby noncommercial human activities and services are appropriated, re-formed, packaged, and then sold as commercial products or services' (1996: 179), Horsfield's conceptualization of media power is, however, somewhat abstract. As with *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* overall, theoretical explication tends to gloss over real life conflicts and struggles. The inevitable battles for political control and economic resources over issues such as education, the environment, freedom of expression, gender, nationhood, race and sexuality, are all played out in and through both religion and the media. Whilst all of these discourses impact in some way upon this study, two in particular, gender and race, indicate telling blindspots within the evolving paradigm in its still admittedly early stages of development.

Taking gender first, it might be argued that there is no need to worry. Within *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* there is a useful literature review by Claire Badaracco (1996) which may prompt non-specialists to examine the important insights generated by feminist scholars of religion. Aside from this short piece though, the collection ignores the whole question of gender in a way reminiscent of the 'founding fathers' of social and anthropological theory (Erickson, 1993). Given the preponderance of women over men, both in the congregations of traditional

religious institutions and the organizations of more innovative movements, but not in the clergy of mainstream denominations, one might observe that the gender problematic needs to be placed at the centre rather than the margins of the project the book is setting out. For instance, the mobilization of symbols deemed female rather than male has been an important theme in changing attitudes towards the natural environment (e.g. Ruether, 1992, 1996) itself an obvious but ignored topic within the broad discussion of religion, media, and culture.

Even more perplexing, is the near-total absence of race as an issue within *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*. Given the book's justifiable emphasis on the United States, it is astonishing that one of the deepest and most persistent sources of division and conflict within American culture and religion is, to all intents and purposes, ignored. Religion provided much of the original rationale for White Anglo-American racial ideas regarding the supposed inferiority of Africans (Jordan 1974), and, despite emancipation, this ideology was routinely reproduced in the national culture. As Jane Rhodes (1993: 185) writes,

American society responded to the existence of African, Asian, and indigenous people by erasing their cultures and substituting images that supported a system of racial dominance and control. Over time, these representations of America's subordinate groups nourished the nation's popular culture and helped fuel the rise of mass media. Members of these groups responded, when they could, with images of their own creation, and alternative media to disseminate them. Yet, they could do little to counteract the prevailing definitions of race.

She adds, moreover, that the

struggle between the transmission of racist ideology and dogma, and the efforts of oppressed groups to claim control over their image, is part of the legacy of the American mass media. Racial identity has been—and continues to be—a crucial factor in determining who can produce popular culture, and what messages are created. (1993:185)

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The value of the 'evolving paradigm' derives from an insistence that religion, so often dismissed as little more than a vestigial category by western scholars, should be integral to the academic investigation of media and culture. Nevertheless, the marginalization and neglect of, among other things, gender, race, and the political economy of the American media, however unintended, leaves those working within it open to negative criticism. Whilst this may be a harsh assessment if based on one book, the predominantly white, American, male profile of the contributors to *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* might lead sceptical observers of the broader project, of which the book is merely a foundation, to dismiss it via an invocation of bell hooks' (1996: 3) powerful formulation, 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy'. This would be unfair. As Lynn Clark (1996), for example, demonstrates, researchers in this field are by no means unaware of the issues which undergird their work. Commenting on the concept of identity informing her research into media audiences, she writes that it

is connected with the concept of the self and the "sovereign" individual. It is rooted in the 18th century Enlightenment ideals of humanity and reason which developed as critiques of the older feudal order in which ontological understandings had been based in one's relation to a deity and to a king. Thus the concepts of selfhood, "the individual," and identity undergird and legitimize the rise of capitalism as the socio-economic order that replaces feudalism. This underscores the fact that the ideas of the 'self' and of identity are not neutral or ideologically 'blank' ones, but are inherently related to the Western cultural context in which they developed.

Despite this general awareness, however, that there is a history to the conditions of the present, ignoring the particulars of that history does scant justice to the human cost of present day media culture. If research at the intersection of media, religion, and culture is to gain the wider currency it seeks, therefore, the field must incorporate a critical interrogation of the history behind such a convergence.

Within *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*, Graham Murdock's (1996) shortish essay on 'the re-enchantment of the world', a wide-ranging survey of the interplay between media and religion within the broad transformations of modernity, provides an indication of how interesting and valuable a substantial engagement with

the history of media and religion in culture might be. Attacking the assumption within British Cultural Studies that the religious dimension of contemporary social life was little more than a 'residue', Murdock examines culturally and politically determined shifts and differences in relations between religion and the media in a variety of settings. Discussing America, he draws on Colin Campbell's (1987: 219) recognition of 'two strands of thought within Protestantism...even within that especially harsh and vigorous branch of it known as Puritanism'. One corresponds with Max Weber's (1930) famous argument 'that the moral imperatives of Puritanism had provided an essential cultural support for the practices of accumulation that fuelled the rise of capitalism' (Murdock, 1996: 91). The second, however, 'developed into the Romantic sensibility that fed into the consumer system' (1996: 91). Campbell (1987: 227) writes that 'the cultural logic of modernity is not merely that of rationality as expressed in the activities of calculation and experiment; it is also that of passion and the creative dreaming born of longing'. Hence, he locates the source of American energy and dynamism in the permanent and fundamental tensions 'between dream and reality, pleasure and utility' (1987: 227). Murdock (1996: 91) comments that 'the shifting relations between these two sides of Protestant culture is especially marked in America, where the consumer society and the religious marketplace are both most advanced'. In a similar vein, Murdock (1996: 93) notes the importance of religion as subject matter in establishing the commercial viability of the film industry in America. As brief as it is, however, Murdock's piece is probably the most historical and historicized within *Rethinking*. Moreover, his two paragraph discussion of cinema (1996: 92-93) is all the medium would appear to warrant within the book's 'triangulation of theories'.

Leaving aside the potential relevance of the extensive work carried out within the field of film studies looking at areas such as authorship, film narration, genre, representation, spectatorship and reception, as well as race, gender, and the political economy of the film industry, this neglect reinforces the perception of the emerging or evolving paradigm as ahistorical. As Mike Cormack (1992: 77) has written,

during the greater part of the twentieth century the most influential media format has been that of the narrative film. This is not just because for much of this century it has been a major source of entertainment for millions of people in countries round the world, but also because it has had a central role in developing the styles and content of popular visual fiction. Its influence is evident on television drama of all kinds, on advertising, on music video, on fashion, and even (although not so obviously) on written fiction.

Yet, the influence and socio-historical importance of cinema is not really addressed within *Rethinking's* overwhelming concern with contemporary culture. There is no account, for example, theoretical or otherwise of the medium's pivotal role within the not-so insignificant shift away from print towards the televisual emphasized by Chris Arthur (1996 a&b) above. Indeed, given the emphasis within the evolving paradigm afforded notions of practice (e.g Hoover, 1996; Lundby and Hoover 1996), it is surprising that the transformation of mass culture enacted by the coming of cinema has not been addressed as a matter of urgency.

'Selling God': Religion, America, and Commodification

One writer who does address the historical relationship between the cinema and American religion, albeit fairly briefly, is R. Laurence Moore (1994: 220-31). Cited by Hoover and Lundby (1996: 5) in their introduction, Moore's (1994) *Selling God*, is an important counterpoint to the overly presentist orientation of *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture*, by describing how integral religion was to the development of American commercial culture. In Moore's account, the religious marketplace in America, created in part by the First Amendment, meant that the Protestant denominations became key participants in the twin process of commodification democratization which came to define the parameters of modern culture there. Not only were commercial practices used in the service of religion but religion was deployed on behalf of business. Thus we should not be surprised to find that the development of a commercial film industry in the United States was inflected by this symbiosis (see Chapter Two). Moore's point though, is that the commodification of

culture and religion so central to the concerns of scholars like Hoover is nothing new. Rather, it is something peculiarly American.

Recent Developments in the Evolving Paradigm

The 'stuff' produced and consumed by Protestants is of particular interest to art historian David Morgan (1998, 1999). Concerned largely with popular religious images and material artefacts as components of a 'visual piety', something he defines as 'the set of practices, attitudes, and ideas invested in images that structure the experience of the sacred' (1998: 2-3), Morgan's work has done much to open up the historical dimension of the evolving paradigm of media, religion, and culture. Deploying a social constructivist perspective (e.g. Berger and Luckmann, 1967) within his historical approach, he pays special attention to the unfashionable, quotidian, and often mass-produced religious images that have been almost totally ignored within the mainstream of Media and Cultural studies. Morgan alerts us to the fact that these visual materials are not just by-product of the religious worldview, but, in fact, constitutive of it *and* the social identities thus articulated. Sensitive, moreover, to issues of race, class, gender and sexuality, without reducing his historical analysis to these factors, Morgan highlights not only the rich variety of meanings believers have generated through the use of apparently 'kitsch' images such as Warner Sallman's famous *Head of Christ*, but also their importance as repositories of human memory.

Morgan's work is an indication that the potential inherent to the evolving paradigm is beginning to be fulfilled, and that the concerns identified above in discussing *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* with regard to history and power relations are now starting to be addressed. Of particular interest here though, is Morgan's (1999) challenge to assumptions about the iconoclasm associated with Protestantism in tracing the emergence of a distinctively Protestant iconography across America from the early nineteenth-century onward. Somewhat like Moore (1994), Morgan argues that far from being an instrument of secularization, the

emergence of a mass culture based upon the ready availability of printed materials spurred efforts to evangelize America. Organizations such as the American Tract Society, he contends, were so closely involved in shaping the new print culture that they had a significant impact upon the process of national development. Over time, moreover, the didactic illustrated tract came to be replaced by more sentimental devotional images, which were intended to influence and persuade children and others deemed in need of moral uplift. Such a shift anticipated many of the ideas and techniques which were just starting to be deployed in commercial advertising and deepened the symbiosis between religion, entertainment, and commerce which, in many respects, defines the national culture of the United States.

Further development with regard to the significance of religion within American culture is to be found in a recently published compilation of essays edited by Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (2000). Bringing together a diverse range of material of varying quality and vintage, Forbes and Mahan's book is in many respects too eclectic to fully engage with the issues raised by Hoover and Lundby's (1996) volume. Thus while one can indeed 'learn more about widespread perceptions of religion, and the role religion plays in the everyday lives of people' (Forbes, 2000: 2) through the study of popular culture, the wide variety of concerns voiced in Forbes and Mahan's collection functions better as an useful introduction to the field than a sustained development of it.

Religion and Popular Culture is organized around four different ways of thinking about the interrelation between the popular culture and religion. In the first of these, 'Religion in Popular Culture', we find examinations the ways in which American popular culture is shot through with references to religion. Thus, Mark Hulsether (2000: 77) discusses Madonna, 'as one among many high-profile stars...who articulate strong religious themes in their work', in relation to black and feminist liberation theologies. The second reverses the flow to look at 'Popular Culture in Religion'; the way in which organized religion has been inflected and indeed transformed by elements of the host culture. Here, Stewart Hoover (2000)

offers a challenging meditation on the 'megachurch' at Willow Creek as a market-driven but still authentic expression of religion within a cultural context defined by the media-driven process of commodification. The third set of essays, which discuss 'Popular Culture as Religion', highlight the parallels between religion and popular culture as sets of practices both oriented toward the generation of meaning. It is here that the problem of defining what we mean by 'religion' is most apparent, and includes a revision of Michael Jindra's (1994) essay on *Star Trek*. Jindra highlights the way the programme is in some respects akin to a 'civil religion', in as much as it takes the American myth of westward expansion and projects it into the future. He argues that at a time when organized religion has lost much of its social authority, a cultural phenomenon such as *Star Trek* can be seen as having taken on, for its fans at least, some of the more serious functions associated with religion. Indeed, the inclusion of a piece by David Chidester (1996) indicates a tension between academic accounts of 'Religion' and the way such terminology is invoked within American popular culture. What is at stake in defining something as religious?

