Part I

Methodological Considerations

Theology and Film

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No serious theological activity can take place without a consideration of the social, economic, political, and cultural matrix within which it is practiced. The distrust of human judgment that permeates Karl Barth's *The Humanity of God*, for instance – with the concomitant understanding that God is Wholly Other, we can only know God through God's own revelation, and theology should thus be self-validating (cf. Barth, 1967, pp. 39, 47) – cannot be dissociated from what Barth witnessed at first hand as the folly of World War I, and the sincerely held belief that humanity was utterly lost before God. For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, similarly, the rise of Nazi Germany played an instrumental role in the formation of his program of theological ethics, whereby just ''as Christ bears our burdens, so ought we to bear the burdens of other human beings'' (in Floyd, 2005, p. 51). Bonhoeffer believed that the Church had forgotten the ''costliness'' of God's bearing our flesh, and his own experiences in a German prison camp, where he died in 1945, led to the writing of his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, where he argued, in correspondence with his friend Eberhard Bethge, that in order to respond authentically to the challenge of the Gospel one must be a person for other persons – ''It is not some religious act which makes a Christian what he is, but participation in the suffering of God in the life of the world'' (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 123). For Jürgen Moltmann, also, the concept of hope for the coming Kingdom of God that permeates his theology, based on the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, was, paradoxically, rooted in his experience as a German prisoner of war during World War II. When an American military chaplain gave him a copy of the New Testament, the 19-year-old Moltmann found that his eyes were opened to the reality

of God whose empathy lies with the broken-hearted, and that God was present even behind the barbed-wire fence of his Belgian prison camp. His subsequent attempt to reconstruct key Christian doctrines in light of God's promises for the future was inextricably linked to his exposure to the time when "I saw men in the camp who lost hope. They simply took ill, and died" (in Miller & Grenz, 1998, pp. 104–5). This chapter aims to suggest that, when it comes to continuing our explorations in theology and film (to paraphrase the title of Marsh & Ortiz's 1997 volume), it is no less vital to take stock of the historical and cultural context within which such a dialogue might proceed. No theology – indeed, for that matter, no film – is ever produced in a cultural vacuum, and not even those theologians, like Barth, who feel that it is neither possible nor desirable for human culture to be able to contribute to a theological discussion (Barth, 1967, pp. 51–2) can claim total immunity from the cultural environment within which they work. Was it not Barth, after all, who enjoined Christians to "hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other" (see, e.g., Miller & Grenz, 1998, p. 9)?

Although the remit of this book is to specifically examine the interaction between theology and film, it is envisaged that the fruits of the theology–film exchange will have much wider repercussions. On a pedagogical level, it is surprising just how many opportunities tend to arise in the course of teaching a theology module that is not specifically film-based to engage with film and other cultural agencies. In a module on science and theology, for example, it can be extremely fruitful to examine the interface between Christianity and physics in light of Robert Zemeckis's *Contact* (1997), where Matthew McConaughey's Father Joss and Jodie Foster's Ellie Arroway raise – not least through their divergent interpretations of Occam's razor – theologically sophisticated questions pertaining to the relationship between science and faith, rationality and superstition, and, ultimately, whether a personal and beneficent creative force can be thought to sustain the universe in the absence of empirical verification. Similarly, *The Butterfly Effect* (Eric Bress & J. Mackye Gruber, 2004) can be a fruitful entry-point into a discussion of Einstein's theory of relativity and the death of the Newtonian mechanistic account of the universe. There is also the case of Neil Jordan's 1999 adaptation of Graham Greene's novel *The End of the Affair*, which may be found to provide a more subtle and challenging slant to the science–religion debate, in its careful study of the emotional consequences of a loss of belief in inherited faith-based assumptions concerning the design and intelligibility of the universe, than the polarized debate that is represented by the

Creationists on the one hand and Richard Dawkins on the other might suggest. There is a downside here, however. No matter how beneficial it may be to motivate students by utilizing a medium in the classroom with which they happen to be familiar, the rationale for appropriating films in this manner needs to be addressed. Conrad Ostwalt rightly noted in a 1998 article that students are ''stimulated by the auditory and visual experience of movie watching in ways that reading fails to achieve,'' and ''not intimidated by it . . . they are empowered, confident, and bold'' (Ostwalt, 1998, ¶4). But it is less clear that his subsequent claim that ''With film as part of their curriculum, students seem more willing to take imaginative risks and to think critically'' (ibid.) is entirely accurate and can be sustained.

For a start, there is too often a tendency to assume that, because a theological motif or parallel has been located in a film, this comprises a legitimate – and even objective and normative – reading of that film. In Robert Johnston's words, ''There is a danger, as anyone teaching in the field of Christianity and the arts knows, in having overenthusiastic viewers find Christ-figures in and behind every crossbar or mysterious origin'' (R. Johnston, 2000, p. 53). John Lyden similarly argues that ''If every bloodied hero becomes a Christ figure . . . it will seem that we can find Christianity in every action film,'' the net result of this being that this may ''stretch the interpretation of such films to the breaking point and do an injustice both to Christianity and to the films in question'' (Lyden, 2003, p. 24). To give one recent example, the fact that, upon a superficial rendering, in Clint Eastwood's Oscar-winning film *Mystic River* (2003) the protagonist, Jimmy Markum (Sean Penn), has tattooed on his skin a large Christian cross might suggest that he qualifies as a Christ-figure. After all, to further the correlation, he is, in Charlene Burns's words, ''a suffering man with a cross on his back, albeit made of ink rather than wood'' (Burns, 2004, ¶11). However, when one considers that Jimmy is a vengeful murderer and thief who certainly suffers for the death of his daughter but is, by the film's denouement, far from racked with guilt for having killed his best friend, Dave Boyle (Tim Robbins), whom Jimmy had wrongly supposed to be responsible for his daughter's murder, it is very far from obvious that Jimmy comprises a Christ-figure. If, as Burns indicates, ''A Christ-figure is an innocent victim for whose suffering we are responsible and through whose suffering we are redeemed'' (ibid.), then it is apparent that none of the characters in this film meets this criterion. If we simply impose Christian symbolism on to such films, then we fail to hear what these motion pictures are saying

in their own right. To call a film character a Christ-figure is, above all, dishonest if that identification is made without regard for the *context* within which the alleged Christ-figure appears, and, at the very least, it ''borders on triteness'' (Marsh, 2004, p. 51). As Robert Pope asserts with respect to the animated movie *Chicken Run* (Peter Lord & Nick Park, 2000), it is not impossible to discern a Christ-figure motif even here in that Rocky the Rooster comes from a realm beyond (the chicken farm) and, through him, the chickens hope to fly (or ascend) to freedom. But, Pope wisely counsels, this ''pushes the analogy further than it really ought to go if we are to regard an animated chicken as a 'Christ-figure,' '' and he continues that ''to push it thus would serve only to demonstrate either the banality of the category itself or the desperation of theologians to find connections with modern culture'' (Pope, 2005, p. 174) (figure 1).

It may well be the case that, as Léonie Caldecott recently observed in her contribution to the appropriately named volume *Flickering Images*, ''The cinema bears more than a passing resemblance to the cave in [Plato's] *Republic*, where we sit watching the flickering images and shadows of the *Matrix* trilogy on the wall'' (Caldecott, 2005, p. 50), but it is the *uncritical* use of theology in film that should prompt us to exercise caution. It is tempting to suggest, in light of the proliferation in recent years both in university modules and in textbooks in the field of theology/religion and film, that any interaction between theology and film is an innovative and exciting way forward for the discipline of theology, but this is to overlook the inadequacy of much of the work that has been produced in this area. Before we even begin to look at the interface between theology and film, we have to acknowledge that there is no one normative or objective theological framework through which one may attempt to enter into a conversation. It is one thing to suggest that there is scope for ''doing theology through film,'' but ''theology'' is not an objective or monolithic term. There is a multiplicity of ways of ''doing theology'' – dependent on whether you are an Anglican, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Quaker, or Russian Orthodox Christian, or, for that matter, whether you are non-practicing or non-believing. These tensions are in evidence within even the same volume of a recent textbook in this area, *Cinéma Divinité: Religion, Theology and the Bible in Film*. Whereas William Telford, one of the book's editors, explains that he approaches theology as an academic or intellectual discipline capable of being practiced irrespective of one's faith (Telford, 2005, p. 26), Gerard Loughlin writes in the book's introduction that ''theology can only really be undertaken in faith, the communities and cultures of those who understand themselves to stand in relation to a

Figure 1 The crucifixion pose of Phil Connors (Bill Murray) in *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993) is a prime illustration of the attempt to read Christ-figures into films on the basis of their purported visual correlation with the New Testament Jesus.
Photograph: Columbia/Tri-Star/The Kobal Collection

transcendent source, and recognize and seek to understand such a relationship'' (Loughlin, 2005, p. 3). He even goes so far as to argue that any theology that is undertaken outside of such a relationship ''has no real object of learning, and is a kind of vacuity'' (ibid.). It may, further, be the case that you are a Reconstructionist Jew, a Zen Buddhist, or a Sufi Muslim. Are all theological explorations going to be the same? Without attending to what Marsh refers to as ''the specifics of what religions (in all

their internal diversity, as well as difference from each other) actually claim and promote'' (Marsh, 1998, ¶11), it is misleading and condescending to even begin to attempt a theological conversation in this way.

Developing a Methodology

There is also the consideration that theologians will necessarily disagree among themselves as to the appropriate *method* by which to engage with film. One of the most vitriolic contributions in recent years has come from Steve Nolan, an English Baptist minister, who has argued that the methodology that most theologians favor – a literary approach to film – is inherently flawed. Castigating the work of John May, Robert Johnston, and others (including one of the authors of this book) who tend to see film as a ''visual story,'' Nolan argues that ''film is not literature – and a literary approach is not sympathetic to film'' (Nolan, 2005, p. 26), since it fails ''to treat film in its own terms'' (ibid.). In its place, Nolan uses the methodology of Lacanian film theory with a view to seeing that ''the event of making and watching a film becomes a set of signs pointing us to a range of meanings which will always exceed the signs themselves'' (ibid., pp. 26–7). His main argument is that ''to earn critical respect theologians must answer the question: what have theology or religious studies brought to the study of film other than subjective opinion?,'' and he concludes that theological film critics have ''succeeded only in leaving their readers with the question: 'So what?' '' (ibid., p. 27). Melanie Wright has made a similar claim in her 2007 publication *Religion and Film: An Introduction*. For Wright, literary and filmic texts necessarily make different demands of their respective audiences, in that ''A written text draws on verbal sign systems,'' whereas ''in film a multiplicity of different signifiers (aural, visual, verbal) are contained within the space of a single frame or series of frames'' (Wright, 2007, p. 21). While acknowledging that such tendencies are not surprising in that most theology and religious studies practitioners have historically privileged literary texts over other media, Wright is concerned that too little of the work published to date in the area of theology/religion and film has picked up on the fundamental incongruity between literature and film. In her words, ''film's basic building blocks are the shot (the photographic record made when film is exposed to light, or its digital equivalent) and the editorial cut (the transition between shots, made in the pre-digital age by splicing the end of one shot to the beginning of another) but little

religion (or theology) and film work explores these fundamentals'' (ibid., p. 22). In a nutshell, to quote Jolyon Mitchell, ''The danger is that the attempt to 'read' a film turns it into something that it is not: a written text. Films cannot be reduced to mere words to be analyzed. Other skills, such as visual sensitivity, are required to analyze a film'' (Mitchell, 2005, p. 744). In relying upon literary models of film criticism, the rich resources of film criticism and theory – such as sound, editing, cinematography, and *mise-en-scène*, as well as theoretical approaches including psychoanalytic, semiotic, formalist, impressionistic, poststructuralist, Marxist, feminist, and gay and lesbian[1] – are thereby being ignored. As Wright sees it, key questions are thus raised ''about what is really going on in the discussions that purport to bring the worlds of film and religion into dialogue'' (2007, p. 22), and she asks whether, despite the plethora of books and courses in this area, *film* is really being studied at all.

Yet, although it is demonstrably the case that most of the work undertaken by theological film critics is to ''read'' films as texts, with parallels made to literary criticism – the writings of Robert Jewett and Larry Kreitzer spring most obviously to mind – this is nevertheless a useful starting-point for our understanding of theology and film. Wright is no doubt correct that ''A decent course on film within a theology and/or religious-studies program should regard familiarizing students with key areas of film-studies practice as one of its aims'' (Wright, 2007, p. 23), but too much can be made of the ''literature'' vs. ''film'' dichotomy. The fact that much of film criticism over the years has also gone down the path of ''reading'' films as ''texts'' (Hollows & Jancovich's 1995 *Approaches to Popular Film* is one such example) suggests that, as Anthony Clarke puts it, ''film still holds significant connections with literature'' (Clarke, 2005, p. 61). Alister McGrath's anthology of *Christian Literature*, published in 2001, presents clear grounds for interchange with the study of film, as denoted by the discussion that appears in his preface concerning what is precisely meant by the term ''Christian literature.'' He writes that no definition ''has yet been offered which is immune from criticism or modification'' (McGrath, 2001, p. xiv), but the four questions he then proceeds to ask are particularly germane to the theology–film field:

- Is the essentially ''Christian'' element in literature [for which we could substitute film] related to its content, its form, or the interpretation offered?
- Must a piece of writing [or a film] be *exclusively* Christian to count as ''Christian literature'' [or film]?

- Can a minimalist definition be offered, by which ''Christian'' means ''not offending Christian sensibilities,'' or ''not contradicting Christian beliefs''?
- Is fiction disqualified from being a Christian literary [or filmic] form on account of its non-factuality? (ibid.)

McGrath then follows these questions with the identification of three broad categories within which ''works which would generally be agreed to be regarded as 'Christian literature' '' (ibid.) could be said to fall. The first of these comprises those works ''which are specifically written to serve the needs of Christians – such as prayers, devotional works, and sermons'' (ibid.). The filmic equivalent would be movies whose explicit aim is to bolster the faith of Christian audience members. A film such as *The Omega Code* (Robert Marcarelli, 1999), whose producers are affiliated with the Christian cable channel Trinity Broadcasting Network, is a particularly good case in point. The film, which draws on the Torah, the Book of Revelation, and Michael Drosnin's novel *The Bible Code* for its inspiration, delineates an apocalyptic war between the forces of darkness and light, and is cited on the evangelical website Christian Spotlight on the Movies – a site whose explicit aim is, in an age of what it identifies as lying, greed, pornography, adultery, fornication, rape, and murder, to present the Gospel of Jesus Christ in ways that traditional missionaries cannot (Taylor, 1996) – as ''THE film for Christians to recommend. It is THE film to take the 'lost' to see. We should support this film with the 'best' word-of-mouth advertising we can give it. *The Omega Code* deserves all the enthusiasm of *Star Wars*'' (Downs, 1999). Although McGrath does not specifically refer to a missiological dimension, his assertion that works that belong in this first category ''are a response to the nature of the Christian faith, and can be seen as both responding to the needs of that faith and expressing its nature'' (ibid.) would certainly accommodate those cultural products that seek to do more than simply preach to the converted. Accordingly, the critical reaction to Mel Gibson's chronicle of the last 12 hours in the life of Jesus, *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), would also legitimate inclusion in this category. Although it is not a self-contained piece of work that can be judged simply on the basis of what happens on screen, inasmuch as if one is already a committed Christian then one will be much more likely to understand and better placed to accept the graphic depiction of violence on offer than if one is approaching from an outsider's perspective, these words from another Christian Spotlight contributor suggests that there is a strong missiological

dimension to this picture: ''I am closer to Jesus now after witnessing his sacrifice for me in its full horror and brutality. My hope is that somehow this film will be taken as a witnessing tool around the world... because I believe in this film there is the power to bring millions to Christ'' (qtd in Willis, 2004). A more detailed exposition of films that belong in this category will appear later in this chapter in a discussion of the fifth of H. Richard Niebuhr's models of ''Christ'' and ''culture'' (Niebuhr, 1952, ch. 6).

McGrath's second category encompasses general literature that is not specific to the Christian faith, but that has been ''shaped or influenced by Christian ideas, values, images, and narratives'' (McGrath, 2001, p. xiv), irrespective of whether the writers would identify themselves as Christian. The lyrical ballads of Wordsworth and Coleridge would thus qualify in this section. This links with how, for Robert Johnston, ''Some movies are simply inexplicable except from a Christian theological perspective'' (R. Johnston, 2000, p. 51). A film such as *The Da Vinci Code* (Ron Howard, 2006) would be an obvious candidate for inclusion here. For what is relevant is not whether a movie can propagate or sustain the Christian faith (though anecdotal evidence suggests that, after reading the Dan Brown novel or watching the film adaptation, *The Da Vinci Code* caused an upsurge in the number of people keen to join Opus Dei), but the extent to which Christian beliefs, doctrines, teachings, and history have strongly influenced – even inspired – its subject matter. In the case of *The Da Vinci Code*, the plot hinges on the quest to find the Holy Grail of Christian legend, the identity of Mary Magdalene, and the disclosure that one of the lead characters, Sophie Neveu (Audrey Tautou), is the last living descendant of Jesus Christ. However, the fact that one can spot Christian themes in a film is not the same thing as saying that the filmmaker is ''covertly affirming a Christian perspective'' (R. Johnston, 2000, p. 70). As with the discussion above concerning the uncritical appropriation of cinematic Christ-figures, where there is often a tendency to falsely baptize a film character as a functional equivalent of Jesus Christ (see Kozlovic, 2004), movies do not need to be explicitly Christian in their content or form to be theologically significant. It is much more appropriate to see film as an expression of broader cultural[2] influences that may or may not encompass distinctively Christian elements. The intentions of film directors will sometimes ''cohere with theological interests and purposes, even if those intentions are very diverse and not overtly religious or theological'' (Marsh, 2004, p. 107) – and this should be sufficient. It may be the case that an audience watching *The Da Vinci*

Code or *Edward Scissorhands* (Tim Burton, 1990) will find theological motifs in these films, and read them as theological – even faith-inspiring – texts, but it does not ultimately matter if we can penetrate the mind(s) of the filmmaker(s) and glean whether or not they had a theological agenda in creating them. Sometimes, albeit unintentionally, it may well be the case that a non-explicitly Christian film will be more faith-inspiring for viewers than the likes of *The Omega Code* and Gibson's *Passion*. Writing in the context of theological aesthetics, and the religiosity of sacred works of art, Pie-Raymond Régamey argued some fifty years ago that a pious and faith-oriented perspective (along the lines of McGrath's first category, perhaps) is not always the most helpful anyway:–

> It is not surprising if the works that the pious artist produces for pious people manifest clearly the dull, dispirited devotion that belongs to the common faith of many today . . . We have to conclude that in certain cases a non-Christian will have a deeper, more genuine, and more effective feeling for the theme or function of a work than will a Christian.
>
> (Régamey, 2004, p. 224)

Régamey's argument is that if the artist begins from the starting-point of faith, the work of art concerned may be ''artificially manipulated for the good of the cause'' (ibid.), and that there may be among non-believers a ''far more intense and demanding'' process at work ''than is to be found among many Christians!'' (ibid., p. 225).

