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Religion Before and After Secularism

Implosion is not the ‘end’ of secularism, as postmodernity is not the ‘end’ of modernity and postliberalism is not the end of liberalism. There are no radical breaks or ruptures culturally, only negotiations that modify in rehearsing what has been received. Just as the Georgian and Victorian squares and the 1960s examples of office-block modernism remain in the transforming urban landscape, so secularism has its institutions – its systems of education, its practices of law, its government statutes, its research laboratories. These will maintain the myths of objective, impartial knowledge and judgements by quarantining theistic belief-practices for some time to come. They will continue to promote human autonomy and the democratic ideal in terms of the rights of ‘man’. What the implosion signals is that secularism is coming to an end; that modernity is being undermined from within by a certain dawning realization of its unstable foundations; and that liberalism’s universalism, egalitarianism and belief in progress are in terminal decline.

These observations, let me quickly add, are not to be taken as outright condemnations of secularism or modernity or liberalism. Much violence, atrocity, oppression and sheer waste of human resources have been the product of so much religious bigotry, so many different kinds of ‘wars of religion’. Even today it might be remarked that in certain countries in the world a good dose of secularism would break the repressive holds certain state-ratified religions have over people’s lives. Nor can we say that nothing

good came from modernity, or that nothing good still comes from its traditions. The fruits of modernity in terms of the pursuit of humanitarian principles, the advances in medicine and science, and the promotion of educational and political ideals are evident: in public libraries, schools, universities, hospitals, law courts, etc. The observation I am making in this manifesto is that there is a deepening crisis of secularism, modernity and liberal values, such that our culture – being elsewhere – finds some of the assumptions and presuppositions of secularism, modernity and liberalism no longer credible. I am talking about credibility here, not what is true and what is false. I have no view from above; religions have no unmediated, unambivalent view from above either. We – and by that I mean not only we in North America and Western Europe, but we who in these geographic locations have had and continue to have profound influence over the rest of the world – are in the midst of a cultural sea-change.

One of the most striking characteristics of that sea-change is the return of religion to the public arena and the consumer market. However, we are moving too quickly here, and much of this will have to be revisited in the final chapter, where I try to present a description of where we are and what this might imply about where we are going.

Cultural Hermeneutics

For now, we have some fairly weighty words on the textual table: ‘religion’, ‘secularism’, ‘modernity’, ‘postmodernity’ and ‘liberalism’. I am shortly going to add another: ‘theology’. I am not going to define any of these terms. There are enough studies that offer tours of how *religio* has its roots in the classical Roman *relegere*, ‘to reread’, or *legere*, ‘to gather’, and so is synonymous with *treditio*. The third-century Christian writer Lactantius relates ‘religion’ to *religare*, ‘to bind up’ or ‘to bind together’, and so religion becomes inseparable from liturgy, community and the practice of faith. *Religio* is ‘worship of the true’ – with the explicit reminder that only Christianity is therefore a religion, the ‘true religion’. In his treatise *de vere religione* Augustine concurred.

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Theology has a more ancient pedigree. The use of *theologia* to describe stories about or thought concerning the gods is found in Plato and Aristotle. It is not found in the New Testament and *theologia*, like *religio*, underwent a Christian appropriation, having been at first avoided by the early church writers because of its associations with ‘paganism’. When appropriated by figures such as Athenagorus and Clement of Alexandria, ‘theology’ did not refer to knowledge of God’s nature, but speaking about the God who is believed in. Theology was synonymous with doxology.

Furthermore, *saeculum* came to mean ‘age’, ‘this age’, ‘the present world’ and, finally, ‘an account of the world without reference to God’. *Modus* means ‘now’ and the concerns with the present rather than the traditions of the past; and so ‘modernity’ as a cultural epoch characterized by rethinking the present and the future independently of the past is antagonistic to religion as *relegere* and *tradio*. *Postmodus* can mean either ‘after the modern’, ‘anterior to the modern’ or both, as Jean-François Lyotard has taught us.

I am not going to proceed by taking off-the-shelf definitions founded upon etymological possibilities. The importance of drawing attention to the semantic histories of these key terms is to show how words slip and slide in their different uses. What will become evident is how these words are exchanged and circulate in specific cultural and historical contexts, each impacting upon the other. They are defined and redefined as they are iterated in this novel, in that play, in this tract, in that journal entry, across time. Each iteration is an interpretation and a new cultural negotiation. It is by means of these interpretations that cultures change internally and modify each other. Hence what this book seeks to uncover is something of the cultural hermeneutics in which religion, theology and the secular participate. So, in order to understand both what ‘true religion’ produces and how it is itself part of a cultural production, we need to observe where ‘religion’ makes its appearance within particular cultural matrices and begin to analyse the nature and significance of those appearances within those specific contexts. We can then allow the nature of what is ‘religion’ to emerge from the cultural appearance it has made and the nexus of associations in which it stands. In this way we investigate its formations and transformations as a discourse – that is, the way the word is articulated

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within specific gestures, actions, speaking and writings, and the institutions that govern, evaluate and enforce those articulations.