This question is a useful prelude to the fourth and final section of Forbes and Mahan's volume which looks at 'Religion and Popular Culture in Dialogue'. As we have seen, this dialogue usually takes the form of a faith perspective being applied to elements of 'secular' culture. Thus the book includes a chapter from Jewett (1993) and a piece by Christian feminist Meredith Underwood (2000) on the status of gender relations in cyberspace. However, there is an interesting reversal of this in Anthony Pinn's (2000) critical discussion of African-American theology in the light of insights gained from blues and rap music.

Even from this brief survey of way Forbes and Mahan's book, it is possible to recognize that the project of rethinking relations between religion and contemporary media culture is becoming increasingly sensitive to issues of race and gender. Furthermore, the editors recognize that the categories they use to organize their

book are not exclusive (Forbes, 2000: 17). There is, however, very little history.¹³ This, again, leads to the context within which these various interchanges between religion and popular culture take place being taken for granted: that is, the process of American nationhood. To be fair, Forbes (2000: 11) does engage briefly with Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence's notion of an 'American Monomyth'. Drawing on the ideas of Joseph Campbell (1956), Jewett and Lawrence summarize the distinctive American variant on the heroic monomyth thus:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil: normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task: aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisaical condition: the superhero then recedes into obscurity. (Quoted in Forbes, 2000:11).

Examples would include westerns such as *Shane* and comic book heroes like *Superman*. Moreover, Jewett and Lawrence see this monomyth as secular 'replacements for the Christ figure, whose credibility was eroded by scientific rationalism' and the superhuman qualities of these heroes 'reflect a hope of divine, redemptive powers that science has never eradicated from the popular mind' (quoted in Forbes, 2000: 11). That Christ has been replaced is a debatable claim. Yet, although Jewett and Lawrence's description of the American monomyth does indicate the preponderance of redemptive narratives abroad in the national culture, one might still wonder why such stories hold so much power in America.

The concluding essay by Jeffrey Mahan (2000: 292) suggests that there are two basic issues addressed by the book: 'whether American pop culture has a religious face', and the ways in which religion 'developed and adapted in the midst of a consumer culture'. Yet, viewed from the other side of the Atlantic, one might also ask, why is being American so bound up with the religious worldview? What historical processes have helped to sustain this symbiosis between nation and religion? Thus, one notes also that Forbes and Mahan include no discussion of the

¹³ The one real exception to this in Forbes and Mahan's volume is Jane Naomi Iwamura's (2000) account of 'The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture'.

cinema beyond reproducing Jewett's (1993) application of Pauline theology to Clint Eastwood's *Pale Rider*.

That a re-examination of film history might have much to offer the 'evolving paradigm' is indicated by some of the preliminary findings of work on the *Symbolism, Media and the Lifecourse* project directed by Stewart Hoover. In a paper entitled, *Religion, Media and the Cultural Center of Gravity*, Hoover (1998b) ventures to offer three observations as to the "effects" of the media on religion'.

The first is the aforesaid 'flattening' of religious symbols within the broader universe of symbols available in the media. Commenting on generational differences with regard to the authority of traditional religious symbols, Hoover cites the example of Sinead O'Connor tearing up a photograph of Pope John Paul II on television. In contrast with audience acceptance of Madonna's sexually suggestive use of the crucifix, the controversy prompted by O'Connor's actions is interpreted by Hoover as an indication that while 'the cross, as an object of history and tradition, had lost much of its power to shock and convict,' the Pope's iconic media presence led him to be understood 'in the here and now' as 'a real human being'. The second type of effect Hoover describes is the "agenda setting" function of the media...not so much telling us "what to think" as "what to think about". As he puts it, if 'the symbolic marketplace of the media sphere is coming to be the place where religious meanings are made, then the raw material of those meanings will necessarily be a narrower set of resources than all possible ones'. Indeed, in a media environment more or less given over to commercial imperatives, economic considerations will inevitably impact on both the content and form of media product. This relates to the third effect: 'that certain narratives, symbols and stories come to be established at the expense of others'. Some myths or 'symbolic constructions' are made to appear 'natural' while others are denied. Narratives are crucially important in identity formation and determining the course of human action. Hence, whether articulating religious beliefs, national sentiment, or any other form of cultural identity, there is considerable social power bound up in the circulation and exchange of stories.

Although Hoover does not reference the cinema, the point to be made here is that all three of these 'effects' have been shaped, in the American context and beyond, by the advent of motion pictures. That the movies impacted upon the religious environment of America is an argument running throughout this study. But here one might observe, for example, that in so far as it demands an investment of emotions in personalities rather than abstract principles or values, the star system developed by Hollywood bears more than a passing resemblance to a pantheon of gods or saints. The Pope's status as a media 'star' reflects, perhaps, the extent to which the whole world has come to share in the Hollywood cult of personality. Similarly, the commercial principles upon which the American movie industry was founded have not only determined what stories ended up on the screen, but led also to the development of a particular style of narrative film (Bordwell *et al*, 1985); a style whose influence has extended throughout twentieth century popular culture. In short, the movies were integral to the emergence of a twentieth-century culture based in consumption (e.g. May, 1983). For that reason as much as any other their history demands to be re-assessed from within the 'evolving paradigm' of scholarship into media, religion, and culture. This study is based upon the observation that work of this sort is almost entirely non-existent.

Conclusion

The aim of this opening chapter has been the location of this thesis in relation to an emerging scholarship which addresses media, religion, and culture 'as an interrelated web within society'. As a strategic exercise, the chapter has sought to outline the key concerns of this 'evolving paradigm' and to indicate the rich potential of this growing body of theory and research for those who wish to gain a better understanding of contemporary culture and society, especially in the American context. However, a review of this still developing field has highlighted certain lacunae within it; shortcomings which this research would address.

The most significant of these is the lack of any fully realized historical work which might deepen our understanding of those forces and developments which have shaped the contemporary situation which will, no doubt, remain the primary focus of this area of study. Hence, this thesis is based on the premise that sustained examination of the past is a pre-requisite for developing a considered and worthwhile vantage on the present.

Related to the perceived lack of historical perspective within the 'evolving paradigm' is the under-examination of power, understood here as both a determining force and a resource to be struggled over. The political and economic contexts, shaping media, religion, and culture, especially issues of nationhood, appear taken for granted at times; as inevitable rather than the result of historically contingent desires, tensions, conflicts, and settlements. As it is argued throughout this thesis, the particular national context of the US makes it impossible to ignore the extent to which struggles over issues like education, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and, of course, race, as well as religion, were integral to the historical development of American culture and the modern mass media. Such themes are only starting to be addressed within the literature on media, religion, and culture.

The third main gap in the scholarship on media, religion, and culture is the lack of serious attention afforded the medium of motion pictures. Whilst the movies are still important within contemporary culture, they carry an even greater significance in historical terms, especially in terms of enacting a broad shift away from print media towards televisual communication. Despite a perceived lack of interest in the medium from within the scholarly paradigm outlined above, therefore, the movies readily suggest themselves as appropriate subject matter via which one might develop a more historicized understanding of relations between media, religion, and culture. Indeed, the point is underscored by observing the more or less self-evident importance of both religion and Hollywood in shaping popular conceptions of American nationhood.

As the following chapter will demonstrate, however, the history of the relationship between religion and film within the broader context of American culture has received only sporadic attention, be it from the mainstream of film studies or from the more specialized scholarship on film and religion. While this might be a little disappointing, in the light of the preceding discussion, it also represents unexploited potential. The rest of this study is a response to the opportunities therein.

CHAPTER TWO

Approaching Religion and Film in American Culture

Introduction

In surveying the growing body of research into media, religion, and culture, Chapter One identified three main areas of concern the rest of this study would seek to address. The first was the somewhat ahistorical concern with the cultural forms of the present which characterizes the 'evolving paradigm' overall. The second was an inadequate interrogation of how power relations inform the interrelationship between religion, media, and culture. Third was the lack of serious attention afforded within the field towards cinema. Whilst the study as a whole should be understood as a positive contribution to an emerging body of work with much to offer, this chapter develops the critical perspective outlined above by examining the condition of existing writing on religion and film.

As Chapter Three will elaborate, the discourse of religion has been integral to the process of nation building in America. From its 'great awakenings' and revival meetings, through to its mythologies, political rhetoric, and even comedy, religious stories, ideas, and imagery have been key resources from which the people of America have not just made sense of their personal and collective experiences but constructed a civilization. This fact is largely ignored within the now extensive writing on the American cinema; largely but not totally. The first section of this chapter examines this state of affairs while drawing out some of the observations

and insights concerning the relationship between religion and cinema within American culture scattered across the field of film studies. Whilst some useful and suggestive material does exist with regard to issues such as censorship for example, and the representation of religious minorities, discussion within the mainstream of film studies has been limited by a lack of interest in the theoretical issues raised by the distinctive character of American religion.

This is followed by a survey of writing which has addressed the movies from perspectives based in theology and religious studies. As with most of the early discussion of media and religion, interest in film and religion has tended to come from within the Christian faith community. Rooted in the traditions of theology and hermeneutics, and deploying methods adapted from the text-based study of literature, 'religious film-analysis' (after Nolan, 1998) has made little impression on non-believers. Thus, although this body of work does at least take religious concerns seriously, its ahistorical and rather speculative character has, until quite recently, offered little to those who seek an understanding of the medium in its cultural or societal context. There are signs that things are changing, however, with the emergence of approaches to film derived from religious and cultural studies rather than theology. Whether this shift in emphasis will prompt more interest within the mainstream of film studies is open to question. Nevertheless, it is argued that development of this sort has the potential to make the study of film an important rather than peripheral component of scholarship into media, religion, and culture. What is needed though, is a greater sense of the medium's historical development.

Film Studies and Religion

To some extent, the lack of interest as regards the cinema from within the 'evolving paradigm' of research into religion, media, and culture merely reflects the curious and slightly absurd disjunction between film studies as an academic discipline in its own right and contemporary scholarship into communications and media. For all the

obvious overlapping between these two areas of endeavour, acknowledgement of shared interests and concerns is by no means as common as it might be. Whilst the importance of film as a medium has diminished somewhat since the advent of television around the middle of the twentieth century, movies are still integral to the contemporary media environment. Yet one finds little discussion of film scholarship in mainstream media and cultural studies journals. This is something which probably reflects the concern with present and emerging manifestations of the communications revolution which characterize the field overall. At the same time, film-as-text based work still 'provides film studies with much of its distinctive focus' (Hill, 1998: xix). Hence, despite the emergence, since the 1970s, of a positivist film historiography which has provided the empirical base for an enriched and more complicated understanding of the medium's historical development (e.g. Balio, 1985 [first edition 1976]; Allen and Gomery, 1985; Bordwell *et al*, 1985; Staiger, 1992a), and the adoption of culturalist approaches which seek to relate films to the wider social context (e.g. Dyer, 1979, 1987; Uricchio and Pearson, 1993), the engagement with social theory which underpins the mainstream of media research is little more than a background influence upon film studies, and vice versa. Thus, Andrew Tudor (1998: 193-94) notes that 'a sustained sociology of film is still something of a pipe-dream', despite the suitability of sociology as an 'intellectual resource' to a 'multidisciplinary understanding of twentieth-century culture, a culture within which film itself played a historically crucial formative role'.