Of course, this is very different from the first of McGrath's categories, where confessional works, made by Christians and for Christians, were discussed. However, it is in McGrath's third, and final, category that we find a further development of the relationship between theology and literature (and, by implication, film). This is where the influence of Christianity is apparent, as in categories one and two, but there is evidence of an ''appropriation, development, or modification of Christian assumptions'' (McGrath, 2001, p. xv). Rather than merely illustrate and reflect Christian ideas, along the lines of films that bear witness to purported Christ-figure motifs such as *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (Steven Spielberg, 1982) and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Milos Forman, 1975), this third category comprises those works that challenge and even subvert dominant theological paradigms, for example by setting up a dichotomy between what Christianity traditionally espouses on matters of doctrine or ethics and what happens in experience. The aforementioned *The End of the Affair*, which questions and even subverts fundamental

tenets of Catholic teaching concerning the rationality of the cosmos, the existence of miracles, and the beneficence of the Creator, is a good case in point. There is, further, the case of films such as *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, 1998) and *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998) that not only draw on Christian ideas pertaining to the Creation and Fall of the Book of Genesis but subvert them, inasmuch as it is suggested in these movies that it is theologically beneficial to accept change and disorder rather than live in a sterile, prelapsarian, Edenic paradise, in order for human beings to realize their potential and growth and to exercise their free will. Two of Clint Eastwood's recent films could also be said to correspond to this third category as, in both *Mystic River* (2003) and *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), the efficacy of the Church is challenged. Although the former was cited earlier as a less helpful example of what Steve Nolan would call ''superficial equivalences of realist representation'' (Nolan, 2005, p. 43), once we move beyond the Christ-figure analogy, *Mystic River* could also be seen as a searing indictment of those who, like the Marcum family in the film, see the Roman Catholic Church as ''nothing more than a social institution,'' whose ''teachings have no impact in their lives'' (Burns, 2004, ¶18). Charlene Burns even goes so far as to suggest that the parable of *Mystic River* teaches us that, though ''the symbols of Christianity have been adopted by our culture . . . its substance has not'' (ibid.), and that, in a fallen world, the institutional Church is actually complicit in that fallenness. This will be discussed further in the chapter on justice. In *True Crime* (1998), further, Eastwood can be seen to critique the representatives of the Church as suitable messengers of salvation, as epitomized in the depiction of an unctuous prison chaplain working on Death Row. The secularization of the struggle for redemption, from the Church to the ''mean streets'' of New York's Little Italy, that characterizes much of Martin Scorsese's early work – not least in *Mean Streets* (1973) itself – would also be a good example of this third category, since there can be seen to be a theology actually going on in these films. For all the condemnation that has been meted out by some Church groups to *The Da Vinci Code* for its supposed non-piety – in particular, its suggestion that Christ may have been married to Mary Magdalene and had a child – *The Da Vinci Code* is more akin to an Indiana Jones-style treasure hunt, along the lines of *National Treasure* (Jon Turteltaub, 2004), than a challenging or critical theological exploration of the Graham Greene (in literature) or Martin Scorsese (in film) kind, and this is where the line of demarcation between McGrath's second and third categories could be said to lie.

Christ against Culture

In light of the discussion so far, it is thus easy to concur with Anthony Clarke's claim that ''Whereas some films clearly set out to portray Christian or religious events, such as the various 'Jesus' films, or explore particular religious themes, it would be theology's loss to confine our reflection to this category alone'' (Clarke, 2005, p. 64). Significantly, however, for too long this has been the predominant way in which a theological engagement with culture has been practiced. Peter Horsfield encapsulates the situation well when he writes from his own experience in Australia that ''A persistent issue I have found in working with church leaders around the subject of electronic media is their fear that engaging with electronic media seriously will compromise Christian faith'' (Horsfield, 2003, p. 276). Horsfield continues that for most Church leaders:

> Christianity is a distinct body of ideas and practices, defined and defended most effectively in theological books and journals. In this common view, electronic media are seen as more than just another form of mediation: their very structure as well as common content are seen as a significant threat to Christianity as a thoughtful, ordered and authoritative faith structure.
>
> (ibid.)

There is thus a sense in which only a limited and partial engagement with culture can be permitted, since cultural activity is to a very real extent an anathema to Christian beliefs and values. The underlying consideration here would seem to be that Christianity and culture are divergent – and irreconcilable – entities, in a manner that corresponds to what H. Richard Niebuhr had to say on the subject. Niebuhr, an American Christian theologian based at Harvard Divinity School, proposed, in his seminal 1952 publication *Christ and Culture*, five ways in which Christ and culture can be said to relate, the first of which directly concerns us at this juncture. This first model is that of *Christ against Culture*. In Niebuhr's words, ''Whatever may be the customs of the society in which the Christian lives, and whatever the human achievements it conserves, Christ is seen as opposed to them, so that he confronts men with the challenge of an 'either-or' decision'' (Niebuhr, 1952, p. 54). There is a clear biblical antecedent for this model. In the First Letter of John, the world is pictured as a realm that is under the power of evil and ''into which the citizens of the kingdom of light must not enter'' (ibid., p. 61). As Niebuhr puts it, this worldly realm constitutes ''a culture that is

concerned with temporal and passing values, whereas Christ has words of eternal life'' (ibid.). In the early Church, also, Tertullian can be seen to bear witness to this model, as betokened by his rejection of Christian participation in the Roman state, including military service, trade, philosophy, and the arts (ibid., p. 66). In the twentieth century, such an exclusivist picture would find a ready sympathy in the theology of Karl Barth, for whom, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, God is Wholly Other and theology should thus be self-validating (Barth, 1967, p. 39). Barth was mindful of the fact that, if we are not careful, theology could all too easily become a mere tool for the promotion of a wholly human agenda, as was the case, Barth thought, with Rudolf Bultmann's program of demythologization and appropriation of Heideggerean existentialism. In short, for Barth, nothing that is created by humans can enable revelation to happen, since there is no point of consciousness between God and man – only God can reveal God, and as human beings we are utterly lost before God. Regarding the concept of ''beauty,'' for example, Barth believed that it was dangerous to apply such a human and secular adjective to the transcendent God:

> If we say now that God is beautiful, and make this statement the final explanation of the assertion that God is glorious, do we not jeopardize or even deny the majesty and holiness and righteousness of God's love? Do we not bring God in a sinister because in a sense intimate way into the sphere of man's oversight and control, into proximity to the ideal of all human striving?
>
> (Barth, 2004, p. 315)

The downside of this approach, however, is that it is not particularly dialogical – indeed, there is extremely limited scope for entering into a conversation between ''theology'' and ''culture.'' The ultimate authority and point of reference of what is and is not acceptable emanates from pre-established theological norms. In his influential publication *Knowing God*, James Packer epitomizes the problem from a Calvinist position. Stressing the Protestant preference for the written word over images, Packer, writing in 1973, believes that even reverential pictures and statues of Jesus contravene this position, since ''those who make images and use them in worship, and thus inevitably take their theology from them, will in fact tend to neglect God's revealed will at every point. The mind that takes up with images is a mind that has not yet learned to love and attend to God's Word'' (Packer, qtd in R. Johnston, 2000, p. 75). As we shall see later, this goes against the grain of how for Paul Tillich – who

was brought up a Lutheran – neither the religious nor the secular realm ''should be in separation from the other,'' since both ''are rooted in religion in the larger sense of the word'' (Tillich, 1964, p. 9), but during the course of the twentieth century, since the inception of film, the *Christ against Culture* position has been particularly influential. It is explored, for instance, in Mark Joseph's book *The Rock & Roll Rebellion* (1999), where the point is made that ''From the moment Elvis first swayed his hips and Bill Haley rocked around the clock, rock and roll has been on a collision course with millions of Americans . . . It was seen as the Devil's music and to be avoided at all costs'' (Joseph, 1999, pp. 1–2). In this light it is worth noting the following quotation from David Noebel with respect to the Beatles, cited in the same volume:

> They wanted to subvert Western culture. They were pro-drugs, pro-evolution, and pro-promiscuous sex; anti-Christ and more . . . Rock music is a negation of soul, spirit and mind, and is destructive to the body . . . The muscles are weakened, the heartbeat is affected, and the adrenal glands and sex hormones are upset by continued listening . . . It's also been shown that rock music destroys house plants. If it destroys God's plants, what's it doing to young people?
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> (in ibid., p. 3)

This position also coincides with the ''Condemnation'' model identified by William Romanowski in *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture* (2001, p. 12). While such an approach is manifest in such consumer tactics as boycotts, Romanowski suggests that ''it is perhaps more pervasive as an attitude that aligns Hollywood or popular culture with the realm of evil as opposed to the Kingdom of God'' (Romanowski, 2001, p. 12). Accordingly, ''If the popular arts are 'of the devil,' the only recourse for Christians is complete abstinence,'' to the point, indeed, that, for some churchgoers, only the complete renunciation of secular culture ''is the mark of a true believer'' (ibid.). Further evidence of this position can be seen in Robert Johnston's ''Avoidance'' model (R. Johnston, 2000, pp. 43–5). In *Reel Spirituality*, Johnston refers to the large numbers of Christians who have grown up in homes where it is believed that, even if movies are not actually sinful, ''the cinema was at least not morally uplifting or a good use of leisure time'' (ibid., p. 24) and should thus be avoided. As Johnston puts it, ''The father of one of my friends worried, for example, about what would happen if he were in a theater when Jesus returned. Surely Jesus would not approve!'' (ibid.) Writing in the introduction to Herbert Miles's 1947 publication *Movies and Morals*,

Hyman Appleman went so far as to castigate movies as ''next to liquor, the outstanding menace to America and to the world,'' while for Miles himself movies were believed to constitute ''the organ of the devil, the idol of sinners, the sink of infamy, the stumbling block to human progress, the moral cancer of civilization, the Number One Enemy of Jesus Christ'' (qtd in R. Johnston, 2000, p. 43; see also Clarke & Fiddes, 2005, p. ix). John Lyden refers to similar ideas in his 2003 publication *Film as Religion*, where the point is made that sexual themes in films initially gave rise, in America at the beginning of the twentieth century, to prohibition and censorship. The police in Chicago, for instance, were authorized to confiscate any films that they deemed to be ''immoral'' or ''obscene'' (Lyden, 2003, p. 127).

Especially in its early days, the Church as a body also played a prominent role in attempts to control the movie industry. In 1929, the Catholic Movie Code in America called for censorship of nudity and explicit sexuality and for the positive reinforcement of religious, family, and societal values over against what it perceived as the decadence of the film industry. This code became the basis for the Hays Office Code, which was named after Will Hays, an elder in the Presbyterian Church as well as chairman of the Republican Party, who became the first president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association in 1922. Hays believed that, at a time of social uncertainty (specifically in relation to the Depression), film should be employed to bolster national morale, and that the mission of the film industry should be one of prescribing what audiences ought to feel rather than reflecting what they were actually experiencing and suffering. This is demonstrated by the recommendation of Joseph Breen, head of the Studio Relations Department at the Hays Office, in a letter to Samuel Goldwyn in 1937 concerning the screenplay for the film *Dead End* (William Wyler, 1937). For Breen counseled that the picture should not emphasize ''the presence of filth, or smelly garbage cans, or garbage floating in the river'' (qtd in Tuska, 1984, p. 137), but conform to more conservative and inoffensive standards. Breen was a devoted Roman Catholic, and his involvement with Hollywood was recently dramatized in Martin Scorsese's biopic of the life of Howard Hughes, *The Aviator* (2004), in which Breen is depicted as remonstrating with Hughes over the inappropriateness of portraying nudity on screen, specifically in the context of the disclosure of Jane Russell's breasts in Hughes's film *The Outlaw* (1934). Similar tensions can be seen to exist in the objectives of the Catholic Legion of Decency, founded in 1933, the present-day incarnation of which is the United States Conference of Catholic

Bishops' Office for Film and Broadcasting. The Legion asked its members to ''remain away from all motion pictures except those which do not offend decency and Catholic morality'' (qtd in Johnston, 2000, p. 36), and Johnston notes that within just a few months of this pronouncement seven million to nine million Catholics had observed it to the letter. Indeed, in 1934, Cardinal Dougherty of Philadelphia referred to this edict as ''binding all in conscience under pain of sin'' (ibid.), and cinema attendance in Philadelphia subsequently dropped by 40 percent. In more recent years, the film *Priest* (Antonia Bird, 1994), which depicts a Roman Catholic cleric in a Liverpool parish indulging in a homosexual relationship, was denounced by the American cardinal John O'Connor for being ''as viciously anti-Catholic as anything that has ever rotted on the silver screen'' (Ortiz, 2003, p. 186).

It is worth stating at this juncture that it would be wrong to conclude that all Roman Catholics see film as the epitome of all that is unholy and as a barrier to the promulgation of Christian values. As will be discussed in relation to the third of Niebuhr's five categories, there are many within Catholicism – including, not least, Martin Scorsese – for whom film can expand the theologian's understanding and enable a greater insight to be achieved. This sacramental and incarnational approach may be at odds with the Catholic Movie Code and the Catholic Legion of Decency, but Catholic film juries over the years (under the auspices of SIGNIS) at such festivals as Venice, Locarno, and Cannes have increasingly been able to see film as an important arbiter of cultural meaning, where it is the responsibility of the Church to read ''the signs of the times.'' When *Priest* was shown at the Berlin Film Festival in 1994, it is significant that the Catholic members of the Ecumenical Jury issued a press release acknowledging that issues of ''clerical celibacy and homosexual relationships of priests are a real problem of the Catholic Church,'' but signaling that the Church should not be avoiding or denying sexually related issues but should ''confront, reflect on and clarify them'' (qtd in Ortiz, 2003, p. 187). Provocative and controversial though the film's issues may be, the jury's statement sought to draw attention to the many ''positive Christian themes and values'' that they found to be ''strongly present'' in Antonia Bird's film, such as ''the search for God, the involvement of the faith community, prayer, the Eucharist, solidarity, forgiveness,'' and ''reconciliation'' (ibid.). Notwithstanding the very real threat that many Catholics genuinely feel is created by film, the opportunity afforded by the silver screen to enter into dialogue with culture should not be underestimated. That the press release was endorsed by the bishop of Berlin,

with the film then scheduled for screenings to Catholic communities across Germany (ibid.), does suggest that the goalposts have the capacity to be moved. At the very least, as Johnston notes, many people who previously urged Christians to abstain from cultural engagement now argue for *caution* instead. In his words, ''Given the advent of the television age, abstinence is less and less a practical (or practiced) option'' (R. Johnston, 2000, p. 59).

That said, however, whereas in Catholicism there are clear signs that a position of complete abstinence is not widely endorsed, new forms of conservatism, especially in Protestant America, have returned to the top of the agenda. In the *Explorations in Theology and Film* volume, published in 1997, mention was made of the assertiveness of the so-called ''New Right'' (see Marsh & Ortiz, 1997c, p. 246), which ''bemoans the decline of 'Christendom' '' and mourns ''the loss of the impact of Christianity upon Western, cultural values,'' with a view to reasserting ''traditional values'' and ''reclaiming Christianity's proclamatory voice in Western society'' (ibid.). Accordingly, unless film is suitable for family viewing and promotes family values, the old tensions between the sacred and the profane, the religious and the secular, ''theology'' and ''culture,'' will persist. In the words of the conservative critic Michael Medved, ''In our private lives, most of us deplore violence and feel little sympathy for the criminals who perpetuate it; but movies, TV, and popular music all revel in graphic brutality, glorifying vicious and sadistic characters who treat killing as a joke'' (qtd in Lynch, 2005, pp. 84–5). More will be said on this particular point in the chapter on violence. For the moment, though, it is significant that even films that espouse traditional values of ''good'' versus ''evil'' are not immune from attack from conservative Christians, as the criticism of the *Harry Potter* books and movies has shown. J. K. Rowling's 2000 entry in the series, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, was attacked by some Christian groups for its ostensibly sympathetic portrayal of witchcraft, yet, as Lyden observes, the *Harry Potter* stories ''deal largely with a conflict between those who would use magic for good and those who would use it for evil, so that its morality is quite traditional'' (Lyden, 2003, p. 249). In his book *The Last Temptation of Hollywood*, Larry Poland goes even further: ''If there is no 'chilling effect' for film and TV producers from the deeply religious majority in America, we will be seeing child molesting, cannibalism, sado-masochism, bestiality, and even 'snuff' films soon accepted as 'art' on the major movie screens of America'' (qtd in R. Johnston, 2000, p. 44). Since Poland's book is a play on the title of Scorsese's 1988 Jesus film, *The Last Temptation*

of Christ, brief reference to the controversy that this inspired among conservative groups would not be out of place, not least because it was, in Robin Riley's eyes, ''one of the most prominent episodes in the recent history of popular culture to challenge fundamental beliefs about the sacred'' (Riley, 2003, p. 1), engendering as it did a feverish debate between religious conservative protestors and liberal progressive defenders. Whereas, on the one hand, in his adaptation of Nikos Kazantzakis's novel, Scorsese may have seen himself ''as an important instigator of social change, bringing about new ways of seeing Jesus Christ'' (ibid., p. 38), it has been argued, conversely, that all that really happened is that liberal progressives and religious conservatives ''became locked in a struggle for legitimacy, attacking the weakness of the opposition while reaffirming their own institutional legitimacy'' (ibid., p. 3). Riley's detailed investigation into the way in which Scorsese's fictionalized biopic polarized America, *Film, Faith, and Cultural Conflict*, is a significant work, since his study of the various and competing ways in which the film was received and perceived – from a work of blasphemy and sacrilege that ought to be destroyed, to a challenge that must be surmounted, to religious expression of which the freedom is protected by the American Constitution – says much about the state of relations in modern America. On the one hand, there are those who are critical of a theological engagement with culture (along the lines of Niebuhr's *Christ against Culture* model), and on the other, there are those, such as Universal Studios, which produced the film, for whom ''no one sect or coalition has the power to set boundaries around each person's freedom to explore religious and philosophical questions whether through speech, books or films'' (qtd in ibid., p. 69).

It is hard not to conclude from this that a fissure has thereby opened between conservative and liberal positions in America today. At one point, Riley even labels Scorsese a ''heretic'' (ibid., p. 11) and claims that ''Critics that argue for the unfettered right of a film to blaspheme are in effect campaigning for the right to selectively offend the members of those they disagree with, namely religious conservatives, by abusing their religious beliefs'' (ibid., p. 95). Since it is Riley's contention that as ''a protected representation of free speech,'' *Last Temptation* ''serves to sanction the persecution and victimization of religious conservatives'' (ibid., p. 117), is the solution to ban outright anything that offends? It is our view that, whether we are speaking of religious fanaticism and fundamentalism (or, for that matter, the media's trivialization of cultural values and moral standards), there is much work to be done in continuing

mutual conversation instead of resorting to authoritarian edict, censorship, or even hostilities as remedies for the cultural crisis of the new millennium. Otherwise, it is hard to see how, to cite Riley in the conclusion of *Film, Faith, and Cultural Conflict*, there can ever be a renewed commitment to the processes of dialogue and reconciliation, ''opening the way for honest and constructive dialogue between competing segments'' (ibid., p. 127). It cannot be denied that the removal of rancor and scapegoating (a prominent theme in Riley's book) is a genuinely good thing, but at the cost of freedom of religious expression it is difficult to see how the banning of films and other cultural products that offend is going to bring us any closer to what Riley identifies as the ''ideal'' of ''a more tolerant society'' (ibid., p. 123).

The prognosis is not altogether promising, as the release of Gibson's *Passion* in 2004 served to exacerbate the tensions even further. However, in a twist of irony, whereas the *Last Temptation* controversy in 1988 may have involved religious conservatives falling victim to an unsympathetic and intolerant media and legal system, which ultimately sanctioned the right of Scorsese's film to be released, Gibson's ultra-orthodox version of the Jesus story was sanctioned by conservative groups and scorned by liberals. Scorsese's biopic may have fueled similar antagonisms, but when conservative Christians such as Pat Buchanan saw the debate over Gibson's film as ''a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America'' (qtd in Berenbaum & Landres, 2004, p. 8), it is clear that, unlike in 1988, Gibson's film is seen to lie on the winning side! Despite claims that the film is anti-Semitic (see Deacy, 2005, pp. 117–26), some of the film's defenders – including Gibson himself – have turned such allegations on their head, claiming that to criticize the film is tantamount to attacking Christianity itself (Berenbaum & Landres, 2004, p. 8). In the words of Berenbaum and Landres in their book *After* The Passion *Is Gone*, Gibson's defenders ''spun'' these counter-claims ''as evidence that there was a conspiracy to destroy the film and discredit Christianity'' (ibid., p. 3), which in turn allowed Gibson, they allege, to portray himself as a martyr and a hero. As Jeffrey Siker sees it, ''Gibson's film can be seen as a kind of embodiment of these more conservative voices, a reactionary counterpunch to current developments in historical research and in constructive Christian theology'' (Siker, 2004, p. 144), not least in the way that the film has ''touched a nerve with Christians who believe that scholars and church leaders alike are selling out some of the deepest doctrinal commitments of their faith'' (ibid., p. 143).