That there are possibilities being spurned here is recognized by Philip Schlesinger (2000), who describes how contemporary analyses of 'national cinema', a concept invariably defined in opposition to Hollywood (i.e. American) cinema, rarely make explicit reference to the sociological thinking which furnishes the background framework of ideas within which the debates surrounding nationhood take place. Likewise, film scholarship hardly figures within sociological analyses of identity formation at the national level. Schlesinger (2000: 29) comments that these 'two lines of inquiry...ought not only to converge but also to be thoroughly integrated as

part of a broad programme of work on nation and culture in the age of so-called globalization'. Whilst such concerns might appear to be beyond the scope of research into media, religion, and culture, the 'relevance of the American case' within the 'evolving paradigm' (Hoover, 1996) suggests otherwise. Hollywood is the 'national cinema' *par excellence*. As a medium, an art form, a social practice, and an industry, the cinema helped to shape and define American society in the twentieth century (e.g. Sklar, 1975; Jowett, 1976). At the same time, and contrary to many expectations perhaps, many Americans have continued to embrace religious ideas and practices which would appear to have been at odds with the scientific rationalism guiding the world's most modern and powerful economy. In these circumstances, positing a relationship between film and religion might represent an appropriate starting point from which to enquire into the nature of American culture. Because that possibility remains to be fully explored, it is a basic aim of this thesis to demonstrate that the relationship between religion and film within the national culture of the United States, is not merely historically interesting, but also important sociologically.

As already been suggested, the mainstream of film studies, like media studies as a whole, is characterized by a 'blindspot' with regard to religion. This was not always the case, as the writings of such seminal figures as André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer testify. Whether prompted by faith, in Bazin's (1967) case a Catholicism heavily influenced by the radical visionary Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, or with the Marxist Kracauer (1960), merely articulated in such religious terms as 'the redemption of physical reality', the work of these pioneers reveals an overriding concern with the moral and ontological implications of cinema. With the emergence of film studies as an academic pursuit during the late sixties, however, considerations of this kind all but disappeared from the mainstream of film scholarship. The advent of a broadly counter-cultural materialist theoretical orthodoxy, a development Stephen Heath (1976: 11) describes as 'the encounter of Marxism and psychoanalysis on the terrain of semiotics', created a scholarly

environment hostile to the serious treatment of religion. The question of religion and its relationship with the cinema was all but ignored. Beyond some discussion of Hollywood films, particularly Westerns, in terms of 'myth' (e.g. Cawelti, 1971; Wright, 1975) based in an appropriation of the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963, 1969), interest in such aspects of the medium has been sporadic, being largely confined to the margins of the field. With just a few exceptions, the issue of religion has barely figured in the most important and influential scholarly examinations of American movies and the industry that makes them, though there are some recent indications that this may slowly be changing.

As one might expect, some acknowledgement of religious themes and influences can be found (despite, on occasion, some poor indexing) in writings devoted to key directors such as D.W. Griffith (Simmon, 1993), Cecil B. DeMille (Higashi, 1994), John Ford (Sinclair, 1979; Gallagher, 1986), and King Vidor (Durgnat and Simmon, 1988). Even leaving aside Griffith for the time being, some of this work carries significant implications for work on media, religion, and culture. Worth special attention here is Sumiko Higashi's (1994) invocation of Edward Said's (1985) seminal *Orientalism* in his discussion of the silent films of Cecil B. DeMille and that director's characteristic, and often religiously sanctioned, deployment of the spectacular. DeMille's films, Higashi (1994: 203) argues, demonstrate how 'fabricating spectacle became a form of commodity fetishism involving both producer and spectator in a process of reification'. DeMille's films both mapped and influenced the transformation of the dominant 'genteel middle-class culture' from which the director had emerged into a culture organized around the principle of consumption. On this basis, Higashi (1994: 203) concludes that 'the increasing dominance of representation in twentieth century economic, political, and cultural life attests to DeMille's enduring legacy as an architect of modern consumption'.

In a slightly different vein, Neal Gabler's (1988) *An Empire of Their Own* is a provocative and highly readable account of Hollywood history which focuses on the role of the immigrant Jewish studio moguls. Despite an anecdotal rather than

academic style, Gabler's (1988: 7) argument, that in 'creating their idealized America on the screen, the Jews [of Hollywood] reinvented the country in the image of their fiction', is a compelling one.¹ Given their intense desire for assimilation, the moguls' Jewishness might be seen in terms of ethnic identity more than those of religious belief. Nevertheless, the suggestion is there that religion, however understood and/or exploited, was an important influence on decisions which shaped the American movie industry. This supposition is lent credence by many of the films themselves. This is most obvious in that most derided of genres, the Hollywood religious spectacular or 'Biblical epic', to adopt a convenient, though not entirely accurate label.²

The Biblical Epic

In spite of the genre's huge box-office success during the 1950's,³ and a tradition which can be traced back to the very earliest days of the American film industry (Campbell and Pitts, 1981; Herx, 1988), hardly any scholarly attention has been afforded Hollywood's religious epics: a fact which would appear to confirm the existence of the previously discussed 'blindspot' with regard to religion which characterizes film and media studies. Until fairly recently, discussions of the Biblical epic were largely confined to a few surveys, often addressed to a general readership, which did little more than list and describe films, from Hollywood and beyond, whose subject matter is more or less explicitly religious (Butler, 1969; Campbell and Pitts 1981; Pavelin, 1990; Kinnard and Davis, 1994). Indeed, even with the emergence of

1 See also *Hollywoodism: Jews, Movies and the American Dream*, a documentary based on Gabler's book, directed by Simcha Jacobovici (1997).

2 Following the lead set by Babington and Evans, 'the term "Hollywood Biblical Epic" is taken to cover three sub-types of film: the Old Testament Epic; the Christ film; and the Roman/Christian Epic (of the beginnings of post-Christ Christianity). Recognising the term lacks precision, particularly in relation to the third category, they nevertheless note that 'a satisfactory alternative is hard to find' (1993: 4).

3 Babington and Evans (1993: 5-6) demonstrate the astonishing popularity of the genre in the Fifties by pointing out that *Ben Hur* (d. Wyler, 1959), *The Ten Commandments* (d. DeMille, 1956), and *The Robe* (d. Koster 1953) were, respectively, the first, second, and fourth biggest box-office draws in the decade 1951-60. Similarly Forshey (1992: 1) points out that, according to *Variety*, religious spectaculars had topped the annual list of box-office during the Fifties, six years out of ten.

some scholarly analyses of the place and role of these pictures in American culture, their impact on film studies has been minimal.

The first serious book-length study of the American Biblical epic, Gerald E. Forshey's (1992) *American Religious and Biblical Spectaculars*, is perhaps a little under-developed. Its most obvious flaw is a rather cursory treatment of the silent era, a time in which the bases of the Hollywood system were established (Bordwell *et al*, 1985). In a brief introductory survey, Forshey (1992: 4) notes that 'religious spectaculars grew out of two popular artistic traditions – the spectacular stage melodramas and the popular quasi-religious novels of the nineteenth century'. He also highlights Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), and that picture's then state of the art demonstration of cinema's capacity for spectacle, as important influences on the religious film (1992: 4). These roots are left largely unexamined, however. So although he describes the genre as 'a staple of the film industry' (1992: 4), Forshey is content to ignore silent examples of it, discussing the significance of the biblical epic within the historical development of the American motion picture industry only from the 1930s onwards. Yet, despite this and other problems, not least a rather abstract conception of the American public for these films, Forshey's study is a success in so far as it highlights the importance of the religious epic within the national culture.

Examining popular examples of these spectaculars within a matrix of 'political, religious, and film history' (1992: 11), Forshey (1992: 1) suggests that within 'these films, the persistent tensions in American culture are fashioned into popular art. They reveal a great deal about American values'. In particular, Forshey (1992: 1-3) highlights three persistent themes in the Biblical epic: first, the problematic relationship between a naturalistic or scientific worldview and religion; second, the close identification of the American nation with the notion of the 'good' society based upon 'eternal principles'; third, the basis of ethical behaviour in a pluralistic society, especially with regard to 'sex, violence, and success'. These are big issues, and fundamental to the life of the nation. Hence, he argues that 'although

Biblical or religious spectaculars...are only tangentially interested in religion per se', they need, nonetheless, to be understood as 'serious treatments of problems in the culture' (1992: 184). Far from being "mere entertainment", Forshey (1992: 191) concludes that prior to the upheavals of the sixties at least (civil rights, feminism, Vietnam, etc.) Biblical epics 'filled the needs of Americans as...social changes altered the perceptions of the nature of reality, and legitimacy of national policy, and the basis of personal and social morality'.

How far one can properly distinguish between religion and the national culture is debatable, and an issue at the heart of this thesis. The question of defining 'religion' and/or the 'religious' is one that Forshey does not address. Nor does he fully acknowledge the absurdities of the genre. Still, by taking the religious epic seriously, Forshey supports the view that as with many aspects of American culture, religious considerations have been integral to the industry's growth and development, and that Hollywood has always been sensitive to shifts and changes in the nation's religious economy.

In Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans' (1993) *Biblical Epics*, the roots of the genre in the particular conditions of American religion are made much more explicit. Following Gilles Deleuze (1986: 148-51), these British scholars begin their study by arguing for a recognition of 'the absolutely pivotal place of the Biblical History film in the American cinema' (Babington and Evans, 1993: 11). Whilst, Deleuze (1986: 149-51) admits that 'it is easy to make fun of Hollywood's historical conceptions', he writes that they are nonetheless important because they furnish 'a strong and coherent conception of universal history' which, among other things serves as a vantage, a source of 'ethical judgement', on the condition of American civilization. This is of acute relevance to the study at hand. As Chapter Three will discuss in some detail, the provision of 'an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality' is basic to Robert Bellah's (1967) conception of an 'American civil religion'. How far Bellah's ideas are applicable to the movies is a question this thesis seeks to answer. Thus despite

Babington and Evans' (1993: 13) fairly orthodox theoretical position with regard to American religion, that it is both more popular and less authentically 'religious' than that found in Europe, their 'interest..in the social and intellectual functions of religion' (1993: 22) does lead them to at least take the religious aspects of the Biblical epic seriously. This is a strategy this study applauds and hopes to develop. Unlike writers such as Michael Wood (1975) and Steve Neale (1980) who, like Forshey (1992) whom they do not cite, view the explicitly religious content of these epics as a mere pretext for the expression of other more 'secular' concerns, Babington and Evans (1993: 12) 'insist on not treating the film's religious content simply as a screen for other preoccupations, real though these may be'. They argue that 'it is not a case of either/or, text or subtext; the Biblical Epic is both. Comprehensive analysis necessitates consideration of the originating site of its most obvious interests, the unique context of American religion'.

Because such a position does not depend on tracing the origins of religion through any 'persuasive but ultimately unproveable hypotheses' (1993: 22), be it, for example, Marxist, feminist, or psychoanalytic, it represents a usefully 'open' starting point from which one might examine the broader cultural relationship between religion and the cinema in America. At the same time though, it would appear to have hampered Babington and Evans in so far as their study lacks for a strong central thesis. For instance, they display little interest in developing the theoretical implications of the genre's centrality within the industry and its relationship to the wider culture of America and the nation's religious economy.

Some exploration of this area has been done by Richard Maltby (1990). In an article on DeMille's *King of Kings* (1927), Maltby locates the production of the film within a deteriorating relationship between a film industry desperate for respectability and an increasingly riven Protestant elite. In particular, Maltby highlights the influence on the film of Bruce Barton, a liberal Protestant advertising executive, who had in 1925 written the best-selling *The Man Nobody Knows: A Discovery of Jesus Christ*. At a time of growing consumerism and materialism somewhat at odds with

traditional Puritan ideals, Barton's book served to legitimate this process by describing Jesus as a kind of tough, pioneering, visionary businessman. Maltby argues that although the film developed this project, becoming in the process a substantial box-office success, it did little to repair relations between the industry and the liberal Protestant establishment. Thus it failed to diffuse the pressure to censor the movies which would eventually lead to the Catholic sanctioned imposition of the Production code in 1934 (see further discussion below).

While Maltby's piece is criticized by them (Babington and Evans, 1993: 22-24) for neglecting the film itself, it does prompt one to suggest that Babington and Evans, whose discussion is largely based upon lengthy textual analyses of particular examples of the genre focused in the main on the representation of sex and gender, might themselves have been a little bolder in theorizing the social significance of these movies. Still, they do make many useful observations indicating the importance of the religious spectacular within the industry. Despite the critical derision later heaped upon them, something which Babington and Evans recognize as having hampered scholarship in this area, Biblical epics were usually regarded as prestige productions by the studios, with resources being diverted to them (1993: 5). For instance, the films were often among the first to benefit from technical innovations. Moreover, Biblical epics were, as Forshey (1992) also indicates, key in establishing representational norms with regard to issues such as sex and gender. As important (and profitable) as the genre was, though, Biblical blockbusters were merely the most obvious manifestation of the American film industry's widespread appropriation of religious stories, ideas, and iconography.

Hollywood as 'Melting Pot': Issues of Ethnicity and Race

Scholarly explorations of this broader tendency to incorporate religious elements and express religious concerns in American movies are rare in film studies, and tend, on those rare occasions when the question arises, to revolve around issues of representation which often conflate religious identities with ethnicity. They can,

however, be seen as suggestive of the cinema's sociological importance; as an arena in which the tensions of religious pluralism could play themselves out in the service of the nation.

Patricia Erens (1984), Lester D. Friedman (1987), and Michael Rogin (1996) all concern themselves with depictions of the Jew in American film. Erens' main aim is to document the representation of Jewish characters in American films between 1903 and 1983, i.e. what films were actually made, the role of Jewish characters within the narratives, etc. In addition, however, she does analyze the wider social significance of changes in these depictions over time. Noting 'the large numbers of Jews who have played an active role in the American film industry' (1984: 22), Erens indicates the ways in which movies reflected the gradual, sometimes difficult, and, in the end, incomplete assimilation of Jewish immigrants and their offspring into American society. Erens (1984: 32) writes of the formative years of the silent era, for example, that from 1909 onward, and despite stereotypical characterizations,

Jewish films reflect contemporary life and social problems arising from the American experience. Earning a living, educating children, co-existing with foreign neighbours were all a part of ghetto life. The narratives juxtapose old moral and religious values, which have held Jews together for two thousand years, with the modern customs and attitudes held by the gentile majority.

Many of these pictures were made specifically for a Jewish audience. Indeed, a Yiddish cinema distinct from Hollywood flourished in America until the outbreak of World War II, with some Yiddish pictures being produced right into the sixties (1984: 164). This did not stop the movies serving the process of assimilation, however, something indicated by the success of *Ben-Hur* (directed for MGM by Fred Niblo) in 1926. Despite their obvious relevance, Erens' book ignores the Biblical epics in the main. She does nonetheless comment that in contrast with the stereotypes of the ghetto picture, the pawnbroker, the scheming merchant, the stern patriarch, etc., 'millions of Americans now enjoyed a unique experience, seeing a handsome, athletic Jewish character as the hero of Silent Cinema's greatest blockbuster' (1984: 100). *Ben-Hur* might be a rather exceptional instance of the assimilationist tendency

within Hollywood cinema. Erens (1984: 73) herself indicates that while anti-semitism is rare in American cinema, 'the pervasive image of the Jew as an Outsider and Victim' persisted throughout the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the possibility that the medium of film offered Jews a place in the mainstream of American culture should not be dismissed lightly.

Like Erens, Friedman's (1987) survey also traces changing representations of Jewishness in American film. Recognizing that 'America became conscious of its films and its Jews almost simultaneously' (1987: 9), however, he acknowledges that 'unlike films about other American minorities, movies with Jews were often scrutinized by one segment of that minority group with the power to decide how the entire group would be presented to society as a whole'; that is, the producers. Thus although Friedman's is a largely untheorized examination of the relationship between representation and the place of Jews in American society, he notes that not only does 'a discussion of Jewish-American films and characters...necessarily become an exploration of Jewish historical and cultural problems in America' it also involves examining 'the ways in which the movies attempt to explain, and, ultimately, to solve them' (1987: 10). What Friedman appears to suggest is that the influence within the industry of Jews such as Sam Goldwyn, Louis B. Mayer, David Selznick, etc., gave the movies special potential, as long as they remained profitable, to smooth the process of assimilation. Indeed, Friedman (1987: 5) prefaces his study by citing Jill Robinson's provocative anticipation of the argument advanced by Neal Gabler (1988): 'Hollywood - the American Dream - is a Jewish idea. In a sense, it's a Jewish revenge on America. It combines the Puritan ethic...with baroque magnificence. The happy ending was the invention of Russian Jews, designed to drive Americans crazy'. Accurate or not, such an assertion raises a bigger question: to what extent did concerns raised by migration and rooted, ultimately, in religious and/or racial conflict, affect what appeared on the screen?

Treating Jewishness in terms of ethnicity and race rather than religion, Michael Rogin (1996) brings a psychoanalytic edge to his history of the use of

'blackface', i.e. the imitation of blacks through the use of make-up (usually burnt cork), by Jewish screen performers, most famously Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor, in the first half of the twentieth century. Although Jewish immigrants had many experiences in common with blacks, not least the Old World association of Jews with spiritual darkness by Christians who believed their own souls had been 'washed white' by Jesus (Rogin, 1996: 20-21), Rogin argues that their use of blackface helped to gloss over ethnic differences among white Americans, by defining 'Americanness' in opposition to 'blackness'. Prompted in the first instance by the historic importance of Al Jolson's 'blackened-up' performance in *The Jazz Singer* (1927, d. Alan Crosland), the first movie to use synchronized sound, Rogin probes the deeper cultural politics of burnt cork.⁴

Rogin (1996: 5) describes blackface minstrelsy, 'the first and most popular form of mass culture in the nineteenth-century United States', as a form of 'racial cross-dressing' (1996: 4 *et passim*). This echoes Frederick Jackson Turner's famous suggestion, made in 1893, that American national identity was forged in the settlers' (self-)transformative encounters with the native Americans and wilderness at the 'frontier'. Just as 'slavery forced Africans to perform for whites', so minstrelsy appropriated those elements of blackness that whites desired, such as 'expressive power and supposed emotional freedom', at the same time as making them 'safe for white attraction' (1996: 22). Explaining the significance behind the loss of whiteness in the blackface performance in terms of contemporary cultural theory, Rogin (1996: 51) cites Stephen Greenblatt: "Imagined self-loss conceals its opposite: ruthless displacement and absorption of the other". Thus, for Rogin (1996: 18), the use of burnt cork by Jewish performers 'displays the peculiar feature of American nationalism, a popular expression that emerged (by way of the frontier myth on the one hand, blackface minstrelsy on the other) not to free oppressed folk but to

⁴ In fact, Rogin (1996: 73) argues that 'four race movies—*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Birth of a Nation*, *The Jazz Singer*, and *Gone With the Wind*—provide the scaffolding for American film history.' Rogin's (1987) analysis of *The Birth of a Nation*, is discussed further in Part II's case study of Griffith's film.

constitute national identity out of their subjugation'. He concludes that 'blackface made visible the deep structure of American history, in which the black role must serve the white' (1996: 251).

By attending to what is now a largely ignored aspect of twentieth century American popular culture, Rogin's history serves to emphasize the degree to which questions of race and ethnicity have shaped US national identity. Although religion is no more than a background influence within his study, the lesson contained there for scholars of religion, media, and culture in the American context is an important one: race is not a side-issue. If, as the evidence gathered in this review suggests for instance, media, religion, and culture do indeed now need to 'be thought of as an interrelated web within society' (Hoover and Lundby, 1996: 3), any historical understanding of this interrelation must take the unique and tragic character of race relations in the United States into full account. Social divisions between black and white pervade American culture in much the same way that religion does. So much so, that one might easily confuse one with the other. With regard to historicizing the 'evolving paradigm', therefore, the 'obvious' racism of *The Birth of a Nation* makes that movie an ideal choice from which to develop a discussion of film, religion, and US national identity.

Of course, Rogin's thesis does to some extent elide the complexity of race problems in US society; rather like Hollywood's occasional attempts to deal with them. Skin colour is not the only issue, although it is certainly the most pernicious. Take, for example, the second coming of the Ku Klux Klan. Whilst the resurgence of the Klan in the late teens and early twenties emanated from the South, and is widely believed to have been prompted by the release of *The Birth of a Nation*, the objects of their ire were not only black. Admitting only native-born white Protestants as members, the Klan was merely the most extreme manifestation of a widespread and xenophobic distrust of immigrants, Catholics, and Jews which would lead to the federal regulation of immigration during the 1920s, and the imposition of a quota system biased against southern and eastern Europeans. Outwith the South, and

away from the metropolitan centres of the Northeast, the Klan's attentions were largely directed towards Catholics. This was nothing new. In a country whose national mythology and, if Max Weber is to be believed, economy are so closely associated with Protestantism (see Chapter Three), the place of the church of Rome was always likely to be somewhat problematic. Suspicion, moreover, was exacerbated by the close association of American Catholicism with the Irish, whose numbers grew rapidly following the large-scale immigration which took place in the 1840s. Protestant antagonism towards them found expression in such phenomena as the temperance movements which culminated with Prohibition in 1919, and sporadic Anti-Catholic riots. How, then, did Catholics fare in the Hollywood melting pot?

Catholicism, Censorship, and the American Film Industry

In contrast somewhat with the fairly extensive treatment of Hollywood and the Jews, the relationship between Catholicism and the American film industry has been somewhat neglected aside from the key issue of censorship (see below). In that respect, Lester and Barbara Keyser's (1984) *Hollywood and the Catholic Church*, an examination of how American pictures have portrayed Roman Catholicism is quite unusual. Like Erens' (1984) and Friedman's (1987) surveys of how Jews were represented on the screen though, the Keyzers are largely content merely to document the changes in the portrayals of Catholics, rather than use those changes as the basis for a deeper analysis and theorization of the interrelationship between Hollywood and the changes experienced by Catholics and their institutions in twentieth century America. How far, for instance, might the sacramental nature of Catholicism have influenced the mythological America articulated in the work of directors from Catholic backgrounds such as John Ford, Frank Capra, and Leo McCarey? The visual nature of the medium is well suited to Catholic sensibilities (Shafer, 1991). Thus, as with the Jews, another group excluded from some aspects of the American mainstream, the emergence of the cinema might be seen as having

afforded Catholics an opportunity to slowly re-present America as a nation to which they too belonged.

In describing images of Catholicism in crime movies, for example, the *Keysers* (1984: 41-92) move from highlighting the immigrant Catholic milieu portrayed in such popular and, at the time, notorious gangster pictures like *Little Caesar* (1930, d. Mervyn LeRoy), *Public Enemy* (1931, d. William Wellman), and *Scarface* (1932, d. Howard Hawks), through to a recognition of the pivotal role of Catholic priests in later films such as *Angels With Dirty Faces* (1938, d. Michael Curtiz) and *Boys Town*, (1938, d. Norman Taurog) dealing with the problems of crime and juvenile delinquency. By the time of Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* (1954), a screen priest, Father Barry (played by Karl Malden), was extolling the virtues of union-bashing and informers in a strong and not entirely coincidental echo of McCarthyism. Such observations are profoundly suggestive of a link between Hollywood and the gradual incorporation of Catholics within the mainstream of American national life which culminated with the election of John F. Kennedy as the first Catholic to the Presidency as President in 1960. Such possibilities, however, remain to be fully explored.