This has enormous ramifications for our understanding of the relationship between theology and culture. As William Cork notes, having conducted a study of internet discussions of *The Passion* among evangelical Protestant groups, the ''emotional defense of the film'' has had the concomitant effect of ''preventing objective discussion of the questions that it raised'' (Cork, 2004, p. 38). Although Cork sees some positive benefit in the use of blogging and web-posting, in that participants' online interaction ''is a bonding experience'' (ibid., p. 42) that can bring ''together people of different backgrounds or beliefs who might never meet in the brick-and-mortar world'' (ibid.), it is significant that he qualifies his conclusion that internet communications can serve the positive function of passing ''on to a younger generation what we have already learned and shared'' with the following clause: ''provided that they are used effectively for education and understanding'' (ibid., p. 41). It is the very absence of an educational dimension that was responsible for initiating J. Shawn Landres and Michael Berenbaum's collection *After* The Passion *Is Gone* in the first place. As the editors explain in the introduction, ''Mel Gibson has the right to make and distribute almost any kind of film he likes, but the rules of civil society and scholarship require that he and his defenders respect the rights of critics, scholars, and others to analyze and evaluate the film'' (Berenbaum & Landres, 2004, p. 7). Crucially, the editors affirm their opposition to those defenders and critics alike who ''use threatening or demonizing language to denigrate those who do not share their views'' (ibid., p. 8), to the point that ''This book attempts what too many of *The Passion*'s defenders, as well as some of its critics, refused to do: to engage in reasoned scholarly discussion'' (ibid., p. 10). Whatever the views of the book's contributors, what lies at the heart of their endeavors is ''a spirit of collaborative scholarly inquiry that acknowledges the possibility of other positions even as it respects each person's right to assert his or her own viewpoint'' (ibid.). Since, as one of the contributors, David Elcott, attests, ''*The Passion of the Christ* is not about Jews; it is about an increasingly polarized America'' where ''Religious assaults that divide us into the forces of absolute good and absolute evil are a sure recipe for increased hatred'' (Elcott, 2004, p. 240), Gibson's film is clearly a barometer of the tensions that exist in contemporary America between conservative and liberal Christians over the use – and abuse – of cultural agencies.

Such is the state of play in America today that, in 2005, 12 Imax cinemas refused to show films that refer to the theory of evolution for fear of a backlash from conservative Christians. Such educational films as

Cosmic Voyage (Bayley Silleck, 1996), *Galapagos: The Enchanted Voyage* (David Clark & Al Giddings, 1999), and *Volcanoes of the Deep Sea* (Stephen Low, 2003), many of which are shown in Imax cinemas located in science museums, were withdrawn, following written comments from audience members such as, ''I really hate it when the theory of evolution is presented as fact'' and ''I don't agree with [the filmmakers'] presentation of human existence'' (qtd in BBC News, 2005). According to Lisa Buzzelli, director of the Charleston Imax Cinema in South Carolina, ''We have definitely a lot more 'creation' public than 'evolution' public'' (ibid.). Despite the constraints identified by David Jasper in his contribution to *Explorations in Theology and Film*, namely that, when ''used in the wrong hands,'' both theology and film can be ''dangerous and powerful instruments'' (Jasper, 1997, p. 236), it is our contention, a decade later, that we can do nothing else but bring culture and theology into serious dialogue in an effort to understand the post-9/11 world in which we live, where we have indeed seen ''wrong hands'' wreak havoc. Although the specific context within which Jasper was writing is that – not least in the discussion of films that bear witness to Christ-figure motifs – ''the shadow of theology is ever present in stories which would never be conceived of in themselves as theological or even religious'' (ibid.), a comparable warning could be raised here in relation to the way in which films such as Gibson's *Passion* have been employed to sanction an exclusivist and reactionary theology. Referring to its intense display of violence, Susannah Heschel goes so far as to argue that *The Passion* ''sanctifies a nationalistic memory of the horrific events of September 11: a Passion of America during which innocent, defenceless Americans were attacked over and over in a most brutal fashion in an unthinkable, unprecedented, unwarranted brutal assault that killed thousands of innocent people and left thousands of families bereft'' (Heschel, 2004, p. 177). Similar dangers are in evidence in the links that Mark Juergensmeyer makes between the film's phenomenal success and ''the current preoccupation with religious terrorism'' (Juergensmeyer, 2004, p. 279). Although, as Juergensmeyer notes, those who perpetrate terrorism in the film are Jewish rather than Muslim – as evinced by ''the shadowy, bearded and robed figures'' (ibid., p. 281) of the Jewish Sanhedrin – he proceeds to ask whether it is

> such a stretch to imagine that in Middle America, any bearded, robed enemy of Christendom might be viewed as a part of a generic ''Other'' capable of the most hideous anti-American terrorist acts? . . . [T]hey could be any of the shadowy, bearded and robed figures in America's image of terrorist

> activists – the Ayatollah Khomeini of the Iranian Revolution, Sheik Omar Abdul-Rahman of the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center, Sheik Abdul Yassin of Hamas, or Osama bin Laden of al-Qaeda.
>
> (ibid., pp. 281–2)

Another danger presented when films are ''used in the wrong hands'' arises from the tendency among more conservative groups to expound a critique of a film that is what Lynch calls ''very high on criticism and very low on thoughtful analysis'' (Lynch, 2005, p. ix). As Johnston suggests in *Useless Beauty*, ''Some Christian movie critics offer a content analysis of movies as to their moral suitability,'' such as ''the presence, or lack thereof, of sex, violence, coarse language, or a pagan worldview'' (R. Johnston, 2004, p. 183). Some Christian websites such as Christian Spotlight tend to go down this path, which leads to a tendency to pit Christian ''judgment'' against what critics and secular audiences may be inclined to glean from the film. In the case of the Robin Williams family comedy *R.V.* (Barry Sonnenfeld, 2006), for example, in which a dysfunctional family embark on a road trip in a hired recreational vehicle to the Colorado Rockies, Christian Spotlight acknowledges that the picture ''delivers several very funny moments'' but also warns that ''viewers must endure a seemingly endless line of crudeness (occasionally to the point of disgusting), rudeness, and immodesty along the way'' (Soencksen, 2006). When it transpires that the rationale for the trip is that Bob Munro (Robin Williams) has to attend a crucial business meeting in Colorado during a planned holiday to Hawaii or else he will lose his job, and this is his way of attempting to balance his work–family priorities (inevitably to the satisfaction of neither his wife nor his children, none of whom know about the conflict), Christian Spotlight denounces what it sees as ''a gigantic lie,'' and invokes passages from Luke 12 and Proverbs 23 as a retort to its perception of the film's tendency to promote ''greed, covetousness, and materialism'' (ibid.). The site also advises that ''Though nudity and strong sexuality are absent, immodesty is rampant,'' with one character in particular showing ''cleavage in every shot,'' which they fear will cause ''male viewers'' to be ''distracted'' (ibid.). Setting up a dichotomy between Christianity and culture – as made explicit in the stipulation that ''impressionable teens may be influenced by the worldly character of this film'' (ibid.) – Christian Spotlight cites Jesus's warning in Matthew 5:28 that ''every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart,'' and counsels that ''It's a very high standard, but one we must not yield on'' (ibid.). A similar criticism can be found in Michael Medved's review of *Superman Returns* (Bryan Singer,

2006), in which the conservative critic opines that children who see the movie will not fail to notice that ''Lois Lane has followed politically correct trends to become an unwed mother, raising a kid of somewhat mysterious parentage'' (Medved, 2006a). Medved is also quick to disparage *The Fast and the Furious: Tokyo Drift* (Justin Lin, 2006) for, among other things, its ''vague drug references and leering views of loads of scantily clad hotties'' (Medved, 2006b).

Not only does this sort of criticism inhibit the cultivation of a theological conversation, but, to cite Niebuhr regarding the first of his five theological models, it is inadequate to affirm the ''sole dependence of Jesus Christ to the exclusion of culture,'' since ''Christ claims no man purely as a natural being, but always as one who has become human in a culture . . . He cannot dismiss the philosophy and science of his society as though they were external to him; they are in him'' (Niebuhr, 1952, p. 80). It may be possible to ''withdraw from its more obvious institutions and expressions'' (ibid., p. 81), but, as was suggested at the beginning concerning Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Moltmann, nothing we do is ever produced in a cultural vacuum. Even among Christians whose goal, or *telos*, is the future Kingdom of Heaven, it is impossible to completely separate oneself from one's worldly environment, as evinced in the New Testament when St. Paul wrote to the Christian community at Corinth concerning marriage (1 Cor. 7), the role of women in worship (1 Cor. 11: 2–16), and the tenability of eating meat sacrificed to pagan gods (1 Cor. 8: 4–13). Niebuhr, similarly, wrote that ''Though the whole world lies in darkness, yet distinctions must be made between relative rights and wrongs in the world, and in Christian relations to it'' (Niebuhr, 1952, p. 84), and that

> Christians are just like other men, needing to rely wholly on the gracious forgiveness of their sins by God-in-Christ, that Christ is by no means the founder of a new closed society with a new law but the expiator of the sins of the whole world, that the only difference between Christians and non-Christians lies in the spirit with which Christians do the same things as non-Christians.
>
> (ibid., p. 90)

The *Christ against Culture* position thus has serious drawbacks. However, it is worth noting that this model can also work in reverse, with a ''Culture against Christ'' approach the hallmark of many recent works in film studies. It is not so much that an explicit anti-Christian or anti-theological position is taken, more that contributions from theologians and religious

studies specialists tend to be either neglected outright in work carried out by film theorists or given decidedly short shrift. A particular case in point is Peter Matthews's review of *Explorations in Theology and Film* in February 1998 for *Sight and Sound*, where it is said that ''It's hard not to be touched by the book's naïve desire to be now and with it, even if the total effect is as acutely embarrassing as those church services that try out rock music to fetch back the dwindling flock'' (Matthews, 1998, p. 30). Is this not simply an inversion of Barth's call for a separation between culture and theology?

Christ of Culture

Niebuhr's second model of the interrelationship between Christ and culture is qualitatively distinct from the *Christ against Culture* position, as it sees theology as firmly embedded in, rather than in opposition to, culture. In this second approach, which Niebuhr refers to as *Christ of Culture*, we see an agreement between these two entities to the extent that those who subscribe to this position will feel equally at home in the Christian community and in what Niebuhr terms the ''community of culture,'' and will ''feel no great tension between church and world, the social laws and the Gospel, the workings of divine grace and human effort, the ethics of salvation and the ethics of social conservation or progress'' (Niebuhr, 1952, p. 93). In this model, which Johnston sees as a liberal Protestant perspective (R. Johnston, 2000, p. 59) and which according to Niebuhr himself could be labeled ''Culture-Protestantism'' (Niebuhr, 1952, p. 94), there is deemed to be no threat or antagonism on the part of its defenders between Christianity and society. Rather, a two-way process is involved of interpreting culture through Christ and Christ through culture. The seeds of this approach stretch back to the very origins of the Christian Church, where, for Justin Martyr in the second century, Platonism was employed to communicate the Gospel. Justin argued that as divine wisdom had been spread throughout the world, it was not surprising if aspects of the Gospel were reflected outside of the Church. Accordingly, Christianity might be said to build upon and fulfill those anticipations of God's revelation that can be found in pagan philosophy (and for that matter the Old Testament). By the fifth century, St. Augustine had become one of the greatest champions of using secular culture, arguing that if ancient culture and philosophy could be appropriated by Christians then this could

only serve the cause of Christianity. Niebuhr also gives the example of the Gnostics of the second century who sought to ''reconcile the gospel with the science and philosophy of their time'' (Niebuhr, 1952, p. 96), namely, a belief system that saw salvation to be possible not through faith but through knowledge. Niebuhr argues that the Gnostics may have been scorned in their day, but that their position was not fundamentally different from ''those folk in our day who find in psychiatry the key to the understanding of Christ, or in nuclear fission the answer to the problems of eschatology'' (ibid.). Niebuhr may also have had in mind here the theology of Rudolf Bultmann in the twentieth century, for whom the appropriation of Heideggerean existentialism was a vital way of communicating the *kerygma* or proclamation, and the significance of the Christ of faith, in a scientific and technological age. In all such instances, Christ will always be the dominant motif (for all his reduction of the Christian proclamation to existentialist philosophy, no one could accuse Bultmann of being less than Christo-centric), but secular thought-forms and agencies have the capacity to resonate with, and even amplify, the extent to which the Christian message can be discerned.

In the case of the medium of film, this two-way interaction and exchange between Christ and culture have reached their apotheosis in the work of those such as Anton Karl Kozlovic for whom Christ's life and ministry have provided the benchmark for so many popular films (Kozlovic, 2004). Seeing Christ as a role model or exemplar, and the prototype of such movie characters as Edward Scissorhands, E.T. and *The Green Mile*'s (Frank Darabont, 1999) John Coffey, the recent proliferation of work on cinematic Christ-figures is a particularly good illustration of Niebuhr's second model. According to Niebuhr, ''Jesus often appears as a great hero of human culture history; his life and teachings are regarded as the greatest human achievement; in him, it is believed, the aspirations of men toward their values are brought to a point of culmination'' (Niebuhr, 1952, p. 54). This is not wholly distinct from Matthew McEver's claim, in a 1998 article published in the *Journal of Religion and Film*, that, in films whose protagonists may be designated Christ-figures, ''humanity is indebted to those who dare to confront, challenge our thinking patterns, and willingly suffer for it'' (McEver, 1998, ¶29). Forging a correlation between cinematic Christ-figures and the New Testament Jesus, McEver argues that Jesus is very much present ''on the silver screen'' (ibid.), albeit ''not as a prophet and teacher from Nazareth'' but as ''an unlikely redeemer in a prison'' (Lucas Jackson in *Cool Hand*

Luke [Stuart Rosenberg, 1967]), ''a mental hospital'' (Randle P. McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*), ''a class room'' (John Keating in *Dead Poets Society* [Peter Weir, 1989]), or ''inside the home of an abused child'' (Karl Childress in *Sling Blade* [Billy Bob Thornton, 1996]). Underlying McEver's claim is the implicit suggestion that these functional equivalents of Jesus Christ are performing a role that is analogous to that of the New Testament Jesus but that, crucially, cannot be understood in isolation from the Jesus of history and/or the Christ of faith. There is no talk of these Christ-figures replacing Christ whether as role models or as agents of salvation and redemption. Quite simply, McEver's position appears to be that filmic Christ-figures are doing the job that Jesus himself once did but that, in an age when film audiences have lost the appetite for biblical epics (though in light of the furore surrounding Gibson's *Passion* this is questionable), audiences tend to get more out of going to see a Christ-*like* figure on the cinema screen than a representation of Jesus himself.

In marked contrast, then, to Niebuhr's *Christ against Culture* model, the *Christ of Culture* is a reductionistic approach that sacrifices Jesus to the interests of the prevailing culture. Rather than Christ being seen as superior to culture, the two entities are inextricably connected so that, when we watch a film, for instance, it is impossible to isolate the beliefs and values communicated in that picture from prevailing suppositions and ideas concerning Christ. Neither would it be possible to see film-watching as merely a leisure-time or recreational activity that can be set apart from the religious sphere. On the positive side, this model would appear to demonstrate that, in an ostensibly secular age, religion has not been eviscerated or destroyed and that secular agencies need not be construed as being antithetical, or in opposition, to the affairs of religion. In an age in which many Western intellectuals in such fields as anthropology, sociology, and psychology ''have anticipated the death of religion as eagerly as ancient Israel anticipated the Messiah,'' and have thus looked forward to ''the dawn of a new era in which, to paraphrase Freud, the infantile illusions of religion will be outgrown'' (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985, p. 1), the abundance of literature on cinematic Christ-figures would certainly suggest that the so-called secularization thesis is outmoded and that religion is evolving and mutating to meet new circumstances, rather than in an inexorable decline. On the negative side, however, Pope is right to counsel that there is something lacking in this model. As he sees it, there is a qualitative difference between any

''transcendence'' that we may experience in film and ''transcendence'' as traditionally conceived in religion:

> If it is the case that the cinematic experience is one of transcendence, this transcendence is more the recognition of human need than a response to contact with the divine. It may be a transcendence of the self, of personal limitations . . . But is this really an encounter with the ''wholly other'' as some would claim? More importantly, is it only the *appearance* of the real or the noumenal that religious encounter and experience have usually been held to be?
>
> (Pope, 2005, p. 170)

In other words, the same language may be invoked in both a theological and a secular context, but the referent is not the same. When a term such as ''redemption'' is utilized in Protestantism, it is likely to refer to the restoration of the torn fabric of personal relationships between God and his ''fallen'' Creation, and exclusively denotes the activity of Jesus Christ coming into the world by God's grace to bring about the salvation of sinful humanity by means of his substitutionary and atoning death on the Cross, thereby freeing humans from slavery to sin. When it is used in the context of a film, however, does it refer to the same thing? *The Shawshank Redemption* (Frank Darabont, 1994) is a film that contains the word ''redemption'' in the title, and its tagline reads ''Fear can hold you prisoner. Hope can set you free,'' suggesting that something vaguely theological may be taking place, but any ''redemption'' that there might be going on in the film is a far cry from article 15 of the Church of England's 39 articles of faith, where it is affirmed that Christ ''came to be the Lamb without spot, Who, by sacrifice of himself once made, should take away the sins of the world'' (qtd in Gibson, 1902, p. 439). This is not to belittle the medium of film, but merely to suggest that, while acknowledging that words such as ''theology'' and ''redemption'' are heterogeneous, and that there are many approaches by which a theologian may wish to conduct a theological conversation, any attempt to link theology and film by means of extrapolating words and ideas from one context and appropriating them into another is fraught with difficulties. As Niebuhr counsels, it can often end up being the case that Christ is treated as ''little more than the personification of an abstraction'' (Niebuhr, 1952, p. 117), and that ''sometimes it seems as if God, the forgiveness of sins, even prayers of thanksgiving, are all means to an end, and a human end at that'' (ibid., p. 121).

Similar problems are expounded by William Romanowski in *Eyes Wide Open* in relation to his ''Consumption'' model (see 2001, p. 13). In

contrast to his aforementioned ''Condemnation'' approach, Romanowski notes that ''most Christians watch pretty much what everyone watches, with little thought about how faith might affect viewing habits and criticism'' (ibid., pp. 12–13), and it is here that he identifies the problem that arises when one immerses oneself too deeply into the world of popular culture. For, although such an approach can be interpreted as ''an affirmation of cultural involvement'' (ibid., p. 13), the downside is that Christians may naïvely consume popular culture ''without critical Christian appraisal'' (ibid.). In other words, there may be a tendency to indulge in what film and other cultural products have to offer without acknowledging that some films will more readily lend themselves to theological exploration than others. Just as there are various different ''theologies'' available (Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and so on), ''film'' is not a monolithic or homogeneous medium, and cannot function in an analogous manner to theology (and nor should it be expected to). David Jasper's chapter in *Explorations in Theology and Film*, entitled ''On Systematizing the Unsystematic: A Response,'' was particularly critical of the function of film vis-à-vis that of theology, and is one of the most cited pieces of work in the theology–film field in subsequent years. As Jasper sees it, ''Theology, within the Judeo-Christian tradition or otherwise, emerges from more problematic and disturbing material than Hollywood dare show'' (Jasper, 1997, p. 244), and, quite simply, theology and film belong to two different orders of things. Indeed, as he sees it, the cinema is ''effective in as much as, demanding nothing of the viewer, it seems to offer the viewer the power to understand without the need seriously to think or change'' (Jasper, 1997, pp. 242–3; see also Loughlin, 2005, pp. 1–2; Deacy, 2001, p. 9). He has his eyes set in particular on the escapist and illusory dimension of Hollywood cinema, the sole function of which, according to Jasper, is to ''help us through the tedium of inactivity'' (ibid., p. 235). Johnston similarly claims that ''All too frequently, movies are controlled by crass commercial interests'' that ''merely provide escape or indulge our prejudices and fantasies, oversimplifying life in the process'' (R. Johnston, 2000, p. 87). As a result, movies are inclined ''to create spectacular special effects in order to generate a crowd rather than to portray the nuances of everyday life'' (ibid.), and it is here that Jasper's concerns about the discordance between what Hollywood does and what theology does come to the fore.