The most thoroughly documented aspect of the relationship between Catholicism and Hollywood is the Church's part in bringing about censorship of the movies. Based in extensive archival research, books by Gregory D. Black (1994) and Frank Walsh (1996) trace the influence of the church on the development of the film industry. These histories examine how from the First World War onwards, clerics, lay Catholics, and eventually the church itself launching the Legion of Decency, worked to draw up and impose a production code on the industry, thereby curbing what these guardians of morality saw as the excessive sex and violence of the movies. Under the auspices of Will Hays, a Presbyterian, and president of the industry's trade association, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), and based upon a code drawn up by Jesuit priest Daniel Lord with the help of Martin Quigley, the lay Catholic proprietor of the *Motion Picture Herald*, the

leading trade journal, the Production Code Administration (PCA) was set up in 1934. Directed by another lay Catholic, Joseph Breen, the PCA gained total control over movie content, surveying scripts and directly influencing what ended up on screen. Although the Lord-Quigley code was comprehensive in its coverage of what was and was not permissible on screen, much scorn was directed at the code's predictable concern with sex. Still, the power of the PCA was based ultimately in economics, the ultimate sanction in Hollywood, and the threat of Catholic boycotts in the most lucrative markets, the big cities. Hence, the code stuck. The result was that from 1934 onwards films without a PCA stamp of approval could not be shown in any major American movie theatre.

Whilst the story told in Black's and Walsh's empirical studies is an important one, one might reasonably complain that neither book really takes on the theoretical issues raised by the history of Catholic involvement in censoring the movies. What motivated certain Catholics, both individually and collectively, to campaign for a production code? Taking up a classical liberal standpoint with regard to freedom of expression, both Black and Walsh appear to argue that imposition of the production code led to movies of poorer quality. This is open to argument and some degree of revision. Many of the films made within the system as it evolved are still regarded as classics. More significantly perhaps, Walsh and Black would seem to have ignored the possibility that the pressure to censor was based less in Catholic 'puritanism' than in doctrine and a development of ecclesial strategy. With regard to doctrine, Ted Jelen (1996: 48-49) explains that the Catholic church has always been willing to censor because it 'is not committed to *intellectual freedom* as that term is conventionally understood'. Elaborating the point he writes that

In contrast to the classical liberal model of free expression, Catholic doctrine regards human reason as readily corruptible and, therefore, a suspect, if necessary means by which the faithful can discern truth. By virtue of its special status with Christ, the church seeks to provide guidance for people attempting to make intelligent and moral choices about the information and media to which they pay attention....[T]he primary function of the church is a *teaching* responsibility, through which people can

internalize the norms of Catholic natural law doctrine and...apply God-ordained law to themselves.

Indeed, scholars of religion from Durkheim (1915) onwards have come to recognize the significance of boundaries between what is deemed permissible and what is not in the structuring of individual experience and the maintenance of collective social life (e.g. Douglas, 1966). Hence, there emerges the possibility at least, that alongside its defence of a conventional public morality, American Catholicism's involvement in censorship and its assertion of authority over the film industry was also part of a more strategic renegotiation of the Church's place and function in an increasingly secular society.

These broader possibilities are tackled in an anthology on the history of *Movie Censorship and American Culture* edited by Francis G. Couvares (1996a). Whilst it covers a period from the very beginnings of American cinema, through to the early nineties, the book is not content merely to recount history, but builds on it to theorize the deeper significance of movie censorship. Instead of treating censorship as an individual or collective act of defining and/or prohibiting the 'indecent' and 'immoral', Couvares introduces the collection by arguing for a perspective on censorship which sees it as a loose set of processes whence a society's values and understanding of reality are created. Based on a recognition that 'determining what is legitimate to say, hear and see...is a central activity of all societies and social groups', Couvares (1996a: 12) argues that battles over the censorship of motion pictures are part of 'a complex and continuing social drama in which the parties in conflict engage, albeit in different ways, fundamental questions about how to live in a modern, capitalist, democratic, and plural society'.

With regard to present concerns, what is refreshing about the poststructuralist framework articulated by Couvares, is that there is a genuine attempt within it to understand the religious background to movie censorship as something more than a simple top-down exercise of hegemony. For example, Charles Musser (1996) describes how films based on the Passion Play of Oberammergau, a number of

which emerged in the first few years of the cinema, were lauded by members of the Protestant clergy who saw evangelical potential in the new medium. This helped, within a decade of the medium's emergence, to subvert traditional Protestant objections to religious subject matter on the theatrical stage. The result was that by 1904 productions of the passion play were being mounted across America.

By Musser's (1996: 65) account, the gradual abandonment by Protestant clergy of the view that dramatization of the passion was sacrilegious, 'underscores the ways in which a new mode of representation such as the cinema can alter and destabilize not only specific cultural forms of which they are a part...but the broader cultural landscape'. Indeed, Musser's piece carries implications of substantial interest to scholars examining the 'commodification' of religion. Citing Walter Benjamin's famous essay on 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', 'which noted that all art had its basis in religious ritual, the location of its original use value', Musser (1996: 65-66) argues that

Cinema did much to disrupt the relationship between religion and certain cultural practices....First photography and then cinematography... 'emancipate[d] the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual,' resulting in the 'liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.' The fight over the passion play in nineteenth-century America was precisely a fight over its ritual significance. Evangelical Protestants refused to accept the Passion as a suitable subject for dramatic treatment, concerned that what Benjamin would have called its 'aura' or 'authenticity' would be blasphemized. As reproductions of a religious-based ritual, these films freed the passion play from the weight of tradition and soon enabled it to function both in the artistic sphere and beyond it. It allowed avatars of urban commercial popular culture to appropriate a subject that had previously resisted easy incorporation into a capitalist economy and modern culture.

As Musser goes on to admit, the rapid expansion of the film industry from 1905 soon led to a resurgence of Protestant suspicion with regard to the morality of the movies (see Chapter Five). Nevertheless, his analysis is a provocative one in terms of media, religion, and culture, in so far as it signals the cinema as integral to the

process of modernization which was then uprooting American national culture from its traditional Protestant bases.

For Couvares (1996a), the cultural instability which accompanied the growth of the movie industry necessitates a far more nuanced and subtle understanding of what was at stake in the debates over movie censorship than either a classical liberal (Black 1994, Walsh 1996) or perhaps marxist standpoint would allow. While the medium of film was widely recognized as powerful, Couvares (1996a: 2-3) suggests 'that the Dream Machine was not quite the Hegemony Machine'. Because Hollywood did not control the context within which movies were consumed, the industry 'fully controlled neither the meaning nor the effect of that consumption (1996a: 3). Hence, Couvares (1996a: 5) writes that politicians, reformers, and clergy critical of Hollywood, were less concerned with halting the industry's development than with 'coming to terms with the most popular medium of communication and persuasion in their world and thereby securing their own cultural authority and political power'. In short, calls for censorship were about more than just control of the movies.

This point is well illustrated by Couvares' (1996b) own piece on the role of the Catholic church and its changing relationship with the industry prior to the institutionalization of the Production Code. Couvares sets out to address 'the unanswered question' articulated by Garth Jowett (1976: 247) as to 'why...the Catholic Church suddenly decided to bring its massive influence to bear on the problem of motion picture immorality.' In fact, he argues

that the encounter of church and movie industry was...less a struggle than a mutual embrace, motivated by an urge on the part of both movie moguls and Catholic clerical and lay leaders to defend their institutional interests and achieve respectability and cultural authority in twentieth-century America. (1996b: 129)

Opening out the historical perspective, Couvares (1996b: 129-30) suggests that the American film industry's problems with censorship and boycotts were but part of a

more extensive '*Kulturkampf*' which lasted roughly from the 1870s up to the Second World War:

In that cultural struggle, the social accompaniments of industrialization—immigration and ethnic conflict; urbanization and the rise of commercial “mass culture”—set off a series of skirmishes over public morality that pitted native against stranger, Protestant against Catholic, Christian against Jew, “modernist” against “fundamentalist,” small town against city, and at one time or another, most of these groups against the “merchants of leisure,” who seemed capable of subverting the moral lessons of family, church, and tradition.

Hence, the Catholic Legion of Decency's defence, in 1934, of 'American values' against the 'alien' threat coming from Hollywood was but a variation of an old theme. As Couvares (1996b: 130) summarizes, 'in trying to control the content of movies from the 1910s to the 1930s, critics and moviemakers entered an essentially political contest over the locus of cultural authority in the modern United States'.

What Couvares recognizes is that many of the reasons for Catholic involvement in the censorship debate and their success in forcing the studios to accede to the strictures of the Production Code came from the complex dynamics of American religion. At a time when Protestant America was increasingly riven between the poles of liberalism and fundamentalism, a range of opinions which made it difficult to ascertain where mainstream morality lay, Catholicism represented a united front with regard to issues of morality. A new generation of Catholics, anxious to distance themselves from the latest wave of immigrants and prove themselves respectable Americans, provided a base from which clerics and lay intellectuals, confident in the moral certainties furnished by church doctrine and natural law, could presume to speak on behalf of not only other Catholics but the nation as a whole. As Couvares (1996b: 151) points out, the Catholic charge 'that secularized Protestant Americans had lost touch with their own roots, particularly with the natural-law tradition that had produced the nation's founding documents', set 'the tone for the anticommunist conservatism that would flourish in the post-World War II period'. Yet, this moral fundamentalism had its attractions for the film industry, as

Catholics were firmly opposed to Federal or state control of the movies. Outside of the big cities, anti-Catholicism flourished, ensuring the failure of Democrat presidential candidate Al Smith in the election of 1928, and the continued imposition of Prohibition, a distinctly anti-Catholic measure. Recognizing the limits of their influence, therefore, Catholics campaigned, 'in terms nearly identical to those employed by Will Hays and the studio moguls' (1996b: 143) for self-regulation of the film industry rather than state censorship.

By the 1950s, sociologist Will Herberg (1960: 258) was led to observe that Catholics and Jews were as much a part of mainstream America as Protestants, something 'quite unprecedented in our history', and a state of affairs confirmed by Kennedy's election to the White House at the end of the decade. How far this is due to the influence of motion pictures in reshaping popular conceptions of what 'Americanness' entailed is an open question, but not an entirely fanciful one. If we view the Code as an important determinant of what Americans saw on their screens over the next couple of decades, then one might suggest that its imposition in 1934 marked an crucial moment in the history of American religion as well the history of American film and popular culture, for it emerged from Catholic efforts to refashion the United States in their own image. As Couvares (1996b: 152) notes, 'the struggle over movie censorship responded to an important shift in the internal organization of Protestant and Catholic communities and in the relative power of each within the American polity'. From 1934 onwards, Hollywood's output was, in its way, a monument to that shift.

Religion and the History of American Cinema

To scholars working to develop the evolving paradigm, Couvares' collection is a useful reminder that the interrelationship between media, religion, and culture is a ever-changing process with a long, complex, and sometimes surprising history, at the heart of which lie debates concerning the value and relative legitimacy of different forms of representation. Sadly, his nuanced understanding of American

religion is unusual in the context of writing about film, including film history. For instance, Robert Sklar's (1975) landmark *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* is prefaced with 'a recognition that movies have historically been and still remain vital components in the network of cultural communication, and the nature of their content and control helps to shape the character and direction of American culture as a whole' (1975: vi). Something, one need hardly point out, they share with the churches. Sklar (1975: vi) even acknowledges religious identities as having shaping the exercise of cultural power by and within the industry. Yet, there is no discussion of this aside from a few cursory and predictable references to clergymen associating them with a middle-class hostile to what Sklar, a marxist, regards as the working-class roots of the medium. While film history has moved on over the last two-and-a-half decades, a crude and under-theorized view of religion in America as little more than an instrument of middle-class hegemony has persisted, even in work which, in other respects, honours the complexity of American culture.

It is not the case, however, that considerations of religion are entirely absent from the historiography of American film. For instance, Garth Jowett's (1976) still standard social history of cinema in the United States, *The Democratic Art*, acknowledges the importance of the creeping secularization of America which took place in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Jowett (1976: 35) points out that the gradual loosening of traditional Protestant strictures against theatrical entertainments helped create the conditions from which an audience for the movies might emerge. The new urban popular culture which spawned motion pictures and other forms of recreation such as the phonograph, the penny arcade, and the amusement park were, for Jowett, part of a major social and cultural reorientation in response to the challenge of modernization. Thus Jowett (1975: 35) writes, that 'as church restrictions were relaxed, informally at first, then later by popular assent, more and more Americans began seeking new diversions, with the major criteria being moral acceptability, accessibility and low cost'. The film industry proved well suited to these conditions.