As I have argued elsewhere, serious religious reflection does not consist of an identification with a merely transitory, ephemeral wish-fulfillment realm, but, rather, makes the contradictions and discontinuities of reality

much clearer, and any transformation that exists is necessarily of a radical and more rudimentary kind (Deacy, 2005, p. 26). When the Christian tradition talks about human beings being able to enter into a new covenant with God by means of the Incarnation, this is necessarily far removed from the manner in which popular cinema continues to foster a suspension of disbelief or submission in the darkness of the movie theater to the sights and sounds of the big screen. As more and more people continue to partake in the ritual of attending the cinema, then, coupled with the hegemony of Hollywood, Marsh is right to counsel that this could be ''identified as no more than a form of controlled escape, and a trite one at that, from postmodern fragmentation'' (Marsh, 2004, p. 133). The fact that what he calls the ''disjointedness'' of life is handled through ''avoidance'' (ibid.) raises, by its very nature, theological questions and concerns. It links, for example, with how for Paul Tillich, while in principle ''everything that has being is an expression, however preliminary and transitory it may be, of being-itself, of ultimate reality'' (Tillich, 2004, p. 210), not every manifestation or interpretation of popular culture comprises or bears witness to this dimension of depth. Specifically, where the object of worship is not God but may, for instance, be a film text or the movie stars and celebrities it features, Tillich believed that one is thereby being idolatrous because the object concerned is transitory and temporal, causing the worshiper (or idolater) existential disappointment. As when we accord ultimate worth to relationships, power, and wealth, we will, argued Tillich, ultimately be let down because they will not satisfy our deepest spiritual needs. By contrast, people who think that life makes sense and transcends minor things have come to know God whether they know it or not. On this basis, therefore, it would be dangerous to attempt to conflate Christianity and culture along the lines of Niebuhr's second model since there is a danger that one will end up ascribing ultimacy and depth to that which is not ultimate or even especially deep.

Considering that Tillich is often cited as a theologian whose work most enables a fruitful dialogue between theology and film to arise, in light of his claim that neither the religious nor the sacred realm ''should be in separation from the other,'' since both ''are rooted in religion in the larger sense of the word, in the experience of ultimate concern'' (Tillich, 1964, p. 9), his skepticism regarding cultural forms *per se* taking on a religious dimension is not without significance. It also links with how, for Bultmann, the influence upon us of technology and the media can alienate us in a manner that is equivalent to what the New Testament writers had in mind when they spoke of demonic powers ruling our world

and of our being ''fallen'' creatures (see Bultmann, 1953, pp. 24–5). Bultmann's disdain for the way in which the mass media can control us and lead us away from appropriating God's grace is another illustration of how the *Christ of Culture* model is deficient, and suggests that film and popular culture might be impediments, rather than open invitations, to theological engagement. Films that ostensibly bear witness to theological motifs – in the form, for instance, of Christ-figure analogies – can never, therefore, be a substitute for the real Jesus Christ, on this interpretation. As Jasper sees it, in relation to Hollywood cinema, many films simply ''mimic theology without theology's claims for methodological order and reflection'' (Jasper, 1997, pp. 237–8) and do not require the same form of intellectual assent that theology demands. In his 1997 contribution to *Explorations*, Jasper is particularly critical of the first two *Terminator* movies (James Cameron, 1984, 1991), which he sees as ''capacious and largely empty containers'' (ibid., p. 238), where once the stage has been set the viewer is not required to think any further, but is sent on a rollercoaster ride. In marked contrast, Jasper refers to the ''fire of religious passion'' that underscores the writings of the Hebrew prophets, which could never be categorized in the same way as providing entertainment value within a viewing environment ''that is ultimately reassuring and safe'' (ibid.). The tendency for films to delineate happy endings is a particular moot point, here, as, in Jörg Herrmann's words, this is ''a concession to the needs and desires of the consumer'' (Herrmann, 2003, p. 198), whereas in marked contrast Christian culture perceives social realities in which the contradictions and discontinuities of life are apparent. In a social and material sense, also, rather than simply in terms of the psychological or transformative effects that a film may have upon a viewer, there are clear functional differences between what Christian communities and film communities tend to do. As Herrmann points out, ''[b]irths, deaths and weddings cannot be celebrated well in the cinema'' (ibid., p. 199), just as, in mainstream movies at any rate, ''existential crises'' cannot adequately ''be coped with'' (ibid.) in the same way as by theologians or clerics.

The appropriation of films for films' sake is thus a major problem for theologians. No matter how persuasive a Christ-figure motif may appear to be, Clive Marsh makes the judicious point that ''We would be unwise to try and conduct a theological conversation, however useful its subject matter may be, with a 'bad film,' '' which he defines as ''a film which people simply would not want to watch'' (Marsh, 1997, p. 32). Without disputing that not all of what Hollywood produces is banal, in an age

of movie sequels and remakes – does the world really require the likes of *Miss Congeniality 2: Armed and Fabulous* (John Pasquin, 2005) or the virtual scene-by-scene re-creation of *The Omen* (John Moore, 2006)? – it is hard not to concur with Benjamin Svetkey's observation, published in an *Entertainment Weekly* article, that ''pretty much *all* of the big commercial films being released by major studios these days have a certain written-by-chimps-locked-in-a-room-with-a-laptop quality,'' wherein ''[s]tory lines veer in nonsensical directions, dialogue is dim or dopey,'' and ''characters have the heft of balsa wood'' (qtd in R. Johnston, 2000, p. 101). Whereas theology may use the language of *kerygma*, films tend to veer in the direction of kitsch, and for every film with a Christ-figure motif, can we really say that Christology is more important to the film's producers than commercialism? This is not to say that religion or theology does not have a stake in commercial matters. Indeed, the grounds of Canterbury Cathedral, the birthplace of the Christian Church in the United Kingdom, rely heavily on National Lottery funding – the completion in 2000 of the International Study Centre in the cathedral precincts is a case in point – and there is a very fine line between its status as a sacred site and as a tourist haven. Similarly, when Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel it was a job undertaken on commission (see R. Johnston, 2000, p. 87). However, in an age where ''spectacle seems to be supplanting drama based in storytelling,'' and every ''script must have a script doctor, and stars often demand the privilege of rewriting their lines,'' the net result of which is that ''cohesive stories become little more than a collection of choppy scenes'' (R. Johnston, 2000, p. 101), is it altogether surprising if any theological engagement that has the capacity to take place is too threadbare to warrant serious scrutiny? A case in point is Wolfgang Petersen's 2006 film *Poseidon*, a remake of the seminal 1970s disaster movie *The Poseidon Adventure* (Ronald Neame, 1972), about which Paul Arendt, writing for the BBC Films website, remarks:

> Chucking the characters from Paul Gallico's novel overboard and paring backstory to a bare minimum, Petersen fills the space with setpiece after setpiece, hardly giving the audience room to draw breath. It's a refreshing approach, but since the new characters are pretty dull, the experience is more of a jolly rollercoaster than a scary movie.
>
> (Arendt, 2006)

Ironically, given the discussion above about the tenuous utilization of messianic-figure motifs, *Poseidon* has actually jettisoned the original film's overt theological referent, in the form of Gene Hackman's Bible-spouting

preacher, who leads a select band – the chosen people, no less – of the ship's passengers and crew through the waters to freedom, Moses-style. As the *Observer*'s Philip French puts it: ''The special effects are stunning and there are more corpses around than you'd find on a Napoleonic battlefield, but the characters are a dull lot, and the original's allegorical element with 'the Reverend' Gene Hackman as a muscular Moses figure has been dropped'' (French, 2006). Perhaps we have now reached a point in our culture not only where ''The world presented by films tends to be neater, more orderly, and has satisfactory endings . . . in which vice is punished and virtue rewarded, families are reunited, and lovers mate for life'' (Lyden, 2003, p. 45), but in which the presence of a biblical analog (whether a Christ-figure or a Moses-figure) is deemed to add an undue layer of complexity to the proceedings, and so is better off being omitted altogether. If any conflicts that take place within the length of the film are resolved by the denouement, and however ''bad the situation of the characters may be at various points in the story, by the end all will be tidy and we will be reassured that all is well with the world'' (ibid.), is there any scope for serious theological engagement? Moltmann and Pannenberg may have believed in the importance of hope and in the need to revolutionize and transform the present – a motif that is central to so many contemporary films – along the lines of Stephen Brown's claim that ''If the cross identifies itself with our present human condition then the resurrection is God's promise of a future transformation'' (Brown, 1997, p. 232), but this is a far cry from the tendency in films to ''offer an entry to an ideally constructed world'' (Lyden, 2003, p. 4). As Lyden puts it, ''We often hope and wish for a world like the one we see in the movies even though we must return to a very different world at the end of the show'' (ibid.).

Although it would be wrong to suppose that this *Christ of Culture* model was one that Niebuhr himself espoused, one advantage of this approach is that it demonstrates the extent to which the realms of theology and culture overlap to a much greater extent than is commonly perceived. This fits in with John Lyden's own model for looking at the interface between religion and culture, as delineated in *Film as Religion*, where he suggests that ''theology cannot stand outside culture any more than any other aspect of human religion or culture can do'' (Lyden, 2003, p. 17), and that ''there is no absolute distinction between religion and other aspects of culture'' (ibid., p. 2). Lyden's premise is that we tend to designate certain activities as ''religious'' because they conform to a pre-set pattern or model that we recognize from religious traditions with which we are acquainted, and, as a corollary, we overlook the religious

provenance of anything that does not conform to such a typology. Accordingly, ''Once we give up narrower definitions of' 'religion' that only identify it with formal institutions that go by that label, we can recognize that multiple religious influences affect each one of us'' (ibid., p. 135). In lieu of the classic distinctions between ''theology,'' or ''religion,'' and ''culture,'' Lyden advocates a more nuanced position, in keeping with Niebuhr's *Christ of Culture* model, that sees all aspects of culture as having a religious angle or propensity, and that, crucially, does not require us to have to choose one side over another (as in Niebuhr's first model). Just as a Christian who studies Islam is not thereby abandoning their Christian heritage by being open to the beliefs and values of another religious tradition, so Lyden emphasizes that neither is a Christian ''worshipping false gods each time they go to the cinema'' (ibid., p. 135). As has already been suggested, with reference to Justin Martyr, St. Augustine, the Gnostics, and Bultmann, no religion can exist unless it adapts to, and borrows from (and even incorporates), prevailing religious and cultural influences, and Lyden develops this position by suggesting that film and other cultural products are performing a functionally equivalent role to that of religious traditions. In his words, ''It may be that the insistence on a distinction between religion and culture mainly signifies a battle between one kind of religion and another,'' so that just as in biblical times monotheism was defined in relation to polytheism (cf. Cohn-Sherbok & Cohn-Sherbok, 1994, p. 4), so today traditional religions define themselves in relation to secular culture instead. Instead of secularization, and the eclipse of traditional religion, we thus have the evolution of new forms of religious expression.

While Lyden has a point, it is questionable, in an age when conservatism is back on the agenda – in the form, for instance, of the ''Christian Right'' in the United States – whether this is the whole picture. This model is more likely to hold sway in liberal circles than among more evangelical and conservative Christians for whom culture presents a demonstrable threat to traditional beliefs and values. It may well be the case for Lyden that the interaction between religion and film may be deemed comparable to the dialogue that exists between religions (so that to enter into a theological conversation with a film comprises a form of inter-religious dialogue), but it is hard to find eager support for a position that takes it as a given that no one ''religion'' is right or that there is no one legitimate or normative world-view, thereby allowing for ''genuine differences in approach and perspective so that our judgments do not condemn others simply for disagreeing with us''

(ibid., p. 126). He is, however, far from wide of the mark in stressing that traditional religious groups have tended to respond to the threat produced by secular films (as shown in relation to the Catholic Legion of Decency) *as though they constituted alternative religious sites*. In Lyden's words, ''By relating to it either as a demonic threat to their own religion, or a mirror image of it, religious film critics were essentially already viewing film through the categories of religion'' (ibid., p. 132). Indeed, similar questions were being addressed, albeit in a radically divergent way, as shown by the controversies over *Dead End* and *Priest*, in which both films were deemed by Catholic church groups in particular to be raising the same sort of questions (relating to street culture and celibacy, respectively) but in ways that were antithetical to one another. While Lyden's claim may initially seem overstretched, not least because church groups have never accorded films the status of an alternative religious tradition, along the lines of Islam, Buddhism, or Judaism, this may, paradoxically, corroborate Lyden's argument, since anyone espousing an anti-film polemic would naturally be inclined to discredit, rather than dignify with a higher status, the alternative that it presented. To give an example, Lyden refers to the manner in which ''early Christian explorers of the Americas were reluctant to call the practices of the 'Indians' by the name of religion'' (ibid.), and we could similarly cite the more recent tendency post-9/11 among moderate Muslim groups to denounce the purported Islamic predilections of suicide bombers, thereby not exalting their terrorist acts to the status of a ''holy war'' being conducted in the name of Allah.

On this basis, therefore, the medium of film may be performing an analogous function to that of traditional religious groups, not least through addressing comparable if not equivalent issues to those found in Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism. As will be seen in the second part of this volume, when specific themes are examined, films can raise theologically fecund questions pertaining to a whole range of ostensibly ''religious'' questions, including abortion (for which we might cite *Citizen Ruth* [Alexander Payne, 1996], which examines questions of free choice and the sanctity of human life against the backdrop of an increasingly polarized conservative Christian America), euthanasia (as sensitively handled in *The Sea Inside* [Alejandro Amenábar, 2004]), and a just war (as delineated in an animated film such as *Antz* [Eric Darnell & Tim Johnson, 1998] and such documentaries as *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara* [Errol Morris, 2003] and *Fahrenheit 9/11* [Michael Moore, 2004]). Since such films are not, however,

purporting to grapple with religious or theological issues as a means of illustrating or bearing witness to religious traditions – in other words, they are not missiological works – then Lyden's claim that films have the capacity to function religiously in their own right (Lyden, 2003, p. 34) should not be dismissed out of hand. M. Darroll Bryant wrote in 1982 that ''as a popular form of the religious life, movies do what we have always asked of popular religion, namely, that they provide us with archetypal forms of humanity – heroic figures – and instruct us in the basic values and myths of our society'' (Bryant, 1982, p. 106). Although Bryant qualifies this claim by making a distinction between a religious and a secular culture, in that, since the Enlightenment, the former, which ''seeks to mediate a transcendent order,'' has been associated in secular circles with superstition,[3] whereas the latter ''has no referent beyond itself and consequently worships itself'' (ibid., p. 105) – to the point that ''modern cultures have outgrown religion'' (ibid.) – Lyden's approach shares much common ground with Bryant. Indeed, for Bryant, the act of going to the movies is a participation ''in a central ritual of our technological civilization'' (ibid., p. 102) and where ''the 'stuff' of everyday life can be taken up and magically transformed; base metals are turned into gold'' (ibid., p. 103). It is significant that Bryant lays emphasis upon the origin of the term ''culture,'' which, derived from the Latin *cultus*, means ''worship,'' and signifies that ''a culture grows out of intimate life with the gods'' (ibid., p. 105). In the words of Garrison Keillor,

> If you can't go to church and, for at least a moment, be given transcendence; if you can't go to church and pass briefly from this life to the next; then I can't see why anyone should go. Just a brief moment of transcendence causes you to come out of church a changed person.
>
> (qtd in R. Johnston, 2000, p. 100)

This quotation, which is also cited by Ken Gire in his book *Windows of the Soul: Experiencing God in New Ways*, is then followed by this response from Gire:

> I have experienced what Garrison Keillor described more in movie theatres than I have in churches. Why? . . . movies don't always tell the truth, don't always enlighten, don't always inspire. What they do on a fairly consistent basis is give you an experience of transcendence. They let you lose yourself in somebody else's story.
>
> (R. Johnston 2000, p. 100)

In other words, film is not just analogous to, or a functional equivalent of, traditional religious agencies, but may actually be even more adept

at functioning religiously than its traditional counterparts. As John Updike, author of *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984) and the more recent *Terrorist* (2006), once wrote:

> the cinema has done more for my spiritual life than the church. My ideas of fame, success and beauty all originate from the big screen. Whereas Christian religion is retreating everywhere and losing more and more influence; film has filled this vacuum and supports us with myths and action-controlling images. During a certain phase in my life film was a substitute for religion.
>
> (qtd in Herrmann, 2003, p. 190)

Similar testimony is provided by British journalist and author John Walsh, whose *Are You Talking to Me? A Life Through the Movies* (2003) comprises an autobiographical account of the power that film can have. Writing about the interconnectedness of movie images and the vagaries and vicissitudes of real life – ''[t]hey offer you images of a counterlife that you might, but probably won't ever, live'' (Walsh, 2003, p. 311) – Walsh reflects upon the way in which films had the ability to leave such an indelible impression while he was growing up that, when he lost, at the age of 19, ''the last vestiges of religious faith'' (ibid., p. 310), it fell to the movies to provide the values and aspirations through which life-decisions are made. Recollecting that ''My parents didn't disapprove of the cinema as a temple of sin, they simply ignored it as an irrelevance in their children's education'' (ibid., p. 22), Walsh describes at length his first ever visit to the cinema, to see *Mutiny on the Bounty* (Lewis Milestone, 1962). He recalls that ''The Odeon loomed above us like an enormous temple. It took up as much space as our local church and seemed to bulge with light, eclipsing all the other buildings on one side of the square'' (ibid., p. 24). He continues that ''We sat, all fourteen of us plus two teachers, line-abreast across a whole row, chattering and gazing at the Odeon's mile-high ceiling, the complicated sculptures on the facing walls, the great proscenium arch'' (ibid., p. 27), and refers also to the ''massive stage in front of the film'' as ''a sort of epic altar'' (ibid.). Both at the time and in subsequent years, Walsh attests to the life-changing capacity of the silver screen, whereby ''when we've seen everything we were supposed to see, have been strung out by the drama, dinned into submission by the galloping soundtrack, carpet-bombed by the special effects, made to laugh aloud or weep real tears, we make a connection with the screen that's life-changingly powerful'' (ibid., p. 13). Similarly, Walsh affirms that ''all my life I had been storing up images and dialogue

and epiphanies from the movies that had come to mean more to me than my own true-life experiences'' (ibid., p. 12). Contending that ''the cinema screen works an insidious magic on the emergent consciousness, and leaves us *charged with feeling* in ways that we only dimly understand'' (ibid., pp. 16–17), Walsh's testimony is a prime example of how, in a Durkheimian sense, film can provide communities of cinema-goers with the means to affirm shared values in the way that traditional churches may once have done. As he says in relation to his penchant for watching horror movies:

> So many movies featured crucifixes, Satanic faces and sacrificial victims that it was easy to confuse the church-stuff and the cinema-stuff. They were both alarmingly keen on death and darkness . . . It seemed an odd form of enjoyment, to sit in a dark cinema watching mad people with staring eyes making each other bleed in dark rooms and spooky exteriors, but no odder than to kneel for half an hour in a crepuscular church, listening to tales of crucifixion with a moaning organ accompaniment.
>
> (ibid., pp. 44–5)

Such testimony also goes some way toward rebutting Christine Hoff Kraemer's dismissal of the premise of Lyden's *Film as Religion*, whose ''interreligious approach,'' she argues, ''threatens to put contemporary films and rich religious traditions thousands of years old on equal terms'' (Kraemer, 2004, p. 249). While Kraemer argues that it is necessary to honor the autonomy and integrity of both religion *and* film, she feels that ''to compare them as if they were equal risks disadvantaging film, which by its nature cannot be as complex as a world religion'' (ibid.). Despite the similar force of Jasper's claim, adduced earlier in this chapter, that film is too illusory and undemanding a medium to enable a systematic theology to take place, the testimony of the likes of Walsh and Updike would suggest not simply that films *can* perform a religious function, but that they can do so in a way that is no less enchanting, nourishing, emotionally intense, and transcendental.