In a similar vein, Lary May's (1983) *Screening Out the Past* argues that the movies were key to 'a revolution in morals' (1983: xiv *et passim*) which brought about 'a profound alteration in American identity...at the turn of the century....helping to foster the shift from a producer's to a consumer's democracy' (1983: viii). May's thesis is clearly of some relevance to the broader discussion of commodification in relation to media, religion, and the culture, and, unusually for film history, does take account of religion as an influence on the development of the medium. Yet, in line with his somewhat 'top-down' view that dominant social groups controlled the movies from early on, May's notion of religion is limited to its emblematic significance within a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant hegemony. One cannot ignore that aspect of American religion, but it is far from being the whole story. In his relatively brief (given their importance) discussion of the Jews of Hollywood (1983: 167-99), for example, May merely suggests that 'as immigrants with bourgeois values the Jewish moguls were ideal middle men for realizing a fusion of styles' (1983: 175) which could take up and develop the consumerist trends initiated by the traditional social elite of America.

Religion in the History of Early and Silent Cinema

Both Jowett and May indicate the importance of religion within the broader social process out of which the movies and mass culture emerged. Confirming Hoover and Venturelli's point about religion being a 'blindspot' within media theory, however, the theoretical implications of secularization have yet to be fully explored within film scholarship. Aside from the issue of censorship and the history of the Production Code, it is only within the flourishing field of early and silent cinema history that the category of religion even begins to impinge on the mainstream of film studies.

Certainly, the moral concerns expressed by religious organizations with regard to motion pictures once the Nickelodeons had arrived, the various and often contradictory attitudes of clergy towards the medium, and their involvements with the so-called 'uplift movement', have been well documented in histories of the American

cinema from Terry Ramsaye's (1926) *A Million and One Nights* onwards. As one might expect, the upheavals brought on by immigration, industrialization, urbanization, the development of communications technologies, and the rising authority of a positivist scientific worldview were accompanied by religious change. That motion pictures should have emerged as a mass medium at such a time indicates that the relationship between religion and film, while complex, was also at its most fluid and 'open' during this formative period, and perhaps most amenable to historical examination and theoretical explication in the present. This view informs the rest of the study. Indeed, the religious and cultural background to the so-called Progressive Era, as well as the moral and other pressures brought to bear on the film industry of the time by the churches and other reformers are discussed at some length below in Chapter Five. What is worth stressing for current purposes, however, is that within writing on pre-Hollywood American film, the treatment of religion has only rarely moved beyond an attention to the clergy's social role as guardians of public morality.

The most significant work on religion and silent film is to be found in *An Invention of the Devil? Religion and Early Cinema* (Cosandey *et al*, 1992), a volume of proceedings from a conference on the topic held in Québec in 1990. As one might perhaps expect from specialist scholars of film, *An Invention of the Devil?* offers little theoretical interrogation of what 'religion' means and the term is used throughout the collection in its organized, institutional sense. Yet, despite this, and the international scope of the subject matter, the book does contain observations of relevance here.

In their preface, the editors note that the starting point of the conference was an acknowledgement of certain intersections between organized religion and early cinema. Most obvious of these is the fact that many early films were based upon religious materials, be they sacred texts or contemporary stories with religious themes. As has already been indicated, moreover, religious institutions were often the originating sources for much of the early discourse about the social role of the cinema. In conjunction with a format in which relevant films were screened and

academic papers given, these basic observations led the conference to realize that the topic of religion and early cinema allowed a continuous circulation 'between issues of text and context, from the films and their interior configurations of narrative or formal composition to the larger discourses which sought to understand, define or even repress the production and reception of these films' (1992: xx). Thus Cosandey *et al* (1992: xx-xxi) report that participants, 'often during the discussion between presentations', made 'links between the various formal characteristics of filmic discourse evident in the films themselves and the way organized religion provided a discourse which sought to define cinema's place within society'.

Interestingly, a comparison of some of the papers on religious policies regarding censorship reveals that religious attitudes and actions were often determined by national context, even where the institutional framework, e.g. Catholicism, was held in common. Thus in Spain and French Canada the Catholic Church rejected the new medium, while in other locations such as Belgium, France, and Italy, the church was far more supportive of moves to mobilize the power of motion pictures for pastoral purposes (Cosandey *et al* 1992: xxi). As will be elaborated further below, this sort of ambivalence also characterized the reaction of religious groups, largely Protestant, towards the medium in America in its first decades. What Janet Staiger (1992b: 355) notes in her concluding remarks is that such divergent responses were often prompted by the internationalization of film distribution, and the violation of national norms by foreign products, making it difficult for a nation's religious organizations to control film content. Given the various sorts of relations between church and state, differences in approach to this problem were inevitable. On that basis, Staiger (1992b: 355) hypothesizes that 'as long as control of the content of films was in local hands, the church was not disturbed; once control moved to distant sources, concerns developed from differences in norms'. An interesting implication Staiger (1992b: 355) draws from this suggestion, and one which anticipates the basic position of scholars addressing media, religion, and culture as 'an interrelated web in society', is 'that the apparent separation of Church

and State, of religion and secular life, is a false opposition'. This provocative comment is, however, as close as the contributors to *An Invention of the Devil?* or indeed, any other scholars from the mainstream of film studies, come to reconsidering the theoretical implications of categorizing religion in traditional institutional terms.

That said, several contributors to the proceedings indicate areas where filmic practices, particularly those in America were shaped by religious considerations. Thus, Charles Keil's (1992) examination of Kalem's *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) prompts an observation that an attitude of reverence towards the subject of such New Testament narratives, i.e. Christ, resulted in the 'stylistic retardation' of this and other similar films, relative to the general formal development of American motion pictures which took place in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Keil (1992: 112) writes that although this film was made in 1912, it presents the life of Christ as a series of virtually autonomous tableaux and all but 'eschews any inter or intra-scene editing, varies its camera position but little and moves the camera less, and maintains a fairly persistent medium long shot scale throughout'. This contrasts sharply with the practices of many filmmakers of the time who had by the early teens already discovered the use of techniques such as the close-up, for instance, as a means to invest characters with a psychological dimension. Keil (1992: 114) explains this 'retarded' style by acknowledging that if, as was then (and in America, still) common, one accepts 'the sacred nature of Christ's existence...the very notion of conceiving of Christ in terms of a psychologically-based characterization is problematic'. Citing Frank Kermode's commentary on narrative in portions of the New Testament, Keil (1992: 115) suggests that the style of *From the Manger to the Cross* is similar to the stories of Christ found in the Bible because it lacks "plot—the fulfillment of narrative promise, the insistence on cause and regulated sequence". Keil (1992: 115-16) argues that Kalem's strategy in making the film in this way was determined by a desire to depict the Christ story as history and a belief that such an approach might avoid the pitfalls of interpretation, and the necessity of taking a

particular hermeneutic position. Whilst Keil does not develop the point with regard to the religious context of America in the early twentieth century, it is tempting to suggest that the adoption of such an 'open' style was a deliberate response to the growing divisions between the liberal and conservative strands of American Protestantism.

Far less conservative, at least in terms of technique, were the editing practices of D.W. Griffith. For Adam Knee (1992), the way Griffith developed certain formal techniques during his time at the Biograph company, particularly his characteristic use of crosscutting, articulated a distinctively religious and spiritual worldview. Discussing several pictures from this period, Knee (1992: 319) argues that in these films,

editing and narrative structure function to imbue the diegetic universe of these films with an inescapable moral order, suggesting the ultimate control of an all-knowing deity....Characters can evade neither their interconnectedness nor their moral obligations toward one another, and those neglecting such obligations inevitably suffer through the intervention of the eternal mechanism which seems to regulate all lives in Griffith's universe.

This is not, however, to reduce the editing practices Griffith was associated with to the director's religiosity. As Knee himself (1992: 319) acknowledges, there are a wide range of functions to crosscutting;

from representing simultaneously occurring events and efficiently forwarding the narrative line (or impeding the narrative for suspense) to making socially-oriented comparisons and suggesting character point of view, and these numerous functions are undoubtedly shaped by a wide range of overlapping ideological, economic, and technological determinants.

Nevertheless, as Knee (1992: 323-25) demonstrates in his discussion of, for example, *The Golden Louis* (1909), Griffith's crosscutting relies upon a 'kind of cosmic logic' so that it might be reconciled with diegetic reality.⁵ Thus Knee (1992:

⁵ In *The Golden Louis*, the protagonist, a gambler, envisages and responds to the unease, in an entirely separate location, of a sleeping beggar girl from whom he has, unbeknownst to her, borrowed a gold coin as a stake. He returns to share his winnings with her but too late to save her from a death which might have been prevented had she had some money to hand.

325) suggests a further function for the technique; 'to imply spiritual connections between characters as well as physical, emotional, and economic ones'.

What follows from Knee's thesis, and is further supported by the popularity of Griffith's pictures upon release, is that the religious worldview articulated by the director would have appeared quite normal to large sections of the contemporary movie-going public. It might even be the case that elements of popular religiosity provided important ideological bases for the development of such editing techniques in commercial cinema. Yet, if Griffith's and other filmmakers' innovations were, in some sense, reliant upon existing religious attitudes, they were also changing them by translating them into a new form, the motion picture narrative. As we have seen from Keil's (1992) discussion of *From the Manger to the Cross*, traditional Biblical stories were not that easy to incorporate within the evolving medium of film. Giving a particular visual form, moreover, to a set of beliefs ostensibly based in the Word, would alter the way people related to those beliefs and, by extension, the beliefs themselves, as well as the social relations predicated upon those beliefs.

Whilst evidence of how particular audiences reacted to the religious aspects of movies in the silent era is scant, some discussion of the relationship between religion and reception is provided by Steven Higgins' (1992) paper on Thomas H. Ince's 1916 production of *Civilization*. At a time in which American public debate was dominated by the possibility of joining the war in Europe, *Civilization* articulated the non-interventionist pacifist position in explicitly Christian terms. Given the widespread support for the peace movement at the time, such a project would have had considerable commercial potential. Indeed, Higgins (1992: 339) describes how the film used images of Christ and the Cross in taking up the rhetorical stance of the Woman's Peace Party who had recast the arguments for peace 'in absolute terms: war's total abolition, the complete reeducation of humanity to peace, and the recognition of women's rightful place in effecting these changes'. Such a moral position did not harm the film's box-office appeal, although, as Higgins (1992: 341) points out, film historians have 'uniformly treated it with disdain, even ridicule'. He

cites Kevin Brownlow's evaluation of it as 'simple-minded' and the latter's claim that the 'undeniable impact on audiences of the time now seems baffling.' Higgins rejects this sort of assessment, however. He recognizes that not only is the film that has survived missing around an hour of footage, but that the numerous allusions to Christ and the Bible contained in it would have been readily understood and absorbed by audiences of the time (1992: 339). Arguing against the critical dismissal of the picture, Higgins (1992: 341), develops a far more subtle interpretation of those elements which most jar our contemporary and apparently more 'secular' sensibilities, and suggests that the growing inevitability of American involvement in the war in Europe would have made the notion of 'divine intervention' to 'stop the slaughter' an attractive one to audiences seeking hope. Thus Higgins suggests that the impact of the film was "undeniable" not because it was retrogressive or "simple-minded" but because 'it mirrored what seemed to many the least cynical, most progressive elements of their society'.

While not blind to the potential for exploiting religious beliefs in commercial film-making, Higgins' perspective on religion is unusual in the context of mainstream film scholarship in so far as it allows religious ideas and images a wider set of social functions than the mere reproduction of existing hierarchies. He does not ignore the positive, expressive, even subversive potential of religious symbols. That said, the use of religion in American silent cinema was, often enough, a rhetorical means to align the industry with the more respectable and powerful institutions in society such as churches and schools. While some reformers saw the movies as a threat to social order, others believed it might be a tool of moral and social uplift.