Having looked in detail at the extreme positions presented by Niebuhr's first two models of the interrelationship between Christ and culture, the rest of this chapter will consist of a synopsis of the last three of Niebuhr's positions, which is where he believed the majority of Christians tend to reside. Arguing that most Christians embrace neither of the two extreme positions delineated above, Niebuhr argued that ''the fundamental issue does not lie between Christ and the world . . . but between God and man'' (Niebuhr, 1952, p. 124). In other words, rather than see

the Christian response to culture as being a position of outright condemnation or outright accommodation and interpenetration, he felt that most Christians – whom he referred to as belonging in ''the church of the centre'' (ibid.) – are inclined not to see the distinction as one between ''Christ'' and ''culture,'' since it is not possible to separate the works of human culture from the grace of God, *who makes all works of culture possible in the first place*. At the same time, neither can Christians separate this grace from cultural activity – ''for how can men love the unseen God in response to His love without serving the visible brother in human society?'' (ibid., p. 126). In *Explorations in Theology and Film*, the last three of Niebuhr's positions were consolidated into one section on how Christ and culture can be in critical dialogue with each other (see Marsh, 1997, p. 28), but here more detailed consideration will be given to each of these three models, which are *Christ above Culture*, *Christ and Culture in Paradox*, and *Christ the Transformer of Culture*.

Christ above Culture

In this model, which Niebuhr identified as a *synthetic* approach, and which tends to hold particular sway among Roman Catholics, Christ is seen to complete and fulfill culture. Without going so far as to reconcile Christ and culture in the manner of Niebuhr's second model, both Christ and culture will be affirmed by this third model, but, crucially, the distinctions between them are maintained. This is why the model is referred to as *synthetic*, since there is a synthesis at work between Christ and culture, and those who espouse this position do not dilute or compromise the *dual* nature of Christian interaction – that is, between looking after the affairs of this world and building toward the goals of the next. Seeing Christ as both *continuous* and *discontinuous* with the affairs of this world, Niebuhr cites two passages from Matthew that best encapsulate this position: Matthew 5:17 and 22:21. In the former, Jesus proclaims, in the Sermon on the Mount: ''Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them.'' In the latter passage, Jesus enjoins the Pharisees to render ''to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.'' In both instances, Jesus does not decry human culture *per se*, and indeed does not see it as inherently without goodness or value. However, human culture is *incomplete*, and in need of fulfillment, which can only be achieved by complementing reason with revelation, nature

with grace, and secular society with the Christian Church. This was very much the position of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, for whom there was a huge gulf between Christ and culture, but there is scope for a natural theology to emerge, to the point, indeed, that, according to Niebuhr, Aquinas ''combined without confusing philosophy and theology, state and church, civic and Christian virtues, natural and divine laws, Christ and culture'' (Niebuhr, 1952, p. 136). Culture, on this model, is God-given, and, while the model does not reject the importance of human activity, culture nevertheless entails the exercise of divine power with which it has been sacramentally endowed from above. As the French Neo-Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain saw it, ''Artistic creation does not copy God's creation, it continues it. And just as the trace and the image of God appear in His creatures, so the human stamp is imprinted on the work of art – the full stamp, sensitive and spiritual, not only that of the hands, but of the whole soul'' (Maritain, 2004, p. 327). There is, therefore, a sense in which nature is believed to comprise a spark of the divine, and whereby ''The artist, whether he knows it or not, consults God in looking at things'' (ibid.).

In this Roman Catholic-based approach, a number of film authors and critics have argued, similarly, that the values conveyed in film are preparatory to Christian revelation. In his 1970 work *Theology Through Film*, Neil Hurley asked whether movies will ''serve that reason which, after all, is the universal spark of the divine which the Stoic philosophers believed to bind all men together in some mysterious cosmic fraternity'' (Hurley, 1970, p. 3). For Hurley, film has the ability to expand the theologian's understanding and enable filmgoers to cultivate their sense of what it is to be fully human. This is a marked difference from the way Catholic film criticism was employed in the *Christ against Culture* model, in which the tendency was to disparage films for their tendency to lead audiences astray. In this *Christ above Culture* approach, the objective is not to render moral judgments, but to attain greater insight about human experience and destiny. John May is a prominent Roman Catholic writer who fits into this mold. In books such as *Image and Likeness: Religious Visions in American Film Classics* (1992) and *New Image of Religious Film* (1997), May inquires into the possibility that films represent a visual analog of religious or sectarian questions, including whether the universe is friendly, hostile, or indifferent, and whether human beings are independent from or interdependent with the cosmos (and ''higher things''). Michael Bird's contribution to his co-edited (with John May) collection *Religion in Film* (1982) is also a particularly good illustration

of this process, as, in his chapter ''Film as Hierophany,'' Bird argues that art can point toward the ''holy'' (without being able to go so far as to capture it), and that ''art can disclose those spaces and those moments in culture where the experience of finitude and the encounter with the transcendent dimension are felt and expressed within culture itself'' (Bird, 1982, p. 4). It is not a film's ''religious'' subject matter, but the medium itself, that determines the religiosity of a film, caught as it is between the incarnational (which Bird construes as a rootedness in reality itself) and the transcendent element, that is, a glimpse of something beyond the material world. Impossible though it is to portray the Infinite on screen, Bird believes that the finite can be represented, and that film's simple, realistic style – which enables the real emotions of film characters, in all their anxieties, to be communicated – is capable of pointing to, and anticipating, our true longing and need for the Infinite.

The French film theorist and critic, and father of the French New Wave, André Bazin similarly held that the aesthetic core of cinema was comprised of an innately sacramental dimension, wherein the movie camera, through photographing the world, bears witness to the miracle of God's creation. According to Bazin, it is through film that the surface of the world can be faithfully copied in art, thereby fulfilling an innate human need to stop the constant flow of time by preserving it in an image. Whereas a painting, no matter how lifelike, is never anything other than a work of human art and contrivance, a photograph or film shot ''holds an irrational power to persuade us of its truth because it results from a process of mechanical reproduction in which human agency plays no part,'' and amounts to ''just what happens automatically when the light reflected from objects strikes a layer of sensitive chemical emulsion'' (Matthews, 1999, p. 23). In Bazin's words, ''Photography affects like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty'' (qtd in ibid.). In line with the synthetic model, Bazin believed that film is ''preordained to bear endless witness to the beauty of the cosmos'' (Matthews, 1999, p. 23), and is able to do this more and more effectively as technology improves, since technical advances insure that an ever more perfect approximation of the real (for which we might substitute Bird's understanding of the ''holy'') becomes possible. The filmmaker who preferred montage and editing to the realist style was thus, from Bazin's perspective, committing ''a minor heresy – since it arrogated the power of God, who alone is entitled to confer meaning on the universe'' (ibid., p. 24). Language such as this may be an anathema to many film theorists,

for whom religious language and thought-forms have no rightful place in the secular and rational discipline of film studies – as Matthews puts it, ''the merest rumour of the transcendental is enough to scandalise most film theorists'' (Matthews, 1999, p. 23) – but this must be judged alongside the fact that ''Bazin is the single thinker most responsible for bestowing on cinema the prestige both of an artform and of an object of knowledge'' (ibid., p. 22) and of establishing film studies as an intellectual discipline. Even John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson's benchmark volume on the critical theories, debates, and approaches to the study of film, *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, which conspicuously excludes any mention of approaches from within religious studies, biblical studies, or theology, nonetheless acknowledges (in the volume's sole reference to religion) that Bazin's aesthetic ''was religious and founded in the faith that the cinematic image could reveal the world in fact and spirit and confirm the temporal and spatial thereness of the world with the camera's meditative eye'' (Kolker, 1998, p. 16). Before we get too carried away, however, the qualification must be added that, despite Matthews's warning that talk of religion is an anathema to purist film theorists, Matthews himself is very far from amenable to seeing all interactions between theology and film as productive. Matthews wrote the aforementioned negative review of the *Explorations in Theology and Film* for *Sight and Sound* (Matthews, 1998, p. 30), in which he is highly selective about what amounts to good and bad instances of theological engagement. Approaches that conform to the stature of Bazin's synthetic approach can be countenanced (and Matthews refers in this regard in his review to ''The transcendental trio of Bresson, Dreyer and Ozu''), but any engagement ''with worldlier texts, including *Field of Dreams* and *Awakenings*'' (ibid.) is disparaged. Matthews's general acceptance, though, that, at least in principle, theology and film need not be treated as discrete subject areas is to be welcomed.

A similar approach can be found in the work of the filmmaker and film theorist Paul Schrader, whose *Transcendental Style in Film* (1972) is a groundbreaking publication in this area. Though a Dutch Calvinist, rather than a Roman Catholic, Schrader's approach is particularly amenable to the *Christ above Culture* model in that his premise is that the realistic style evokes a sense of transcendence by pointing beyond the austerity and barrenness of the everyday world toward a higher, transcendent reality. Going a stage further than Bird, in that he believes the ''holy'' *can* be captured on film, Schrader's premise is that even among filmmakers from different religious and cultural backgrounds (and to

this end his book examines the work of Japan's Yasujiro Ozu, France's Robert Bresson, and Denmark's Carl Theodor Dreyer), the seemingly simple and bare – even ascetic – style of filmmaking that is employed can show forth the presence of the transcendent. It may, for instance, be that there is scope for seeing, in the face of a film character, something of God's grace, and the more that films convey the finite in this manner, the greater their capacity for pointing beyond themselves and disclosing the Infinite, or Transcendent. Accordingly, in Schrader's words, ''Transcendental style, like the [Catholic] mass, transforms experience into a repeatable ritual which can be repeatedly transcended'' (Schrader, 1972, p. 11). Another Calvinist theologian who deals with Roman Catholic themes in film is Roy Anker, whose *Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies* was published in 2004. Focusing on film stories, Anker suggests that ''when it does show up, grace befalls unlikely and unsuspecting people in surprising and unforeseeable ways that are quite beyond human prediction, conception, or charting'' (Anker, 2004, p. 17). Quoting from John 3:16 – ''For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life'' – Anker contends that ''God bathes this world in love and that love goes everywhere, even into the damnedest places'' (ibid.). He also cites the aforementioned John Updike, whose 1963 novel *The Centaur*, which concerns the relationship between a father and son as they are forced to spend three days together in a snowstorm, contains the following quotation:

> *All joy belongs to the Lord.* Wherever in the filth and confusion and misery, a soul felt joy, there the Lord came and claimed it as his own; into bar-rooms and brothels and classrooms and alleys slippery with spittle, no matter how dark and scabbed and remote, in China or Africa or Brazil, wherever a moment of joy was felt, there the Lord stole and added to His enduring domain.
>
> (Updike, 1963, p. 267)

Even if a religious vision is not intended by a filmmaker, the important criterion here is that a film is believed to inspire a religious vision. Accordingly, it is that religious themes are being read not so much *into* films, as in the plethora of literature on Christ-figures, as *onto* films, in which, to cite Lyden, ''the religious interpretation fulfils and completes the secular cry of pain and suffering'' (Lyden, 2003, p. 27).

There is, therefore, a strong sacramental dimension to this model, in which the physical can be an important, and even necessary, gateway to

the spiritual (although there will be variations here, as shown by the inclusion in this section of Paul Schrader, a Dutch Calvinist). In this model, on the premise that the created order (and human condition) must be acceptable to God or else He would not have sent His son into the world in the form of the Incarnation, and in a manner not wholly distinct from panentheism – which sees everything as being in God and God as being in everything – the physical is often venerated, to the point that success is seen as only coming about when one confronts the world through action, thereby making the world better through having acted in it rather than suffering in silence and doing nothing (see Blake, 2000, p. 16). Like the bread and wine at the Eucharist, which, rather than merely being symbols, are believed to comprise the actual body and blood of Christ, it may be flowers, costumes, paintings, taxi drivers, boxers, prostitutes, contraband weapons, a baby's smile, water, fire, a nightclub, a parking garage, or sexual love that mediate a transcendent reality. As the American Catholic priest and sociologist Andrew Greeley affirms, filmmakers can sometimes disclose God's presence even more intensively than God has chosen to do through creation itself, with the medium of film being especially amenable to the making of sacraments and the creation of epiphanies because of its ''inherent power to affect the imagination'' (Greeley, 1988, p. 250). Richard Blake, a professor of fine arts at Boston College and a Catholic priest, also explores this terrain in his 2000 publication *AfterImage: The Indelible Catholic Imagination of Six American Filmmakers*, in which attention is given to six film directors each of whom had an early exposure to Catholicism, which, like a flashbulb, has left ''an afterimage on the artistic imagination long after it has been removed, or in many cases, after the artists have removed themselves from the stimulus'' (Blake, 2000, p. xv). Blake also affirms that even though these filmmakers – Martin Scorsese, Alfred Hitchcock, Frank Capra, John Ford, Francis Ford Coppola, and Brian De Palma – may be inclined to ''shut their eyes and turn away to other, non-Catholic stimuli'' in later years, ''the afterimage intrudes and adds a halo of meaning to the object of their conscious attention'' (ibid.). Observing that Catholicism may not always appear explicitly in their films, such as in the form of churches, crucifixes, and statues, is a far cry from presuming that God is neither present nor active in the world. As Blake says in relation to Scorsese's films, ''His characters act out their lives in interaction with the persons and things of this material universe, and through these objects of everyday experience they may eventually find some form of redemption'' (Blake, 2000, p. 38). The challenge for the theologian is

thus to undertake a critical reading of religious influences in film that may lurk so far beneath the surface that they are not even detected on a conscious level by the filmmakers themselves. As Gerard Loughlin, another prominent Catholic theologian who works in the area of theology and film, recently pointed out, there are many directors, not least Ingmar Bergman and Luis Bunuel, who ''disavow religious intent but remain haunted by theological themes,'' and for whom ''the disparities of life still call for spiritual consolations, even if those proffered by religion are found wanting'' (Loughlin, 2005, p. 9). Indeed, Bunuel was, in Loughlin's words, ''an atheist, but a devout one, who cleaved to the God he denied'' (ibid.).

It will often, therefore, be a secular reality that mediates, and discloses, a spiritual or transcendental reality. In the case of Scorsese's films, Blake argues that when, in *Taxi Driver* (1976), the alienated and dysfunctional protagonist, Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro), expresses his distaste for the filth and decay that suffuse the New York City streets where he plies his trade, and anticipates that ''Someday, a real rain will come and wash all the scum off the streets,'' he is echoing the Catholic belief that baptismal waters do not merely symbolize purification *but actually accomplish this action*. While acknowledging that Travis is not overtly or consciously foreseeing that God will use rain as the instrument of his cleansing of the squalid and sin-suffused sidewalks, Blake attests that ''he does give the rain an active role in purifying the city streets in a way that is remarkably consistent with a Catholic understanding of the effects of the sacrament of baptism'' (Blake, 2000, p. 37). A not dissimilar motif can be found in Umberto Eco's medieval detective novel, *The Name of the Rose*, a film version of which was directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud in 1986. In a narrative set in an Italian monastery in 1327, a young monk, Adso of Melk, is at one point torn between the demands of the celibate life he has chosen and the enchantment of a young peasant girl with whom he enjoys a furtive, but incandescent, sexual relationship, which, paradoxically, only serves to reaffirm his sense of the sublime ordering of the cosmos. To quote from the novel:

> It was . . . as if – just as the whole universe is surely like a book written by the finger of God, in which everything speaks to us of the immense goodness of its Creator, in which every creature is description and mirror of life and death . . . – everything, in other words, spoke to me only of the face I had hardly glimpsed in the aromatic shadows of the kitchen.
>
> (Eco, 2004, p. 279)

Adso also speaks of ''the whole world'' being ''destined to speak to me of the power, goodness, and wisdom of the Creator,'' with the young girl – ''sinner though she may have been'' – fulfilling the role not of a temptress, or an obstacle to divine grace, but ''a chapter in the great book of creation, a verse of the great psalm chanted by the cosmos'' (ibid.). Rather than as a mortal sin, Adso sees his physical relationship as ''a part of the great theophanic design that sustains the universe'' and as a ''miracle of consonance and harmony,'' to the point, indeed, that as ''if intoxicated, I then enjoyed her presence in the things I saw, and desiring her in them, with the sight of them I was sated'' (ibid.).

While there is a serious downside to this model, in that, as Niebuhr himself noted, ''The effort to bring Christ and culture, God's work and man's, the temporal and the eternal, law and grace, into one system of thought and practice tends, perhaps inevitably, to the absolutizing of what is relative, the reduction of the infinite to a finite form, and the materialization of the dynamic'' (Niebuhr, 1952, p. 150), it is clear that this synthetic approach holds much sway, particularly in Roman Catholic circles. Christ may be *above* culture, but a radical and transformative reverence for the (God-given) material order is instrumental to this model, and lends itself to a reciprocity between the sacred and the profane, the material and the spiritual, ''theology'' and ''culture.'' It is also notable that this approach does not fall into the trap of Niebuhr's second *Christ of Culture* position, which tends to conflate Christianity and culture to such an extent that critical and theological rigor is lost, such that there is little scope for differentiating between the plethora of different types of theology and different types of film that may be susceptible to a theological interpretation. It would be wrong to suggest, however, that there is a homogeneity or uniformity to the synthetic model. For example, in spite of Bazin's belief that only long, uninterrupted, and continuous shots are able to ''divine the real,'' it is notable that one of the best illustrations of the synthetic model can be found in the cinema of Martin Scorsese, which employs a heavy use of montage and editing. In situating his characters in a busy and violent universe as they search for redemption, the jolting and disorientating effect that editing creates arguably makes it easier, rather than more difficult, for the audience to bear witness to the spiritual struggles that Scorsese's protagonists are experiencing. Indeed, Scorsese has spoken in the past of his desire that the viewers might be part of the tapestry of his films and have their noses bloodied by being bombarded with a multiplicity of sights, sounds, and sensations. As he says of *Raging Bull* (1980), ''I wanted to do the fight scenes as if the *viewers* were the

fighter, and their impressions were the fighter's'' (qtd in Dougan, 1997, p. 65), thereby identifying with the need of Jake La Motta (Robert De Niro) for purification and vindication. Or, to give a more recent example, the arguably futile quest of Billy Costigan (Leonardo DiCaprio) for retribution, purgation, and vindication amid the seedy milieu of a mob syndicate in *The Departed* (2006) owes much to the violence, carnage, and assault that are inflicted not only on the other characters in the film but, viscerally, on the film audience at home or in the cinema. Had Scorsese opted to make his films in the realist tradition, using *mise-en-scène* and deep-focus cinematography (in which both the foreground and the background are equally in focus) in order to objectively lay bare the realities of the world, it is unlikely that the films would have achieved the same effect of bringing the audience into an intense confrontation with the bloodshed and carnage that La Motta and Costigan experience in the boxing ring and the ''mean streets'' of South Boston, respectively. Though an anathema to Bazin, films that use close-ups, fast cuts, jagged dissolves, and swirling camera pans, as well as those that employ such stylistic flourishes as elaborate set decoration and colorful, even garish, costumes (as in *The Age of Innocence* [1993] and *Casino* [1995]), are prime examples of how a spiritual reality may be embodied in, and mediated by, the physical universe, and where, to quote Richard Blake, the viewer ''will discover spiritual meaning'' (Blake, 2000, p. 32). Ultimately, therefore, the synthesis between Christ and culture transcends the matter of which style of filmmaking – realist or montage – is being employed by the director.