For Peter Kramer (1992), this latter tendency found expression in numerous 'screen sermons'. Instead of attempting to bring biblical history to life as many films still did, these 'religious films' drew on more contemporary subject matter in order to teach a moral lesson, as in, for example, *A Drunkard's Reformation*, directed by D.W. Griffith for Biograph in 1909. Whilst supernatural elements were often, though not always, a feature of such pictures, Kramer draws attention to the way these

'sermons' drew on the developing techniques of film-makers, emphasizing individual psychology and constructing an implicit audience for these films. Discussing the Biograph company's promotional bulletins for their contributions to this 'genre', Kramer (1992: 190-91) writes that while they acknowledged that conversion was based primarily on language and the Word, the bulletins posited film as capable of achieving the same effect:

The audience's relation to the screen was argued to equal that of the convert to the agent of his or her conversion: the minister, the saintly mother or the Bible itself....These Biograph films made after 1907 foregrounded the theme of moral renewal by presenting stories of individuals being transformed through encounters with agents of the divine. The bulletins clearly stated the company's intention to present the transformed character as an object of identification for the spectator, and the transformation of this character as a model for the audience's spiritual renewal through the cinema.

Griffith's role as the leading director at Biograph, and his own input into this sermonizing cinema is touched upon below. What is intriguing about Kramer's discussion here though is the linkage between developments in technique and broader religious concerns. Thus although Kramer fails to develop the point, Janet Staiger, who was herself 'raised in a strong Presbyterian environment' and 'spent several years as a fundamentalist protestant' (1992b: 353) recognizes some of the implications of Kramer's thesis. Drawing further attention to the question of national origins and their relation to the practices of filmmakers, She asks:

does it matter that the U.S. was a predominately protestant country?...In the protestant religion, reformation and conversion are central religious experiences. Are Protestant theologies more suitable to psychologically motivated filmmaking? To narrative climaxes and coherence? Is this perhaps a factor in why American films were early to emphasize individual character actions? (1992b: 357-58)

One might also enquire, what impact did the translation of ideas based in the verbal authority of the Bible into motion pictures, the dominant medium of American Culture for much of the twentieth century, have on the nation's religious environment? Does the formal distinction between religion and the cinema help or hinder our attempts to understand the deeper cultural significance of the medium's development?

Kramer himself refers to the work of William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, whose paper on the Vitagraph company's 1910 five-reel production of *The Life of Moses* (1992), included in *An Invention of the Devil?*, is expanded and incorporated into their book *Reframing Culture* (1993). There, Uricchio and Pearson relate text to context in order to examine the cultural significance of the so-called 'quality films' or 'films deluxe', based on literary, historical, and biblical texts, produced by Vitagraph between 1907 and 1910. The subject matter of these movies ranged from the work of Dante and Shakespeare (*Julius Caesar* shortened to a mere half an hour!), biographies of Napoleon and Washington, through to Moses. From a cultural studies perspective which draws on Antonio Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony, and Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) conception of cultural capital, as well as developments in reception studies (e.g. Morley, 1980; Radway, 1984; Ang, 1985; Staiger, 1992a), Uricchio and Pearson (1993: 5) use intertextual evidence to examine not the films themselves but what they reveal about an historically specific 'interface between film and culture'. Whilst they note that these 'high-art films...constituted a relatively small (though highly publicized) component of the industry's output', Uricchio and Pearson (1993: 5) contend that, a time of widespread concern regarding the social impact of movies, 'they represented one of the most visible markers of the film industry's desire to improve its cultural status, explicitly invoking "high" culture referents but offering them in a "low" culture venue, the moving picture shows'. Moreover, while these films represent 'the clearest instance of the film industry's deliberate attempt to upgrade perceptions of the medium among key authorized interpretive communities and institutions of cultural reproduction' (1993: 195-96), the films were designed in a way so as not to alienate the existing audiences, perceived as predominantly working-class and immigrant, which those dominant social groups were so concerned about.

With regard to *The Life of Moses*, Uricchio and Pearson (1993: 161) suggest that the producers probably calculated that Moses was a subject which 'would appeal to the broadest possible audience, while alienating as few viewers as

possible,...a Moses film, unlike a Christ film, would appeal to Jews as well as Christians'. Furthermore, while *Moses* was, like the other 'quality films', designed to improve the cultural status of motion pictures overall, as a 'biblical', it was especially well suited to dealing with the most vociferous opponents of the industry, the clergy, and thus counter the threat of closing movie houses on Sundays, the most profitable day of the week (1993: 165). Despite such advantages for the producers, however, Uricchio and Pearson argue that such a project was also fraught with difficulties.

Mindful of possible objections to the cinematic representation of biblical figures such as Moses, Vitagraph appointed as special consultant to the project, the Reverend Madison C. Peters, who, having abandoned institutional affiliations, dubbed himself 'The People's Preacher'. It was Peters' job to ensure a suitably reverential treatment of the great Hebrew law-giver. Nevertheless, Peters' belief in the literalness of the Bible was not shared by all the various interpretive communities Vitagraph hoped to please. As Uricchio and Pearson (1993: 173-87) recognize, from the mid-to-late nineteenth century onwards American religious life had become increasingly riven by arguments between liberal and fundamentalist theologians, both Jewish and Christian, and a polarization of positions with regard to the 'truth' of scripture. In that context, the depiction of divine intervention in the natural order, as with the parting of the Red Sea, was, potentially at least, a highly controversial issue. Hence, with both the film and its promotional materials, the studio had to take great care in accommodating what Uricchio and Pearson (1993: 193) term 'the discourses of the natural and the supernatural', so that *The Life of Moses* did not further inflame the fierce debates taking place between fundamentalists and liberals, and thus avoid alienating various constituencies within the broader cultural elite Vitagraph evidently sought to placate. Overall, Uricchio and Pearson suggest, *Moses* was more closely allied to the fundamentalist perspective. Nevertheless, Vitagraph promoted the film by drawing attention to the film's supposed accuracy in terms of natural history and its staging of spectacular miracles, despite the inherent theological contradictions of such strategy.

Uricchio and Pearson (1993: 187-92) further emphasize the potential divisiveness of filming *The Life of Moses*, by highlighting the multivalent understandings of Moses which existed in early-twentieth century America. Most obviously, perhaps, Moses the lawgiver would have represented an attractive symbol of stability and order at a time of rapid social change in America, not least because Mosaic law furnishes the basis of US civil law. Indeed, as the epitome of Judeo-Christian morality, the figure of Moses was even better suited than George Washington to mobilize the pre-existing religious beliefs of immigrants in the service of the American way, and thus bolster the existing status quo. Yet, Moses might also be appropriated in ways the filmmakers would have been keen to play down. What of the seventh commandment, to 'Remember the Sabbath'? Emphasizing this would have flown in the face of one of the key motives for the project, to defend Sunday movie-house opening. More radically, the Mosaic code also carried challenges to the social order of the 'Promised Land' in the form of economic legislation and land reform. Left-leaning critics of the social order invoked Moses as an ally as they sought to redress the unequal distribution of resources in the 'New Israel'. The response of Vitagraph to the various possible appropriations of Moses was to elide 'those aspects of the Pentateuch seized on by reactionaries and radicals', and 'avoid partisan controversy primarily through omission, for example, by not showing Moses mandating land redistribution' (1993: 192).

While there is little direct evidence of the reception of the film, Uricchio and Pearson (1993: 193-94) comment that *The Life of Moses* is

perhaps the clearest example of the dangers to be avoided and benefits to be gained by appropriating a revered cultural figure for presentation in the low cultural venue of the nickelodeon. Through its strategy of carefully positioning itself with regard to other cultural producers, evident in the studio's employment of the Reverend Peters and the care it took to accommodate...the discourses of the natural and the supernatural, Vitagraph placated its most vociferous opponents. Although the particularly vexed nature of religion—as an institution of cultural reproduction that brooked little dissent—potentially rendered any cinematic incarnation of Moses more offensive than that of a literary or historical

figure, such an endeavor also offered the opportunity to garner more praise. A carefully mounted film would appeal not only to those preachers damning the new medium but also to a much broader spectrum of the population, given the absolute centrality of Moses in a Judeo-Christian culture.

Uricchio and Pearson's concluding remarks on the picture are reproduced at length here because they reveal both the benefits and potential pitfalls of developing this line of enquiry. Recognizing the wide-ranging significance of religion in the United States furnishes Uricchio and Pearson a means to engage with the complexities and subtleties of the broader cultural concerns which shaped the development of the American film industry. Indeed, their useful and provocative intertextual methodology is designed to highlight 'the sole remaining traces of an ongoing contestation of dominant interpretations and modes of representation (1993: 199). However, as the conclusion of what is probably, thus far at least, the most developed piece of work analysing the historical relationship between religion and film, the crude theorizing of 'religion—as an institution of cultural reproduction that brooked little dissent' is disappointing, if somewhat predictable within the context of film studies as a whole.

Although they suggest that 'paradoxically, engagements with cultural texts or figures that permitted a very wide range of interpretations and modes of representation also served to reinforce the hegemonic order' (1993: 198), Uricchio and Pearson do not apply the implications of this statement to American religion. Moses, they would appear to suggest, was subject to multivalent appropriations, *in spite* of rather than because of his religious significance. Yet, as Chapter Three will discuss in more depth, the most obvious feature of American religion is probably its diversity, the significance attached to difference. What Uricchio and Pearson ignore is the potential of religious discourse in America to accommodate dissent and expressivity in a society in which prevailing values are so powerful that 'existing economic and political arrangements frequently appear not merely as the best possible arrangements but as the only possible ones' (Katznelson and Kesselman,

1987: 29). As Robert Bellah *et al* (1985) argue, religion has long been a 'second language' via which Americans might articulate differing visions of what their nation is and could be. Such theoretical perspectives, based as they are in the study of American religion, have made no impact upon film studies. If film scholars are to grasp the meanings attached to religion in relation to American film culture therefore, there is need for them to develop a theoretical understanding of the particular character of American religion which moves beyond a crude association of it with an existing hegemonic order to one which facilitates an engagement with the rich vitality of American religious life.

Religious Film Writing

So far, the main aim of this review of existing writing on film and religion, has been to highlight the somewhat scattered but, nonetheless, quite extensive evidence indicating the importance of religion in shaping the development of the American film industry and its role within the national culture. Whilst useful, however, the scholarship in this area emanating from film studies does not fully engage with the theoretical issues raised by the unique characteristics of American religion. We now turn our attentions toward a literature, ignored within the mainstream of film studies, but which nonetheless has been steadily growing from the end of the sixties onwards, explicitly addressed to the religious aspects of the cinema; a body of writing Steve Nolan (1998) has labelled 'religious film-analysis'. It might be thought that writing on the cinema which takes as its starting point a serious interest in religion would have addressed many of the issues largely ignored within orthodox film scholarship. This is not the case. Indeed, the history of the relationship between religion and film within American culture has been largely ignored by scholars from the broad field of religious studies.

Theology at the Movies

Like the early writing on media and religion discussed briefly in Chapter One,

religious film-analysis emerged out of Christian (predominantly Catholic) responses to contemporary culture and its challenge to faith and the churches. Prompted by the drift away from institutional religion, and the emergence of a dissenting youth culture, American writers such as James Wall (1970, 1971) and Neil Hurley (1970, 1978) looked for theological inspiration in the cinema. The movies, they held, offered authentic religious experience, transcendence even, whilst simultaneously engaging with the problems of contemporary culture. Influenced heavily by the *auteur* theory (e.g. Sarris 1962, 1968) already being abandoned by mainstream film studies, their methodology was orientated towards the interpretation, from a Christian perspective, of films largely selected on the basis of quality, i.e. 'art' films, many of them European, which during the sixties and early seventies had garnered a substantial audience.

For example, James Wall (1970: 57) argued that the once-successful genre of the Biblical Epic, that is, films which drew on the shared knowledge and religious presuppositions of the audience, were in fact less 'religious' than what he regarded as a new kind of film which can 'be considered religious to the extent that it speaks to the human situation with the authenticity shared by the individual appraising his own religious understanding of life'. Citing examples such as *The Pawnbroker* (1964, d. Sidney Lumet), *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1966, d. Mike Nichols), and *Blow-Up* (1966, d. Michelangelo Antonioni), he contrasts the success of these movies with the box-office 'flop' of the more traditionally 'religious' Biblical epic, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965, d. George Stevens). Clearly, this sort of approach is not without resonance for scholars of media, religion, and culture who might suggest that 'religion...is not limited to what happens in a 'sacred' realm, traditionally conceived, but is that part of culture that persuasively presents a plausible myth of the ordering of existence' (Clark and Hoover, 1996). Yet, Wall's formula is by no means as 'open' to the notion of religious change and innovation as it might at first appear.

Indicative of the limitations which this strand of writing on film imposed on itself, Wall (1970: 59) sought to justify analysing these films from a Christian

standpoint. Answering his own question as to 'what is unique about the Christian's approach to a film if he is to consider it under the same ground rules as the non-Christian', Wall (1970: 59) wrote that while personal background and history obviously affects one's view of a film 'the Christian, to one degree or another, approaches all experiences out of a particular history he shares with other Christians'; one founded upon the New Testament account of 'the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ'. Acknowledging that this perspective affects one's view of humanity, and thus of films, is fair enough perhaps. But Wall (1970: 59) goes on to argue that in terms of values such as 'the dignity of man, the beauty of human relationships, and the loyalty to a cause [etc.]...our common Christian history has already become the hidden agenda of modern society'. The cinema thus comes to be seen by Wall, Hurley, and others (e.g. Ferlita and May, 1976; Holloway, 1977; May and Bird, 1982; May, 1991; Marsh and Ortiz, 1997) as a locus of religious meaning analogous to more traditional and authoritative Christian sources such as the Bible.⁶ What, though, do approaches to film grounded in theology have to offer those with no commitment to Christianity?

For John May (1982), perhaps the most prominent figure in this field, discussion of religion and film developed out of an interest in theology and literature. Concerned to emphasize the autonomy of film with regard to the concerns of faith, May (1982: 26) argues that 'any discussion of the religious or sectarian dimension of cinema ought to be confined, as far as possible, to the language of film itself. The critic's task is to discover the cinematic analogue of the religious or sectarian question'. Treating film in terms of 'visual story', he draws on a 'theology of story' developed by John Dominic Crossan, in which myth and parable are understood to represent the polar extremes of story, and 'the principal types of story that express religious self-understanding the world over' (May 1982: 33). Within this typology,

⁶ Whilst it claims no denominational affiliation, further and more contemporary discussion of this sort are available online at *The Journal of Religion and Film* (<http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/>).

'Myth...establishes world, whereas parable subverts it' (May, 1982: 32). Yet, although notions of myth and parable might not be entirely inappropriate to the study of films, the problem with such an approach is that it assumes the locus of meaning to be the film itself rather than something created in the experience of viewing the film: one man's myth could well be another woman's parable. Typical, until fairly recently at least, of virtually all the writing of this ilk, May ignores the social context of cinema. Moreover, whilst May's emphasis on film in terms of 'visual story' would appear to have preceded a resurgence of interest in specifically cinematic forms of narration (e.g. Bordwell, 1985a; Branigan, 1992), his work is, in fact, rooted in traditional literary theory. As Steve Nolan (1998: 4) comments,

film is not literature – literary theory does not deal with the operations of the medium on the subject, and is not as sympathetic to film as May allows....and his conception of film as 'visual story' entirely misses the specific operations of film as experience.

Later work by May (1991) and his collaborators is much more explicit about the Judeo-Christian framework within which their quest for cinematic analogues to religious concerns takes place. Yet, as Nolan (1998: 5) writes, for those who do not share such a framework May's work betrays a 'short-sightedness about the already committed nature of analogy, namely, it is necessary to believe first in order to see'.

In his useful critical survey of this literature, Nolan (1998: 11) highlights 'the already committed nature of analogy' as the most serious problem associated with this particular body of film writing. Tending to avoid movies explicitly dealing with issues of faith or theology, such work can offer intriguing analogical 'readings' of films which address the concerns of religious people. But as Nolan (1998: 5) recognizes, 'the extent to which' these readings 'engage genuine cultural values, as distinct from offering religious interpretations of cultural tropes', is 'open to question'. Indeed, he indicates

a myopia among religious film-analysts around the location of meaning, with many assuming that it is located in the text and can be read out by interested readers. This has resulted in, at best, a certain predictability of

film readings, and, at worst, a sanitising/sanctifying of what at times can be a dangerously and religiously subversive cinema (1998: 11).⁷

For Nolan, a theologian himself, and keen to develop this literature, these problems can be overcome by treating film as film and mounting a sustained engagement with film theory. Hence he urges 'a more meaningful dialogue between theology and film studies' as a means to examine 'the construction of meaning as it shapes the subjectivity of those who produce and consume theology and cinematic images' (1998: 11). In stressing 'theories of ideology, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and gender' (1998: 11) though, Nolan does not indicate how far such a project might move beyond the notion of film-as-text to offer a more socio-historical understanding of the medium's interaction with religion in culture.

Despite the largely self-imposed limits described by Nolan, religious film writing has, nevertheless, been subject to some degree of variation and innovation. Thus the New Testament scholar Larry J. Kreitzer (1993, 1994) uses contemporary film and literature as a way of 'reversing the hermeneutical flow' and bringing fresh insights to the interpretation of scripture. Similarly, Robert Jewett (1993) and Bernard Brandon Scott (1994) aim, in rather different ways, to develop a dialogue between the Bible and the movies as a means to engage critically with contemporary American culture. While Jewett's 'prophetic' methodology is rooted firmly in Pauline theology, Scott's approach is unusual within the broad context of religious film-analysis in so far as he recognizes that the social and cultural changes wrought by the mass media, particularly the emphasis on visual images, and the challenges these changes pose to religious institutions, need to be accounted for in historical terms. Frustratingly, however, and despite a suggestive overview (1994: 19-45), based in the work of McLuhan (1964) and Ong (1982), of the relationship between changes in media and changes in consciousness, Scott does not really address the

⁷ David Jasper (1997), surveying the other contributions to Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz's (1997) *Explorations in Theology and Film*, argues that the willingness of writers in this field to offer up theological readings of Hollywood films in particular, tends to elide the fundamental difference between commercial cinema and theology, and, in so doing, makes for bad theology.

particular circumstances which spawned the emergence of the movies. He is more concerned with using the Bible as a critical tool with which to examine the movies as examples of American mythology. Thus although Scott (1994: 158-65) devotes some attention to *The Birth of a Nation*, he does not engage with the theoretical and historical nitty gritty of that picture's relationship with the cultural context whence it emerged, beyond a brief acknowledgement of its monumental impact and the role of race in its mythologizing of national self-understanding. Might there not be a deeper and more complex relationship between the film's economic success, the issue of race, technological development, social change, and the religious conditions of the culture which spawned it? Scott does not theorize the degree to which biblical ideas undergird US nationalism, or how movies function in maintaining national sentiment beyond a few references to Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963, 1969). Thus, one might ask, is a Bible-based theology the most incisive way of examining the mythology of America?

In general, religious writing on film tends to affirm the conventional distinction between religion and theology (sacred) on one hand, and the secular medium of film (profane) on the other; hence the need to analogize. This division between 'high' and 'low' or 'popular' cultural forms maintains the assumed authority of the religious perspective. Yet such defensiveness regarding the challenge of the media to religious authority means that the possibility of a somewhat more complicated two-way relationship between religion and the medium of film is largely ignored. What kind of religion, if any, is the cinema conducive to?

Still unusual in this respect, Robert W. Jenson's (1970) enquiry into the audio-visual nature of film as a means of religious communication embraces the populism of Hollywood. Whilst Jenson understands the artifice of film, he argues that in making the past present, even when projecting into the future the medium is particularly well suited to representing 'a certain kind of mythic religion: the "god of our fathers" variety' (1970: 44-45). Contrasting this God of history with the supposed transcendence of Yahweh, he nonetheless writes that

in this sort of religion, God is identified not merely by one moment of the Beginning, but by a past history; he is the one who led us out of Egypt and thereby established a security which is now our right, or he is the one in whom our brave boys in their recent foxholes all trusted and were saved. The deity of this god is the timeless presence of the past history. This is the religion of Israel before the prophets revolutionized it; or it is that nationalized version of "historical religion" which has been America's civic faith. Moving pictures are the only possible images of such gods. The great sentimental biblical epics, and the religious glorifications of Americanism, were authentic and inevitable expressions of the genius of the movies, and were quite properly experienced by most in their audiences as true communication of their deepest religion (1970: 44).

Within the context of religious film-analysis, this celebration of the much derided biblical epic is still exceptional, and its value here is two-fold. Firstly, although he cannot possibly know how the majority of audiences experienced these films, and despite the problematic ideological assumptions with regard to American history embedded in the association of 'our brave boys' and the God of Israel, Jenson's populism stands in stark contrast with some of the more theologically sophisticated but elitist attitudes expressed elsewhere. Secondly, as Paul Schrader (1972) would agree, albeit on entirely different (non-Hollywood) grounds, Jenson recognizes that the religious content of movies is inseparable from their form.

That cultural form determines experience is a point which was taken up with regard to religion and film, two decades ago, by Thomas M. Martin (1981). In his *Images and the Imageless*, Martin (1981: 55), again following the lead of McLuhan (1964), argues that development of film technology has, in extending human experience, led to changes in human, and therefore, religious consciousness: 'Human consciousness cannot be the same today as it was prior to the extension of its vision through film. Neither can religious consciousness ever be the same'. Whilst overly general in discussing 'consciousness' perhaps, it is, nonetheless, a useful and interesting argument and Martin makes some worthwhile observations. Distinguishing between linguistic and filmic modes of perception (1981: 7-15), Martin (1981: 122) asserts that 'films cannot be reduced to analytical written words'. Thus, despite basing his account in philosophy and theology rather than any genuine

psychological account of how we perceive films, Martin does to some extent anticipate David Bordwell's (1985a) subsequent and highly influential cognitivist rejection of theories based in language as models for film analysis. Martin (1981: 113-27) recognizes, moreover, that 'meaning' is something constructed by us, and emphasizes the importance of narrative in helping us make our lives intelligible and meaningful, arguing that just as narrative forms have developed and changed in the cinema, so too have audiences in their ability to respond to these changes (1981:130-34).

Whilst Martin's ideas have been largely neglected, even within the sub-field of religious film writing, his attempt to relate technological development to religious change is similar to the concerns of scholars who seek to address the interaction between media and religion within culture. There are doubts, however, as to how far one might be able to apply his work within the 'evolving paradigm'. For, in following the likes of William James (1902) and Rudolf Otto (1936), and treating religion in terms of individual response rather than social expression, Martin does not really deal with the social significance of his argument. Despite its obvious historical basis, he avoids tackling the wider, and here at least, more interesting implications of his findings. Indicative, perhaps, of the degree to which those engaged in theological and religious discourses understand themselves to be working, in some way, outwith more quotidian secular activities, this reticence with regard to engaging with the broader cultural context within which films are made and consumed has, until fairly recently, been the norm in this literature.

Developments in Religious Film Writing

Whilst bearing the imprint of religious preoccupations, *Screening America* by Jesuit priest, Richard A. Blake (1991) does at least bring some sort of historical perspective to bear on his analyses of Hollywood films from the decade before World War II. Indeed, Blake (1991: 11-102) devotes much of his book to a discussion of the historical relationship between the film industry, religious communities, and the