Christ and Culture in Paradox

In this model, which is a more Protestant-based position, there is an emphasis less on the synthesis that has the capacity to arise between theology and culture, and more on the *dualism* between Christ and culture, with all of the attendant opposition and bifurcation that this entails. Rather than looking at the way in which, through sacramentality, there is a synchronicity between Christianity and culture that Christianity tends to complete and fulfill, this dualist model is inclined to juxtapose the combination of Christ and culture (which for the synthesists is maintained by divine grace) with a recognition of the disunity and distinction that ultimately lie between them. Although, as Niebuhr recognized, there are similarities here with the *Christ against Culture* model, in that dualists

will refuse to accommodate the claims of Christ to the norms of secular society, the difference is that, for those who subscribe to this fourth model, humankind is believed to exist in a tension between two conflicting demands – that of Christ and that of secular authorities and institutions. In Niebuhr's words, ''man is seen as subject to two moralities, and as a citizen of two worlds that are not only discontinuous with each other but largely opposed'' (Niebuhr, 1952, p. 56). This is not the end of the matter, however. As the ''paradox'' of the heading suggests, Christians who subscribe to this model tend if not to overcome this dualism then at least to live with this tension – with all of the attendant sin, suffering, and injustice that this conflict necessarily brings – with a view to securing a justification that lies beyond history. This is not to diminish the pervasiveness of the sin and depravity that dualists believe is an inextricable part of inhabiting a fallen world, but it is hoped that this fallenness, from which we cannot escape, will eventually lead, by God's grace, to a restoration of our prelapsarian condition. Whereas the *Christ against Culture* position holds that we can abstain from worldly impurity, this dualist model is rather more nuanced, holding that we belong to our culture, and that we cannot remove ourselves from it, but that God sustains humankind in it (and by it). As a result, for the dualist, attempting to evade or renounce culture, as in the first model, is simply an untenable position, and it is therefore nonsensical to claim that only by withdrawing from culture will salvation be assured. As Niebuhr says in relation to St. Paul, ''His experience with Galatian and Corinthian, with Judaizing and spiritualizing Christians had taught him . . . that the anti-Christian spirit could not be evaded by any measures of isolation from pagan culture'' (Niebuhr, 1952, p. 167), such as by abstaining from meat sacrificed to pagan gods or abandoning family life in favor of a celibate lifestyle.

Accordingly, although, on this dualist rendering, there is something inescapably negative about secular culture, it can nevertheless serve the function of a necessary evil. It may be the case that, in Niebuhr's words, ''All human action, all culture, is infected with godlessness, which is the essence of sin'' and that ''reason in human affairs is never separable from its egoistic, godless, perversion'' (ibid., p. 159), but it is believed that secular laws can act as a not insignificant corrective, preventing sin from becoming even more pervasive than is presently the case. Without going so far as the synthetic position, according to which culture is directed toward the attainment of positive values, the dualist will begrudgingly accept the norms of secular culture since they may be the only

remedy for and restraint against even greater sinfulness. No matter how independent culture may be from Christ or Church law, there is no alternative, for those who subscribe to this model, to being caught up in the – albeit temporal and transitory – affairs of this world. Provided that Christians derive their knowledge and freedom about what to do in the secular sphere from their Christian ethics, beliefs, and values – so that they live out, as best as possible, a Christian life – then the fundamental tensions between Christ and culture, though by no means overcome, can at least be held together, with a view to gaining new insight from that dialogue or interchange. This has important ramifications for the study of theology and film, since there is no need to attempt, on this interpretation, to foster artificial or contrived connections between theology on the one hand and film, or culture, on the other. Rather than claim, as so much of the Christ-figure literature does, that a film is more Christian or theological than it actually is, the dualist would be inclined, rather, to focus on dissimilarities rather than elementary narrative or thematic convergences. The autonomy of both theology and film needs to be respected, and there can be no scope for simply ''reading'' theology into film in light of the radical discordance between what Christianity and culture comprise. A film that disturbs or challenges, rather than simply enlightens, would be a prime example of this theological model. Rather than go down the path of, say, reading *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999) as a religious or theological film because it contains discernible Christian vocabulary – such as the enigmatic inclusion of seven ''I am'' sayings that correspond to the language of the Fourth Gospel, along the lines of ''I am Jack's smirking revenge'' and ''I am Jack's enflamed sense of rejection,'' as well as the constant references in Fincher's audacious exploration of the redemptive power of physical violence to spiritual rebirth, including ''Every evening I died and every morning I rose again . . . Resurrected'' – a dualist response would be more inclined to highlight how and to what extent the film's exploration of nihilism and self-mutilation differs at key stages from a traditional Christian reading.

A recent publication that might be said to correspond to this model of *Christ and Culture in Paradox* is *Flickering Images: Theology and Film in Dialogue*, edited by Anthony Clarke and Paul Fiddes of Regent's Park College, Oxford. In his chapter ''When Text Becomes Voice: *You've Got Mail*,'' Fiddes undertakes a critical reading of the romantic comedy *You've Got Mail* (Nora Ephron, 1998), in which Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks play rival bookshop owners who develop an anonymous email correspondence with each other, by placing alongside the film's pairing of

''text'' and ''voice'' the New Testament pairing of ''letter'' and ''spirit,'' as delineated in 2 Corinthians 3:6. While noting that there is ''nothing overtly 'religious' about this film'' (Fiddes, 2005, p. 108), Fiddes finds that, despite exposing ''patterns of text, voice and presence in human life where a Christian thinker can see the presence of God'' (ibid.), the film fundamentally differs, in its life-affirming and over-optimistic ending, from Christian eschatological ideas about the End. Attesting that all ''endings in human art offer us an echo and an image of the final End'' (ibid., p. 109), Fiddes is concerned that the fantasy denouement, in which the protagonists are finally reconciled despite their incompatible attitudes to business – Hanks's character, Joe Fox, is a corporate shark while Ryan's Kathleen Kelly runs a small, family corner shop that puts the well-being of its customers above economic greed and financial acumen – offers no more than ''an escape from life, a happy-ever-after world which fails to connect with the world in which we are living'' (ibid., p. 110). Whereas in Shakespeare's comedies ''some dark strain remains in the final harmony, some note of discord or incompleteness'' in which ''one of the characters remains unreconciled, or we are made aware of the passing of time and the threat of death pressing in, or there is something about the relation between the lovers that makes us suspect that troubled times lie ahead in the midst of the happiness'' (ibid.), in filmic romantic comedies it is characteristically the case that all conflict and dissension are miraculously and implausibly resolved. Fiddes argues that the Christian understanding of the final End brings both closure and openness and comprises ''a new beginning in which there will be room for the development of persons, in which there will be journeys to make, adventures to be had and purposes to be fulfilled'' (ibid.). Despite being charmed by the cozy and life-affirming ethos of *You've Got Mail*, Fiddes is nonetheless aware of the radical discontinuity between how the film and Christianity interpret questions of resolution and finality.

Similar ideas are developed by Robert Jewett, a Pauline scholar for whom Pauline theology should take account of the movies. His premise, as delineated in *Saint Paul at the Movies: The Apostle's Dialogue with American Culture* (1993) and *Saint Paul Returns to the Movies: Triumph over Shame* (1999), is that St. Paul's teaching, as chronicled in his New Testament epistles, was shaped more by the popular culture of his day than by any formal religious or educational training, as denoted by the time that he used to spend evangelizing in such secular locations as the workshop, lecture hall, and street corner. Jewett hypothesizes that Paul,

placing himself ''where other people were, to communicate the gospel on their turf'' (Jewett, 1993, p. 5), ''would have been a discerning partner in discussing secular movies had they been available in his time,'' with the issues that they raise and stories they tell, ''reminiscent of conversations in the workshops where he spent most of his life'' (ibid., p. 6). Jewett's approach is to relate the films discussed, which include *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), *Tootsie* (Sydney Pollack, 1982), and *Grand Canyon* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1991) in the first volume, and *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, 1992), *Babe* (Chris Noonan, 1995), and *Mr. Holland's Opus* (Stephen Herek, 1995) in the sequel, to a specific passage from St. Paul's epistles – such as the theme of comfort in 2 Corinthians 1 in the case of *Tootsie*, and Romans 12, which discusses honoring the lowly, in the case of *Babe* – with a view to treating both with equal respect and bringing their common themes into relationship ''so that a contemporary interpretation for the American cultural situation may emerge'' (ibid., p. 7). Laudable though this is, however, there is a vital and not insignificant disclaimer that links with the dualist reading as expounded by Niebuhr. For, rather than simply seeking analogies between ancient and modern texts and situations, in the form of ''an interpretive arch,'' one end of which is anchored in St. Paul's day while the other is rooted in contemporary (American) culture, Jewett believes that this is not a relationship of equals. Although he stresses the need to treat each film under discussion with respect, his non-negotiable position is that ''the Pauline word is allowed to stand as primus inter pares,'' that is, the ''first among equals,'' since, unlike film, the Bible has ''stood the test of time by revealing ultimate truth that has gripped past and current generations with compelling power'' (ibid., p. 11). Acknowledging that motion pictures can also be ''inspired,'' and conceding that the Bible should not be an overbearing partner in the hermeneutical dialogue, Jewett contends that, unlike films, ''biblical texts have sustained the life and morals of faith communities in circumstances both adverse and happy over several thousand years'' (ibid., p. 12).

Since Jewett's rationale is to read the films under discussion against the standard of Paul's epistles, the net result is that the films are consistently treated as lightweight or incomplete conversational partners. After making a number of effective claims about *Mr. Holland's Opus* and its relationship to the discussion of fame and self-commendation that Paul expounds upon in 2 Corinthians 3, Jewett concludes that, ultimately, ''Paul's viewpoint seems healthier than the anticipation evoked by the conclusion'' (Jewett, 1999, p. 85) of the film. Jewett is referring here to

the scene in which an inspirational high-school music teacher, Glenn Holland (Richard Dreyfuss) – who has hitherto considered himself a failure because, due to his pedagogical duties, he never managed to find the time to accomplish the dream of completing his own musical symphony (the ''opus'' of the title) – is finally accorded, upon his retirement, the recognition and acclamation that his 30-year career has warranted, when his former pupils perform a surprise rendition of his unfinished magnum opus in the school hall. Despite finding this ''a moving scene, especially for those of us who have been influenced by a great and devoted teacher or pastor'' (ibid., p. 72), Jewett attests that ''We do not need the endorsement of those we serve resounding through the auditorium, because in Christ we already have divine endorsement that is not dependent on our achievements'' (ibid., p. 87). Likewise, in relation to the end of the John Grisham-based legal thriller *The Firm* (Sydney Pollack, 1993), Jewett argues that although he admires the protagonist, Mitch McDeere (Tom Cruise), for developing, by the picture's denouement, ''a newfound commitment to the law because it treats all persons equally,'' he is concerned that this film ''does not develop the radical implications of freedom as Paul does'' (ibid., p. 144).

Furthermore, just as Fiddes found the ending of *You've Got Mail* to be theologically problematic because of its failure to delineate a sufficiently ambiguous sense of closure (in a manner that conforms to that which has come before in the movie), so Jewett is critical of the ending of *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993), in which an egocentric television weatherman, Phil Connors (Bill Murray), who is punished by spending the worst day of his life over and over again in a small American town, finally finds peace and restitution (and an end to the cycle of repetition) upon finding true love with his producer, Rita (Andie MacDowell). Despite finding rich parallels between the film and what Paul has to say in Galatians 6 concerning the dangers of reaping the rewards of the flesh as opposed to those of the spirit, Jewett feels that the important motif running throughout both Galatians and the film, namely, that we should avoid ''seizing the day in an opportunistic manner'' and instead overcome ''the prideful illusions that the times and seasons can be brought under human control,'' as well as the concomitant tendency to think that other people ''can be mastered and seduced to suit our own rhythm and ego needs'' (ibid., p. 102), is squandered by *Groundhog Day*'s ''fairy-tale'' ending. In Jewett's words:

> The lovers come down the steps of the bed and breakfast at the end of the film, and Phil, gazing at the fresh snow, says, ''It's so beautiful. Let's live here.'' A false note is struck as their station wagon is seen making tracks through the freshly fallen snow, indicating the promise of a new life in

> Punxsutawney for a couple who will live here happily ever after. Especially for Phil and Rita, whose matured vocations require the broadcasting facilities of Pittsburgh, this ending is wide of the mark. Given the cultural appeal of an idyllic life in an isolated town or safe suburb, this is one more illusion of the flesh.
>
> (ibid.)

In marked contrast, Jewett suggests that when St. Paul writes in Galatians 6 about ''reaping a harvest,'' ''doing what is right,'' and ''working for the good of all'' (ibid.; cf. Galatians 6:7–10), a more serious treatise of living responsibly by ''the fruit of the Spirit'' (cf. Galatians 5:22), with the attendant focus on ''love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control'' (Galatians 5:22), is set forth. Whereas St. Paul was calling upon the early Christian community in Galatia (in southern Asia Minor) to seek the welfare of their neighbors in both good times and bad, and to be freed by Christ ''from our culturally shaped compulsions to embrace selfish love'' and our penchant for escaping ''the complexities of vocation and mutual responsibilities'' (Jewett, 1999, p. 102), it is questionable whether *Groundhog Day* is able in quite the same way to counter ''the despair of a cyclical life that goes nowhere'' (ibid., p. 99) and to enable audiences of the film to sow to the Spirit and thereby be in a position to ''reap eternal life'' (Galatians 6:8). Films are simply unable, for Jewett, to impart the same depth of insight and to have the same transformative effect as the apostle Paul was able to convey in his epistles concerning the way we should be responding to such pivotal Pauline themes as justification, shame, honor, grace, love, and righteousness. Although the ''language and metaphors of the Bible still retain their power in some of our most secular artifacts'' (ibid., p. 183), not least in a film such as *The Shawshank Redemption* where the Bible is used as an instrument of oppression by a sadistic prison warden and as a means of escape, by literally housing the key to salvation, by an innocent inmate, Jewett is under no delusion that only a cautious and tentative critical appropriation of film by the Pauline scholar will facilitate a theological (and more specifically Pauline) conversation.

Instructive though Jewett's approach is, however, there are a number of limitations to his position. He may be clearly acquainted with the narrative of the films under discussion, and there is little doubt that he judiciously enters into dialogue with his chosen texts, but, as he admits in the prologue to *Saint Paul at the Movies*, he is not a film critic – ''I have neither the talent nor the training'' (Jewett, 1993, p. 8). This is not a problem *per se*, since he is a Pauline scholar whose primary audience is

students and fellow biblical scholars interested in hermeneutics, but his work is littered with references to the need for a film to carry a ''prophetic power'' and to offer the ''potentially vivid counterweight of biblical stories and ideas'' (ibid.) to culture's more secular and even religion-less values and norms. Jewett may hope to engender ''a respectful dialogue that is sensitive to the contemporary relevance of both the film and the biblical text'' (ibid.), but any dialogue that has the potential to take place is hampered by the fact that this is a one-sided conversation, in which the parameters of the debate have already been framed by the New Testament writings alone. Even when, as happens at one point in a discussion of the theme of vengeance in relation to Romans 12:19–21 and *Pale Rider* (Clint Eastwood, 1985), Jewett concedes that St. Paul is being inconsistent, in that on the one hand he is calling on the Christian community to pray for its enemies but on the other he urges obedience to the government that is responsible for punishing and killing its criminals (as outlined in Romans 13:2, the person who ''resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and . . . will incur judgment''), Jewett resolves the problem by proposing that this is a ''holy inconsistency'' (Jewett, 1993, p. 131). In other words, where we encounter a flaw in St. Paul's judgment and logic, the fault is more likely to be ours rather than the apostle's – ''Is there perhaps a deeper, more divine logic at work here? . . . Is there not perhaps a deeper understanding of the human psyche in Paul's apparent inconsistency than in our cultural simplicities?'' (ibid.).

On no occasion does Jewett concede that St. Paul may be in the wrong, and nor does he countenance that a film may offer a more erudite or judicious reading of theological themes than St. Paul's epistles. In unapologetically dualist terms, Jewett believes that, as he says in his chapter on *Unforgiven*, in marked contrast to the ''distinctively Christian story of regeneration through sacrificial love,'' our culture is predisposed to preach the gospel of ''regeneration through violence'' (Jewett, 1999, p. 161). Since these two contradictory options cannot be brought together – ''When the two models of redemption are held up before us, side by side . . . it should become clear that either choice will eliminate the other'' (ibid.) – we must therefore choose one over the other, and Jewett leaves his readers in no doubt as to where his allegiance lies. Ultimately, Jewett is dedicated to seeing his work as missiological in nature, with ''a commitment to pursue the saving power of the gospel'' (Jewett, 1993, p. 9), so that, to paraphrase Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:22, it might bring at least some of his readers, and those who view these films, to salvation. Is Jewett not, though, judging his selection of films against a standard

by which they were never meant to compete? It is one thing to argue that film can be part of a hermeneutical conversation, but when he argues, for instance, that violent retaliation, along the lines of that meted out in *The Shawshank Redemption* by one of the subsidiary characters, a prison inmate called Elmo Blatch (Bill Bolender), to the wife and lover of Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) – who was in turn framed for their murders – ''is an all too typical reaction'' without the presence of ''the love of Christ that can heal the shame of being treated with contempt'' (Jewett, 1999, p. 174), Jewett goes too far, criticizing a film for its failure to perform an evangelistic function that it had never set out to fulfill.

For this reason, a more useful, and fully dialogical, approach can be found in George Aichele and Richard Walsh's recent collection, *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections Between Scripture and Film* (2002), which explicitly sets out in a manner that is qualitatively distinct from ''most books that bring together Scripture and film'' (Aichele & Walsh, 2002, p. ix) not to privilege the scriptural side of the exchange. Rather than presume, in the manner of Jewett, that if a scriptural text (or a biblical scholar's reading of it) is correct and that if a film should deviate from that interpretation ''on some particular issue, theme, character, plot, or story'' (ibid.) then the film in question is simply flawed, Aichele and Walsh's volume does not presuppose that there is only one, monolithic interpretation of a text. Instead, their aim is to ''bring the selected movies and biblical texts into a genuine exchange that will open up illuminating connections between them'' (ibid.). For example, in the case of the media satire *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, 1998), in which two teenagers from the 1990s are transported to the prelapsarian world of a hermetically sealed 1950s television sitcom, and struggle to create some semblance of humanity and authenticity in what they discover is no Edenic fantasy but an artificial, reactionary, and oppressive milieu, Aichele argues in his chapter ''Sitcom Mythology'' that ''The cinematic rewriting of the biblical stories of Eden and the Flood in *Pleasantville* not only juxtaposes them, but it also recycles them in a way that challenges the Christian reading of those stories'' (Aichele, 2002, p. 116). He suggests that the supposedly paradisiacal world that the two teenagers enter ''was never especially innocent,'' but, rather, ''bland and pasty'' (ibid., p. 119), in accordance with the claim I have adduced elsewhere that although this is an environment where everyone is always wholesome and in high spirits, the fact that there are no dangers, uncertainties, risks, or surprises prompts the question: ''would we want to live in such a world?'' (Deacy,

2005, p. 127). Indeed, would it not do us a disservice as human beings to live a life where we are not required to think or be challenged, and where we operate within a set of carefully prescribed boundaries and limitations – both mentally and geographically (ibid.)? Rather than see this film, as a number of Christian internet contributors have done, as an attack on traditional biblical morality and Christian values (see Deacy, 2005, p. 128) – where, as one Christian Spotlight respondent puts it, ''good is completely slandered,'' with the film constituting ''a twisted allegory of Genesis'' (Rettig, 1998) – Aichele approaches the film from a different angle, proposing that it should challenge our reading of Scripture, instead of (along the lines of Jewett) simply using Scripture to challenge our reading of the film. The film may therefore raise questions about the intrinsic goodness of Eden, but this is an inescapably good thing, on this reading, since few would disagree, at least within a postmodern context, that the meaning of all texts must be continually negotiated and renegotiated between that text (including Scripture) and the interpreter, for there is no objective or absolute reading of any text.

Accordingly, since meaning is never intractably fixed, but lies between texts and in ''intertextual configurations of texts that intersect one another in a wide variety of ways'' (Aichele, 2002, p. 9), it would clearly be absurd to argue that the biblical text should be treated with a degree of reverence and seriousness that no other text (or, indeed, film) could possibly aspire to. In contradistinction to Jewett's approach of according the Bible the upper hand over modern secular cultural products, it is much more appropriate if and when two (or even more) texts can challenge or even subvert readings of each other. A fruitful example of this approach is given by Jeffrey L. Staley in his contribution to Aichele and Walsh's volume, entitled ''Meeting Patch Again for the First Time: Purity and Compassion in Marcus Borg, the Gospel of Mark, and *Patch Adams*,'' in which an attempt is made to read, intertextually, the Gospel of Mark, Marcus Borg's novel *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (1994), and the Robin Williams film comedy *Patch Adams* (Tom Shadyac, 1998). Noting that both Mark and the film explicitly address the dangers involved when purity boundaries are crossed in the name of compassion, Staley argues that viewers are given ''a new way to understand the political challenge'' (Staley, 2002, p. 228) presented by the Jesus of Mark's Gospel. In juxtaposing four contemporary American institutions of purity – a mental institution, a university, the food industry, and a hospital – with the purity codes that appear in Mark's Gospel – in the challenges to authority raised by Jesus' exorcisms (3:20–30), his teaching (1:21–2), his eating with

sinners (2:15–17), and his healing of the sick (1:40–5, 2:1–12) – Staley finds that one is enabled to ''move beyond surface-level critiques of the film that merely focus on its storytelling devices and its emotional tone'' (ibid., p. 226) and can see how both the film and the biblical text present viewers ''with an alternative vision of life that challenges traditional cultural values'' in the form of subversive wisdom and a politics of compassion. This is very far removed from the world of Jewett!

Christ the Transformer of Culture

Whereas the dualist approach, as epitomized by Jewett, tends to encourage cultural conservatism, with cultural laws and standards assumed to belong to what Niebuhr referred to as ''the temporal and dying world,'' thereby comprising no more than ''restraining forces, dykes against sin'' and ''preventers of anarchy'' (Niebuhr, 1952, p. 190), the fifth of Niebuhr's five models takes a much more positive attitude toward culture. In lieu of the tendency in dualism to lay particular emphasis on the fallenness of creation, those who subscribe to this conversionist model will agree with the dualists (and for that matter those who subscribe to the *Christ against Culture* position) that human culture is far from perfect, but with the crucial difference that they will not simply hold to the negative position of mere endurance in anticipation of a future, eschatological (and trans-historical) deliverance from this world. Rather, Christ is believed to be capable of converting and transforming the existing fallen culture, so that a much more affirmative and hopeful position is adopted. Instead of using the dualist's language of justification and redemption from sin, the conversionist will be much more inclined to stress, like the synthesist, the incarnational and sacramental dimension of culture – albeit without the more extreme veneration of culture that pervaded Niebuhr's third model. The present dimension of existence will thus be accorded a more central role than it will for the dualist, for whom, as Niebuhr pointed out, ''spiritual transformation cannot be expected this side of death'' (ibid., p. 191). As a result, in this eschatological present, the emphasis will be on renewal, with culture able to point to the glory of God. Niebuhr cites St. Augustine as one of the most obvious exponents of this position, in that, according to Augustine, Christ is the transformer of culture by his redirection, reinvigoration, and regeneration of ''that life of man, expressed in all human works, which in present actuality is the perverted and corrupted exercise of a fundamentally good nature''

(ibid., pp. 209–10). In response to this corruption, Jesus was believed to have come to earth to heal and renew that which had been perverted – to restore and reorient that which had been led astray by sin. There is nothing in culture that cannot be transformed and converted, on this interpretation.

This fifth model – which Lyden claims was Niebuhr's preferred approach, although this may simply be because Niebuhr does not offer a critique of this model in the same way as he does for the other four – can also be seen to underscore the theology of John Calvin, for whom the secular order was not simply a corrective to evil but also served the positive function of promoting human welfare. In Niebuhr's words, ''what the gospel promises and makes possible, as divine (not human) possibility, is the transformation of mankind in all its nature and culture into the kingdom of God'' (Niebuhr, 1952, p. 217). As with F. D. Maurice, leader of the Christian Socialist Movement in the nineteenth century, for whom the conversion of humankind from self-centeredness to Christ-centeredness was a fundamental theological axiom, the thinking here is that there is no aspect of human culture that Christ does not have the capacity to transform. Ironically, however, whereas Maurice thereby advocated universal salvation, and the promise of redemption for all, Calvin's theology highlighted the deep fissure between those who were predestined, or elected, to eternal salvation and those who would be consigned for an eternity to eternal damnation. It may not be entirely accurate, therefore, to associate Calvin with this fifth model in the way that Niebuhr suggests. However, more modern forms of Calvinism would seem to fit much more effectively, not least in light of Karl Barth's twentieth-century revisiting of Calvin's thoroughgoing form of predestination, in which it is believed that we have all been made acceptable to God, and God has extended unlimited love to us, because of Christ's atoning death for humankind's sins. For Calvin, in marked contrast, the death of Christ merely takes away the penalty of sins of those on whom God has already chosen (indeed, predestined) to have mercy – that is, the sins of the elect – and so does not apply to the whole human race. Although Barth himself stopped short of advocating universal salvation, it is notable in terms of Niebuhr's fifth model that Barth's updating of Calvinist teaching has positioned creation in a much more positive relationship to God than that which was hitherto the case, since, as Christ is the ground and goal of all creation, humans are thereby unable to undo what Christ has done. As the author of creation and salvation, Christ has restored the covenant with God, the net result of which is that all of

creation lies in an essentially positive relation to God. Despite Barth's association with the *Christ against Culture* model cited earlier in this chapter, it may be no less apposite to see him as an albeit partial proponent of Niebuhr's conversionist position.

One possible application of this model to the theology–film conversation can be seen in the way in which Christians may be inclined to create a Christian version of ''secular'' culture by appropriating it with a spiritual dimension. As with the aforementioned *The Omega Code*, which infused the action genre with an overtly eschatological sensibility in order to be palatable to Christian audiences, the hallmark here is explicit Christian belief. Although more spiritual than explicitly Christian, a more recent example of the *conversionist* model is the documentary film *What the Bleep Do We Know!?* (Mark Vicente, Betsy Chasse, & William Arntz, 2004), a part metaphysical treatise, part educational tract, and part New Age self-help manual that attempts, with interviews from both the scientific and decidedly unscientific communities, to offer lay audiences new insight into the phenomenon of quantum mechanics. The film's premise is that, just as quantum physics shows us how phenomena are always transformed by observation, so our perception of reality can be changed if we are willing to give up traditionally held suppositions about the whys and wherefores of the universe and our place within it. As well as the allegation that mass meditation is scientifically proven to have reduced crime rates in Washington DC, one of the claims advanced in this film is that humans have the capability of changing the molecular structure of water simply by looking at it. Accordingly, since human beings are comprised of 90 percent water, then, by observing ourselves, we too have the capacity to change at a fundamental level thanks to the laws of quantum physics. Not surprisingly, the film has received a critical mauling from a number of professional scientists, among them Simon Singh, a particle physicist from Cambridge University, who accuses the filmmakers of distorting science to fit their own agenda and suffusing the film with ''half-truths and misleading analogies,'' if not ''downright lies,'' as well as duping ''millions into mistaking pure claptrap for something of cosmic importance'' (qtd in ''Inside Story,'' 2005, p. 4). In like manner, Richard Dawkins, professor of the public understanding of science at Oxford University, directs his invective not simply at ''the dishonesty of the charlatans who peddle such tosh, but the dopey gullibility of the thousands of well meaning people who believe it'' (qtd in ibid.). However, in seeking to suffuse ''secular'' scientific culture with an albeit quasi-religious sensibility, in terms of the film's ostensible claim that the

distinction between science and religion becomes increasingly blurred once we realize that, ultimately, both are describing the same phenomena, there is a danger that the confessional or evangelical dimension will override all other considerations – aesthetic, scientific, intellectual.

The danger with this fifth model, therefore, is that the religious imagination will become impoverished as the need to transform and suffuse culture with a spiritual dimension becomes the overriding objective. If confessional intent overrides artistic or aesthetic quality, then it is not surprising if, as has happened in the case of *What the Bleep Do We Know!?*, it proves difficult to find an interested or appreciative audience beyond the strict confines of the community, or sub-community, that has engendered it. As Steve Rose, writing in the *Guardian*, notes, while the film ostensibly endeavors to present itself as ''populist scientific enquiry,'' it eventually reveals itself to comprise no more than a ''mushy self-help manual for a new religion'' – or, worse, ''a manifesto for a new religion'' (Rose, 2005). Rather than transform or convert secular culture, therefore, all that it succeeds in doing is ''muddying the waters'' (ibid.), and drawing attention to its ghettoized origins. Stella Papamichael similarly draws attention to the filmmakers' ''cultist'' orientations, in which they appear to be encouraging viewers ''to come out of the metaphysical closet'' (Papamichael, 2005). Rose also argues that *What the Bleep* is ''one to file alongside other pseudo-mystical phenomena like the kabbala and *The Da Vinci Code*,'' and denounces the film as ''a product that's happy to rake in the cash by exploiting our lack of knowledge, or even contributing to it'' (Rose, 2005). Despite the attempt by one of the film's three directors to dispel reservations by assuring audiences that no funding was received from any religious or spiritual organization in the making of this film, a number of commentators have drawn attention to the fact that one of the ''experts'' cited in *What the Bleep* is the 35,000-year-old spirit of an ancient warrior from the lost city of Atlantis known as Ramtha the Enlightened One, who is presently being channeled through the body of a woman living in Washington. Furthermore, all three of the film's directors are known to have studied at the Ramtha School of Enlightenment. As Ruthe Stein, writing in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, thus concludes, the ''biggest puzzlement'' surrounding *What the Bleep* is ''what it's doing in major movie theaters around the country when it so clearly belongs on one of those small cable channels given to peculiar programming,'' leading her to conclude that this ''independently produced feature must have some hefty moneybags behind it to afford this level of distribution'' (R. Stein, 2004). Although Niebuhr himself does not

advance any criticisms of this fifth model, it is clear that, in practice, there are intellectual and artistic problems concomitant with the application of this approach.

Such a dynamic of converting or transforming secular culture with an explicitly religious or spiritual sensibility can also be identified in the Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) industry that was set up in the early 1970s by American evangelical groups as a religious alternative to the mainstream ''secular'' entertainment industry. A hybrid of rock music (''the devil's music,'' no less) and Bible-based song lyrics, this approach entails, in Romanowski's words, ''co-opting existing musical styles and adding 'Christian' lyrics in the current vernacular,'' thereby attempting to evangelize and reach out to the ''spiritually lost'' (Romanowski, 2000, p. 105). Although CCM was created solely on the basis of lyrical content rather than musical style (see Joseph, 1999, p. 5), there is also a sense in which, on this reading, rock concerts might be seen to take on an experiential (and even worship-oriented) role that is functionally equivalent to attending and participating in a church service. Similarly, the creation and distribution of records and CDs might be deemed synonymous with the evangelical task of ''saving souls'' – where ''souls'' are consumers, and the more a ''Christian'' product sells or receives radio airplay the more ''souls'' are thereby saved. The proliferation in recent years of satellite television channels is also a case in point. In Britain, for example, GOD TV has been running for over a decade – ''freely providing life-changing programming to 390 million people'' with a view to winning ''one billion souls'' as it ''feeds from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth 24 hours a day'' (http://www.god.tv). As with Christian bookshops and youth festivals, there is only room for popular art that evangelizes, praises, or exhorts. The strategy has thus changed in conservative evangelical circles from rejecting popular culture, in the manner of Niebuhr's first model, to rebranding it in their own image, so that, to give an example adduced by Lyden, ''rock 'n' roll is no longer 'the devil's music' if it can be given lyrics focused on God rather than sex and drugs'' (Lyden, 2003, p. 18).

Arguably, one of the greatest examples in Britain of an artist who conforms to this model is Cliff Richard, who announced his conversion to Christianity during a Billy Graham rally in London in 1966. There is a difference, though, in that whereas, as Mark Joseph points out, in America ''successful artists who experienced life-changing conversions were encouraged to give up their loyal audiences, who may have been interested in hearing what their favourite artists had to say, and were

relegated to the [CCM] ghetto and urged to make music for fellow believers'' (Joseph, 1999, p. 6), Richard has always worked, successfully, in the mainstream. While acknowledging that a career in the music industry involves ''working alongside acts which you may feel are in bad taste or offensive'' and which ''puts you in a place where your beliefs are under pretty constant attack from people who entirely reject Christian standards'' (qtd in Joseph, 1999, p. 99), Richard concluded that ''Running away from the world is no answer to its challenge . . . so I decided to stay put. Paul told the Corinthians at Corinth to stay in the position in life they were in when they were converted'' (ibid.). In tandem with Niebuhr's fifth model, therefore, since, as Richard earnestly believes, ''I can only say to people who are not Christians that, until you have taken the step of asking Christ into your life, your life is not really worthwhile'' (ibid.), the objective is to attempt to transform culture from within. On the downside, however, as with *What the Bleep*, the danger is that a reductionist agenda is in place, whereby confessional intent becomes the sole objective and ''religion'' is, at it were, introduced through the back door. In Richard's own words, ''I am a Christian, so nothing I ever do now is secular. Even when I sing a pop song that doesn't mention Jesus, it's still a Christian song, because I am presenting it. If my record is played on a mainstream radio station, they are playing a Christian record whether they know it or not'' (qtd in Joseph, 1999, p. 100). Such is the strength of personality that, he continues, ''You can sing about lost love and found love, and about love that's going to last forever. Then once people love you, you can slip them something that really explains what love is about'' (ibid.). Rather than be taken on its own terms, the suggestion, here, is that music is only efficacious when it is harnessed – even manipulated – for missiological purposes, and cannot be judged on its own terms.

Richard's 1999 hit record *Millennium Prayer*, which saw the words of the Lord's Prayer set to the music of *Auld Lang Syne*, perhaps best epitomizes this process. The fact that it so deeply polarized audiences – with fellow music artists George Michael and Mel C castigating the song as a ''heinous piece of music'' (qtd in BBC News, 1999b) and as ''ripping off fans'' (qtd in BBC News, 1999c), respectively – suggests that not everyone is persuaded by the attempt to Christianize popular culture in this way. Indeed, George Michael went so far as to call the enterprise ''vile,'' arguing that ''Just knowing there has been a Christian campaign for it – I think it is so exploitative of people's religion . . . I think there are people out there who feel it is their duty to buy this record on the eve of the

millennium. That is a really horrible reason for a number one record'' (qtd in BBC News 1999b). Controversy also erupted at the time when BBC Radio 2 omitted Cliff Richard's *Millennium Prayer* from its playlist, with a spokesperson for the station explaining that ''We are very supportive of him as an artist but his new single was considered not to be of broad enough appeal to be included'' (qtd in BBC News 1999a).

Another problem with this transformative model is that there is often a confluence between confessional and commercial interests to such an extent that, with its emphasis on such commercial considerations as ''industrial growth, increased market share and greater profits,'' there has been a systematic dilution and reduction of the evangelical message, whether in satellite television or the Contemporary Christian Music scene, to ''the goals and strategies of the commercial marketplace'' (Romanowski, 2000, p. 108). On the GOD TV website, for example, viewers are urged to ''Become a Business Angel'' (www.god.tv/partner/UK/businessangel.aspx). Four dictionary definitions of ''angel'' are then offered, namely, ''A benevolent celestial being that acts as an intermediary between heaven and earth,'' ''A representation of such a being in the image of a human figure with a halo and wings,'' ''A kind and lovable person'' who ''manifests goodness, purity and selflessness,'' and ''A financial backer of an enterprise'' (ibid.). With emphasis on this fourth definition, the channel's website then explains its rationale: ''With a God-given passion to reach the lost and equip the Church, the vision of GOD TV is so vast that it is going to take a multitude of Kingdom-minded financiers to accomplish this mission'' (ibid.). In a somewhat dubious translation of Deuteronomy 8:18 – which, in the RSV translation, sees Moses calling upon Israel to ''remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth'' – GOD TV uses this passage from the Mosaic law to incite business leaders, which it then identifies as those ''who lead corporations, companies or have their own businesses,'' to ''earnestly remember the Lord our God, for it is He who gives power to gain wealth'' (ibid.). One thousand ''business angels'' are then asked to support the channel with a gift of ''£3000 or more per year or £250 per month'' (ibid.). Similar issues arise in the Contemporary Christian Music scene, where, in 1982, Amy Grant's album *Age to Age* sold over a million copies, paving the way for Grant's evangelical record company WORD to sign a co-production and distribution deal with A&M Records. Yet, as Romanowski reports, this led to tensions among evangelical Christians, as Grant's music was deemed to have become less Christianized (Romanowski, 2000, p. 117). Whereas she had, in the past, performed songs called ''My Father's Eyes,''

''El Shaddai,'' and ''Praise to the Lord,'' her subsequent music, such as her 1991 album *Heart in Motion* and, in 1997, *Behind the Eyes*, was deemed by more conservative Christians to be ''religiously shallow'' (ibid.), with her 1985 album *Unguarded* lambasted by one reader of *CCM Magazine* as ''moral and ethical humanism with a very slight religious perspective ... From Amy's ungodly album cover to her mediocre message, I see no attempt at true evangelism'' (qtd in ibid.). In sum, therefore, whatever the merits of Niebuhr's fifth model, it is clear that, to judge by the examples cited from film, music, and televangelism, Christians have a long way to go before Christ will succeed in infiltrating, converting, and transforming secular culture. If anything, this position is the weakest (practically if not intellectually) of Niebuhr's five models, and arguably the most difficult to apply to the interface between theology and film.

Concluding Reflections: "High" and "Low" Culture

While the purpose of this chapter has been to highlight the range of perspectives that exists on the interrelationship between theology and culture, using the five models adduced by H. Richard Niebuhr as a frame of reference, it is apparent that the differences between the five positions cited by Niebuhr are often subtle in form. For example, the fifth model, though clearly distinct from the dualist approach, nevertheless shares that position's tendency to be deeply suspicious about the efficacy of secular products *per se*, at least insofar as they remain in a pre-transformed and unconverted state. And, although it has much in common with the synthetic approach, the difference is that the fifth model does not view culture as *already* in relation to Christ, but only as having the *potential* to become so. It is also different from the second model, *Christ of Culture*, because although both share the propensity to seek a dynamic interaction between Christ and culture, Niebuhr's fifth model is governed and propelled by the Christian faith, and specifically Christ's redemptive power to transform and convert the secular order, and does not see Christ and culture as coterminous and interchangeable. George Marsden may thus be correct in his claim that ''Virtually every Christian and every Christian group expresses in one way or another all five of the motifs'' (qtd in Glanzer, 2003, ¶7), and it is worth noting that even Niebuhr himself acknowledged that ''a construction has been set up that is partly artificial'' and ''no person or group ever conforms completely to a type'' (Niebuhr, 1952, p. 56). The idea that

there is such a clear-cut distinction between ''Christ'' on the one hand and ''culture'' on the other can, indeed, be misleading. No theological activity can ever be conducted in a cultural vacuum, yet there is something conspicuously abstract and even a historical in Niebuhr's distinction between the two. Underlying his typology is the inaccurate suggestion that a line of demarcation exists between the two constructs of ''Christianity'' and ''culture,'' and that Christianity, or at least the Church, ultimately comprises a monolithic category which can be set apart from the equally monolithic and static realm of ''culture.'' Maybe, in order to adequately highlight the extent to which all theological reflection is ultimately, and inescapably, culturally bound, the typology should be reframed as ''the culture of Christianity ... and other cultures'' (qtd in Glanzer, 2003, ¶7), along the lines of what Marsden has suggested. Such an approach would at least have the advantage of drawing attention to the existence of *sub*-cultures. As John Howard Yoder puts it, ''There is no reason that what we should do about war, and about farming, and about epic poetry, and about elementary education, and about pornography ... and about heavy metal, would gain by our trying to treat each of those segments of 'culture' in the same way'' (qtd in ibid.).

Furthermore, as Johnston notes, there are occasions when a theologian ''might adopt several different approaches to the conversation between movies and theology depending on the film in view or the audience addressed'' (R. Johnston, 2000, p. 59). Even Johnston himself, a Protestant theologian whom Lyden associates with the *Christ and Culture in Paradox* model, because of the dialogical nature of Johnston's program (Lyden, 2003, p. 22), defies easy categorization, since his own leanings tend to be toward the Catholic-oriented synthetic model. Indeed, in *Reel Spirituality*, Johnston claims at one point that film ''can usher us into the presence of the holy'' (R. Johnston, 2000, p. 87), and that film stories that ''portray the truly human bind their viewers with the religious expressions of humankind'' and ''awaken a holistic sense in their viewers, providing windows of meaning'' (ibid., p. 158). He goes even further than this when talking about the films of Peter Weir, in the case study that appears at the end of his book. There, Johnston bemoans the fact that ''we seldom notice God's sacramental presence in the ordinary experiences of life, including our moviegoing. We fail to hear God speak'' (ibid., p. 173). Together with his attestations that ''The movies of Peter Weir can help the church recover something of life's mystery and grace'' and that ''The intimations of Spirit/spirit found in his movies are real expressions

of grace and have strong biblical warrant, if we would but listen'' (ibid., p. 189), this clearly suggests that we should exercise caution before pigeonholing theologians and critics as belonging to particular typologies. This is no less true of James Wall, whose article ''Biblical Spectaculars and Secular Man,'' published in Cooper and Skrade's 1970 volume *Celluloid and Symbols*, would indicate that he subscribes to the dualist model in light of his assertion that a film's vision ''can be said to be 'religious' in the Christian sense if it celebrates humanity or if it exercises with conviction a strong agony over moments where humanity is actually distorted'' (Wall, 1970, p. 56). On the other hand, in his later writings in the 1990s for the *Christian Century*, Wall has argued for a more sacramental view of things, as betokened by his claim that ''God is active but often in disguise, and where signs of the spirit are waiting to erupt from novels, movie screens and bully pulpits'' (qtd in R. Johnston, 2000, p. 60).

Despite such ambivalence, however, a general picture may be seen to emerge. While there are many Christians who would subscribe to the two more extreme positions of *Christ against Culture* and *Christ of Culture*, the majority of Christian contributions to the dialogue between Christ and culture tend to relate to the last three of Niebuhr's five positions. Whereas in the first model, where film cannot contribute to Christian theology at all, and in the second, where there is an over-zealous attempt to converge Christ and culture, in the dualist, synthetic, and conversionist models film can clearly contribute to Christian theology *although Christian theology brings its own agenda to the conversation*. Since, for there to be a proper dialogue, theology must expect to be challenged in the process, this is more likely to be achieved in models three to five than in the first approach, where theology resolutely refuses to engage with culture through fear of contamination, and the second, where ''anything goes'' and, as David Jasper's critique has evinced, there is an absence of critical rigor. Of the three latter positions, which in *Explorations in Theology and Film* were synthesized into one generic model entitled *Theology in critical dialog with culture* (Marsh, 1997, p. 28), it is the dualist model of *Christ and Culture in Paradox* that is most resistant to simply welcoming uncritically all that culture has to offer (cf. ibid., p. 27), in view of the model's tendency to judge popular culture on the basis of pre-formed theological assumptions. It is our view that an important way forward for the theology–film field is to insure that a much more dialogical and two-way conversation can emerge that allows both theology and film an equal voice in the exchange, rather than (as in the dualist model as conceived by Jewett) a position that seeks a dialogue but only on the

proviso that Christianity calls the shots. An approach more in keeping with the positions adopted by the contributors to Aichele and Walsh's *Screening Scripture*, rather than Jewett's *Saint Paul at the Movies*, is thus pivotal in this regard, not least because the contributors to the former volume stress the need to undertake a hermeneutical conversation with Scripture, but one in which biblical texts are just one of many voices struggling to be heard among the swirling, fermenting currents of contemporary culture, and none has primacy over any of the others.

Such an approach finds a ready parallel not so much in the work of Niebuhr as in Gordon Lynch's revised correlational approach to the theology–culture exchange, as delineated in a recent Blackwell publication, *Understanding Theology and Popular Culture* (Lynch, 2005, p. 103f.). According to Lynch, such a position ''values a complex conversation between the questions and insights of both religious tradition and popular culture, and allows for the possibility that both religious tradition and popular culture can be usefully challenged and transformed through this process'' (ibid., p. 105). Rather than, in the form of what Lynch refers to as the correlational method, simply looking for theological answers to cultural questions in the manner of Jewett, there is a much greater emphasis in the revised correlational approach on the extent to which theology can itself learn from (and be changed or challenged by) secular culture – even to the point that one may wish to reject aspects of one's theological tradition that are deemed to be deficient or harmful. Although Lynch associates my own work with the correlational model (ibid.), the *revised* correlational approach would be more in keeping with the claim adduced in *Faith in Film* that so complex is the relationship between theology and film that film may even have ''taken on many of the functions that we would historically associate with traditional religious institutions'' (Deacy, 2005, p. 137). Provided that the relationship is a critical and dialectical one, then film and other agencies of secular culture can be seen to comprise a far cry from the way in which adherents to the *Christ against Culture* model have tended over the years to deride motion pictures (and in particular Hollywood) as a form of distraction from – and, indeed, a counterpoint to – more demanding and erudite pursuits. Whereas, to cite one example in the words of Richard Harries, kitsch ''is the enemy of all that is true, good and beautiful'' and ''an enemy of the Christian faith and must be exposed as such'' (Harries, 2004, p. 354), the theology–film debate today has moved on a long way, to the extent that film is often deemed an equal dialogue-partner rather than a merely commercial enterprise that, as the British literary critic

F. R. Leavis, writing in the early-to-mid-twentieth century, believed, is unable to replicate the ability of other art forms such as poems and novels to educate, inform, and confront (cf. Lynch, 2005, p. 6).

There is no room, however, for complacency. Although films can often perform an important cultural and societal role, American art critic Clement Greenberg's diagnosis in the 1930s and 1940s of forms of entertainment (not least kitsch) that offered their audiences easy pleasures without requiring from them any intellectual assent or aesthetic response (cf. Lynch, 2005, pp. 6–7) is not without its more recent advocates. Though a committed movie buff, Mark Kermode, who regularly reviews films for BBC radio and television and for *Sight and Sound* magazine, and has written two entries in the British Film Institute Modern Classics Series on *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) and *The Shawshank Redemption*, lambasted *Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man's Chest* (Gore Verbinski, 2006) – the sequel to a film inspired by a Disney theme park ride – on the BBC2 arts program *Newsnight Review* on July 7, 2006, for representing ''the death of Western civilization.'' It is not that Kermode is adverse to popular film, as his infatuation with (often low-budget) horror films attests. However, film is demonstrably not capable of facilitating a theological discussion *per se*, and Kermode's disenchantment with artistically impoverished summer blockbuster fare is a salutary reminder of the dangers involved in going down the path of the second of Niebuhr's five models. Although he was writing in the context of television, Neil Postman's comprehensive critique of electronic media, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1986), has serious ramifications for the way we look upon film in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. A media theorist and cultural critic, Postman argued that whereas print culture (the dominant form of communication in the nineteenth century) encouraged coherent, orderly, serious, and rational discourse with propositional content, television epitomizes an image-based culture where fragmented, rather than coherent, multi-sensory images, which emphasize feeling and sensation over rationality, predominate. Even when television programs deal explicitly with religion, Postman draws attention to the qualitative distinction between worship that is conducted in a consecrated space, such as a church, synagogue, or temple, and how, when it comes to television, audiences will experience religious programs in the same semi-attentive manner that they will soak up game shows or soap operas – that is, while they are eating, talking, going to the toilet, or doing ''push-ups'' (Postman, 1986, p. 119). Since, according to Postman, audiences of religious programs cannot, by definition, be ''immersed in an

aura of mystery and symbolic otherworldliness'' when in the ''presence of an animated television screen,'' it is highly ''unlikely'' that television ''can call forth the state of mind required for a nontrivial religious experience'' (ibid.). In a nutshell, ''[e]verything that makes religion an historic, profound and sacred human activity is stripped away'' when it is presented on television – ''there is no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no theology, and above all, no sense of spiritual transcendence'' (ibid., pp. 116–17). The danger for Postman ''is not that religion has become the content of television shows but that television shows may become the content of religion'' (ibid., p. 124). As John P. Ferré points out, in his paraphrase of Postman:

> The producers of religious programs know the viewing habits of the audience, including the fact that with a quick press of a button the religion could be gone and a soap opera could appear, so they compete for viewers with upbeat programs that exude health, wealth and beauty. They promote values that have everything to do with audience share, but nothing to do with the rigorous demands of true religious devotion ... [where even] God is subordinate to the evangelist.
>
> (Ferré, 2003, p. 87)

With the lines between worship and entertainment blurred, in which the minister plays the role of entertainer, electronic media thus perform an insidious role in our society, one which is inimical to genuine religious engagement – to the point, indeed, that Postman even refers to this as ''blasphemy'' (Postman, 1986, p. 123). His British counterpart, Malcolm Muggeridge, was also of the view that television was a medium of fantasy in contradistinction to the reality of the Christian message, such that, had Christ returned to earth in the twentieth century and been invited to appear on television then, according to Muggeridge, he would have declined the opportunity, since his province was one of truth whereas television is bound up with illusion. In Muggeridge's words, ''We have created a Frankenstein-like monster, an enormous apparatus of persuasion such as has never before been known on earth,'' which says to those whom it influences: ''satisfy your greed, satisfy your sensuality, that is the purpose of life'' (qtd in Grant, 2003, p. 121).

The dangers of being subsumed into an electronic, visual culture are also illustrated well in a number of motion pictures. In François Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966), for instance, we see a chillingly prophetic vision of a future age where books are ritually burned (''Books disturb people; they make them anti-social'') and the citizens are controlled and manipulated

by television. As Bernard Brandon Scott sees it, the film ''paints a picture in which one of the driving ideologies of the Western liberal tradition, the equality of all humans, becomes in the hands of the new media a tool for leveling and controlling society,'' and that instead of ''inducing freedom'' fosters only ''anarchy'' (Brandon Scott, 1994, p. 273).[4] In *Being There* (Hal Ashby, 1979), reading and writing are peripheral concerns since the protagonist is illiterate. Indeed, Chance Gardiner (Peter Sellers) is a blank slate, whose entire understanding of the world has been derived from television. He has learned all his values – how to behave, how to smile, and how to be pleasant and calm – from TV. When he enters the ''outside world,'' he becomes an instant celebrity, and is a natural performer on television, because this is the tool that has literally formed him. At the end, he is even touted as a possible future president of the United States. Another case in point is *Network* (Sidney Lumet, 1976), a satire on the commercialization of American news broadcasting, in which a TV news anchorman, Howard Beale (Peter Finch), suffers a nervous breakdown live on air and launches a series of rants against the network that had recently decided to fire him because of a fall in ratings. He lambasts the very industry that has molded him, turning into an on-air prophet. However, when ratings begin to soar, especially when Beale threatens to ''blow my brains out'' live on peak-time television, his employers react by turning the nightly news into a type of game show in order to foster the unprecedented audience share, and the entertainment division of the network takes over the news division. In an apocalyptic tone that is reminiscent of Postman, Beale – the ''mad prophet of the airwaves,'' as he comes to be known – denounces television as

> the gospel, the ultimate revelation. This tube can make or break presidents, popes, prime ministers. This tube is the most awesome goddamn force in the whole godless world. And woe is us if it ever falls into the hands of the wrong people . . . Television is not the truth. Television is a goddamn amusement park. Television is a circus, a carnival, a traveling troop of acrobats, storytellers, dancers, singers, jugglers, side show freaks, lion tamers, and football players. We're in the boredom killing business.

This thus connects well with Postman's premise that we are ''amusing ourselves to death'' and that when ''a population is distracted by trivia, when cultural life is redefined as a perpetual round of entertainments . . . - when, in short, a people become an audience and their public business a vaudeville act, then a nation finds itself at risk; culture death is a clear possibility'' (Postman, 1986, pp. 155–6).

Methodological Considerations

In light of such considerations, it is not surprising if church leaders are often predisposed to disdain what the media has to offer as unworthy of theological attention. As Peter Horsfield, writing from an Australian perspective, notes:

> Many church leaders tell me – sometimes proudly, sometimes dismissively – that they are too busy to watch television or go to the movies. Their major media activities are reading books and journals, activities that put them out of touch with the most common media practices of the people to whom they are supposed to be communicating.
>
> (Horsfield, 2003, p. 274)

Such concerns, though sincere and considered, are inclined to judge the value of a cultural product on the basis of where it sits on the high–low culture axis. A distinction will be made between high and popular culture, so that films (and TV) will tend to be seen to comprise throwaway entertainment, whereas the printed form contains an intellectual (and theological) rigor. Paul Tillich is a case in point. Despite his contention in *Theology of Culture* that neither the religious nor the secular realm ''should be in separation from the other,'' since both ''are rooted in religion in the larger sense of the word, in the experience of ultimate concern'' (Tillich, 1964, p. 9), Tillich's theology also underscores the dangers inherent in presupposing that *popular* culture can be amenable to a theological conversation. For the mere fact that for Tillich ''Ultimate concern is manifest in the aesthetic function of the human spirit as the infinite desire to express ultimate meaning'' (Tillich, 1964, p. 8) and ''refers to every moment of our life, to every space and every realm'' (ibid., p. 41) does not mean that all works of art express God in the way that he describes. Indeed, so highbrow was Tillich in his approach to the arts that it is conspicuous that – even taking on board the consideration that much of his work was written in the first half of the twentieth century, when film was more of a fledgling medium – he chose not to refer to the medium of film at all in his *Theology of Culture*. Even when he referred specifically to the ''visual arts'' (Tillich, 1964, p. 71), the remit of the discussion was restricted to ''the Byzantine, the Romanesque, the early and late Gothic styles,'' as well as Mannerism, Baroque, Rococo, Classicism, Romanticism, Naturalism, Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, and Surrealism. The cinema is not accommodated at all in his schema, prompting me to revisit the juxtaposition made in *Screen Christologies* of the way for Tillich everything that the human thinks, feels, and performs achieves its greatness and depth because of the active presence of a

religious dimension to life, and the subsequent suggestion that film is taking on many of the functions of religion in contemporary society (Deacy, 2001, pp. 2–3).

A better conversation-partner than Tillich is Harvey Cox, who, writing in the 1960s, believed that a balance must be struck by theologians between an uncritical reception of popular culture and remaining in their ivory towers. Cox explicitly advocated moving ''beyond a culture dominated by print,'' with what he called ''its inherently elitist characteristics,'' to the point where electronic media has the potential to ''facilitate a more democratic and more participatory society than we now have'' (Cox, 2004, p. 254). While acknowledging that books play a vital role, Cox argued that as modes of communication they are ''awkward'' and ''cumbersome,'' they ''take too long to write, cost too much to publish, encourage a certain snobbish reliance on a pretty style and vocabulary, and clutter up houses and libraries to a degree that is already becoming nearly impossible to handle'' (ibid.). Although this is to overstretch the point somewhat, inasmuch as books, like films, come in a variety of styles, forms, and genres, including those such as comic books, cartoons, dime novels, pulp fiction, and potboilers that do not fit into such a categorization, it is nevertheless germane to the present discussion that Cox claimed that ''Print does not reproduce the full range of human communicative sonorities and gestures the way tapes and especially films do'' (ibid.). Notwithstanding the fact that Cox's critique reads here as an over-simplistic dichotomy and is altogether too reminiscent of the world delineated in François Truffaut's aforementioned parody *Fahrenheit 451*, which was released in the same year as Cox's *The Secular City*, the ''coming cultural revolution,'' as Cox put it, ''from print to images'' (ibid.) has undeniably given theologians the apparatus to engage more fully in a proper critical dialogue between theology and popular culture. Although Cox was of the view that the revolution had not yet arrived, in the sense that ''Instead of a global village we have a global cluster of pyramids, a complex of vertical skyscrapers where signals come down from the tower tops but there is no way to answer back from the bottom'' (ibid., p. 255), it is apparent in an age of reality TV, where audience testimony is regularly solicited (often by inviting the viewer at home to press the red button on their remote control to decide which Big Brother contestant to evict, a trend that extends even to news programs in which the audience is encouraged to text or telephone their views on the latest stories), that the contours have changed significantly in the last forty or so years.

Methodological Considerations

As with the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, of which Cox was an unqualified advocate in the 1960s, it is difficult not to agree with Cox that theologians (and the Church) should re-evaluate their relationship to the ''secular'' world, thereby rendering the distinction between different types of culture (high and low) an artificial and outmoded one. For Bonhoeffer, indeed, any attempt to separate theology from the affairs of the world actually entailed a denial of the unity of God and the world as achieved through the Incarnation. Since there is, on this model, no God apart from the world, no supernatural apart from the natural, and no sacred apart from the profane, then it would be theologically indefensible to argue that films, or any other agencies of popular culture, are anything other than a pivotal part of the way in which theology is practiced and understood. As Bonhoeffer's talk of ''religionless Christianity'' highlights, the goal of Christianity is not to be consumed by increasingly redundant rituals and metaphysical teachings that allow people to escape the challenge of the gospel, ''but to be a man ... in the life of the world'' (Bonhoeffer, 1963, p. 123; see also Deacy, 2007). It may well be the case, not least in an age where reality TV holds such sway, that there is much in popular culture that is mindless and trivial, but this should not inhibit (or prohibit) film and other media from provoking serious reflection on our lives and our society. Romanowski is thus right to call for ''an engaged, critical, and productive involvement with the popular arts,'' one that is ''grounded in a faith vision that encompasses all of life and culture'' (Romanowski, 2001, p. 14).

Having surveyed Niebuhr's five models of the interaction between Christ and culture, and followed them up with some reflections upon where this leaves the theology–culture debate today in light of the variety of perspectives from both theologians and cultural commentators on the adequacy and suitability of entering into a conversation with ''low'' culture, the remainder of this book will consist of the discussion of a number of theological perspectives and filmic themes that will help facilitate a fertile two-way exchange between theology and film. The underlying assumption will be that, although Christians consume films like everyone else (thus concurring with Niebuhr's second model), Christian theology needs to harness appropriate critical tools in order to engage with such material, along the lines of the dialogical model advanced by Aichele and Walsh's *Screening Scripture* and by Lynch's revised correlational model. I would also concur with Clive Marsh's assessment that if dialogue between theology and film ''is to locate itself appropriately within the study and critique of contemporary culture then it needs to

be working with culturally significant material, including dominant examples of popular culture'' (Marsh, 2004, p. 61). As a result, the rest of this book will comprise a detailed overview of the manner and extent to which a conversation between theology and film can enable us to gain some understanding of the role of women, the environment, violence, justice, war, and eschatology. A final, concluding chapter will survey the fruits of the exploration (with particular reference to the cinematic art of storytelling) and will consider just how helpful films are able to be in initiating a theological encounter with contemporary cultural concerns. It will be suggested that this can be achieved without the prophetic voices of either theology or culture dominating proceedings and diminishing the envisaged dialogical and reciprocal nature of the exchange.

Notes

1 This is not to say, of course, that theology does not embrace such theoretical approaches, also. We can, for instance, have psychoanalytical, Marxist, feminist, gay and lesbian, and poststructuralist forms of theology. Indeed, theology is never conducted in a vacuum and will draw upon all manner of ideological perspectives, whether these are consciously articulated or not. I am grateful to Jeremy Carrette for drawing my attention to this ''conceptual overlap.''

2 In this context, we are talking about broader *American* cultural interests. ''Culture'' should not be synonymous with ''American culture'' (this book could have been approached from the perspective of Bollywood and Indian culture, for instance), although in much (though certainly not all, as the chapter on feminism shows) of this book reference is made to American cultural interests.

3 It is worth noting in passing that the word ''religion'' derives from the Latin *religio*, meaning ''to bind,'' and referred in the Roman Empire to those practices that were accepted by the state, in contradistinction to those that were in opposition to the status quo (*superstitio*). It is ironic, therefore, that, in terms of Bryant's argument, religion should have become synonymous in the modern world with superstition when they were originally polar opposites.

4 However, notwithstanding the merits of Truffaut's film in stimulating discussion regarding the critical capacities of visual culture, the film itself is a somewhat vacuous work when compared to Ray Bradbury's 1953 novel that inspired it. The film's literalistic tone and its failure to offer the same indictment of visual culture that is contained in the novel suggest that the dangers of being subsumed into a visual culture are not as well illustrated in some motion pictures as my initial claim would indicate.