This investigation is not in terms of cause and effect. We are not tracing the influence of 'religion' on literature, say, or the influence of state power on the constitution of 'religion'. We are examining the networks of exchange of signs and the cultural fluidity involved in those networks, such that attempts to determine the direction of influence, the mechanics of cause and effect, are understood as too reductive, too restrictive. 'True religion' is disseminated across social and historical processes; the poetics and politics of cultural determination, production and transformation. What is achieved by analysing this dissemination between, say, the fourteenth and the twenty-first centuries, is a certain genealogy of 'religion'. Cultural hermeneutics enables a story to be constructed, a narrative in which we can appreciate the way the word 'religion' and the pursuit of the 'true religion' are produced, challenged and transformed. We can present these exchanges and negotiations only through examining particular events or cultural loci, making evident the worldview or cultural imaginary that constitutes and is constituted by these events. Frequently these events or loci will be literary texts or other cultural forms such as buildings and films, since in these 'events' or loci are often found complex expressions of the way the world is experienced and understood. We can 'ask how collective beliefs and experiences were shaped, moved from one medium to another, concentrated in manageable aesthetic forms, offered for consumption'¹ and gained popular approval.

The transformation of 'religion' will have implications for other terms: the secular, modernity, postmodernity and theology. For the early developments of secularism in England have been traced to the use made of Protestant thinking in Henry VIII's famous dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century. The early development of 'modernism' has been discerned in the penchant among scholastics of the high Middle Ages for the free exercise of the speculative intellect – free, that is, from appeals to authorities such as the scriptures and the reflections of the church Fathers and ecumenical councils (mediated, it is true, by the cultural politics of the church). From these scholastic freedoms the shift from Oxford University's motto *dominus illuminatio meo* to Enlightenment rationalism was triggered and likewise the inauguration of the modern. No doubt both these genealogies

require critical attention, but the change I wish to illustrate in this chapter is that which occurs between pre- and postmodern religion, at a time when secularism's star was in the ascendant.

Romeo and Juliet I

We will begin at a performance of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, or a particular reading of it, which took place at the Globe Theatre probably in the season 1594–5. My reading of the play is influenced in part by a certain perspective being investigated by contemporary Shakespearian scholars: Shakespeare's relations with Roman Catholicism.² Shakespeare's father, after all, is known now to have been a recusant; that is, a Catholic who refused to go to the newly formed and constituted Protestant Church of England brought about by the Elizabethan Settlement. Shakespeare himself may be the same 'William Shakeshafte' who served in one of the great Catholic houses in Lancashire during the 1580s. The focus of my critical attention will therefore be upon (1) the role of Friar Laurence, (2) the role the sacraments play with respect to the politics of personal love and civic strife within the play, and (3) religious rhetoric as it is used by various characters. I am attempting to reconstruct what was understood by religion at a certain time, in a certain context.

The opening of the play establishes an atmosphere of sexual pleasure and violent struggle, dominant throughout. Swords become pricks and pricks become swords in a fluid metamorphosis that requires no Freudian analysis. The entrance of the brooding Romeo only intensifies the youthful, turbulent erotics, by demonstrating through the excessiveness of his love for Rosaline the profound internalization of these feuding dynamics, this 'brawling love'. He participates in the fray, despite not being present at the recent squabble. And religious references constantly appear, in ways that do not draw attention to themselves at this point, but weave in and out of the feverish antitheses of desire and aggression, libidinal pleasures and murderous impulsiveness. The 'fiery Tybalt' hates the Montagues as much as he hates hell; the Capulet characters who provoke the opening fight bear ironized biblical names: Sampson the Old Testament Judge; Abram the Jewish lawgiver; and Balthasar,

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a name given by legend to one of the three wise men who brought gifts to lay at the feet of the infant Christ. Prince Escalus equates, in true Elizabethan fashion, rebellion with profanity; Benvolio acts as Romeo's confessor, hearing his 'true shrift'; Rosaline repudiates Romeo's advances because she has taken a vow of chastity, wishing either to remain in or enter a convent; and Benvolio wishes to teach Romeo another 'doctrine'. But it is within the poetry of Romeo's early ruminations that religion is not only first named, but appears as a defining characteristic of the cultural context:

Why then, O brawling love, O loving hate
O anything of nothing first create!
O heavy lightness, serious vanity,
Misshapen chaos of well-seeming forms! (I.1, 174–7)

Here Romeo relates the play's violent erotics to the creation of the world out of the brooding chaos of nothingness described in the opening lines of Genesis. The violences, though, are clouding the creative processes, so that he (and we) are unsure of the procedure – does chaos move towards well-seeming forms (in which case why the 'seeming?'), does anything come from nothing (in which case why the 'vanity?'), or is it all the other way around and are the divine creative processes being reversed? In making this metaphoric connection Romeo expands the local libidinal warfare shattering the peace of Verona to embrace the cosmic creativity of divine love – the love that shapes all times and places. Romeo intuitively acknowledges a providence, a divine economy at work in creation and maintaining the world. His personal perplexity, expressive of a wider internecine struggle, has not simply a religious dimension, but is itself essentially religious. And so he concludes his deliberations with Benvolio:

When the devout religion of mine eye
Maintains such falsehood, then turn tears to fire,
And these who, often drown'd, could never die,
Transparent heretics, be burnt for liars. (I.2, 90–3)

Of course, the references to religion and religious acts here are metaphorical. But Shakespeare's metaphors have both a habit of

translating themselves into social and historical events on stage and mirroring social and historical events off stage. The trials and persecution of both Catholics and Protestants as heretics had been very much part of the English Christian religion since the death of Henry VIII. Such trials and persecutions were not simply memories. Throughout Elizabeth's reign there were intense purges of Catholics as treasonous plots were uncovered or threats of invasion or usurpation loomed. Some of Shakespeare's friends, family and patrons were implicated in harbouring Catholic priests (a capital offence) and plotting against the queen. The years following the execution of Mary Queen of Scots (1587), the years in which Shakespeare wrote *Romeo and Juliet* and was closely associated with the Earl of Southampton (son of an ardent Catholic who had died imprisoned in the Tower for his faith), were years of aggressive persecution. In March and September of 1592 the name of Shakespeare's own father, John, appeared twice among lists of recusants. Romeo's complex conceit, in which devotion is both true and heretic, rehearses not only the wider theatrical action, but an action which frames and makes that theatrical action possible. 'True religion' was embedded in a culture of violent hatreds; the Christian gospel of love was preached with the threats not of hell's fires only, but earthly fires also and instruments of torture. Erasmus's 'Prayer for the Peace of the Church' (reprinted in Henry VIII's 1545 *Primer*) defines an ethos in which there is 'no charite, no fidelite, no bondes of love, no reverence, neither lawes nor yet of rulers, no agreement of opinions, but as it were in a misordered quire, every man singeth, a contrary note'. The warring between the Montagues and Capulets, a warring without origin or even a focus – a nameless, causeless warring – reflects Erasmus's sentiment and is reflected in Romeo's early ruminations.

The word 'religion' was itself being redefined in and through the turbulence engendered by the politics of Puritan and Catholic demands for reformation and counter-reformation and the rise of the nascent state. The continual search to define the true faith – expressed in documents such as the 1542 'Act for the Advancement of True Religion' – was a search to define a new cultural sensibility. We will say more about this in the next chapter. Suffice it here to point out that it has been argued that the so-called 'Wars of Religion'

that occupied the best resources of Western Europe for almost two centuries involved the production of the modern concept of 'religion'. This said, the restless antagonisms over the true faith that led eventually to the bloody Thirty Years War (see chapter 2) were manifest much earlier, and that part of what we are witnessing in the mid-1590s' composition of *Romeo and Juliet* is a participation in the circulation of social energies at that time in which 'religion' figured prominently. As such, the word 'religion' takes on the colouring and contents of the practices, events and institutions which embody, police and produce the 'religious' understanding of persons, communities, circumstances, pasts, presents and futures. With *Romeo and Juliet* we are examining a critical moment of theological and political confusion and the search for a way beyond it.

It is the house of Capulet that establishes the dominant Catholic worldview that had been England's past and was now passing away. Touches of nostalgia mark the early scenes in the Capulet household. Juliet's father proposes to hold 'an old accustomed feast', akin to the feast held one Pentecost that he recalls in conversation with his cousin. Dating seems very important here. It has been noted how in the sources for the play (Brooke's *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* (1562) and Painter's *novella* on Romeo and Juliet in the second volume of his *Palace of Pleasure* (1580)) the feast takes place just before Christmas. But Shakespeare transposes the feast (which Tybalt twice calls a 'solemnity', a word quite specifically used with respect to holy days) and the events of the play to mid-July, as Juliet approaches her fourteenth birthday on 1 August. In whose honour the Capulet feast is celebrated is left unclear. July is the month of six important feasts – of St Thomas à Becket (7th), of St Swithun (15th), of St Margaret (21st), of St Mary Magdalene (22nd), of St James the Apostle (25th) and St Anne (26th). There is a specific dating of the feast in the conversation between the nurse and Lady Capulet: 'a fortnight and odd days' from Lammass, which suggests the old accustomed feast is on St Swithun's Day. St Swithun's Day marked the onset of the summer storms and it may well have been presented on stage by some symbolic prop. Summer storms could have devastating consequences on harvests and it was said that if it rained on St Swithun's Day it would rain for forty days thereafter. Harvests might have to be gathered early, before their prime.

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Perhaps the reason for not mentioning the saint's day by name has something to do with the fact that in 1532 Cromwell (vice-regent in spirituals) and Henry VIII had passed the Act for the Abrogation of Certain Holy Days. This put an end to liturgical time by demanding that people work through from 1 July to 29 September and disregard certain saints' feast days, partly on the grounds of fighting sloth and idleness and partly on the grounds of the sins of excess and riot 'being entysed by the laity'. All the feasts in July were abrogated except for that of St James the Apostle, including the festival of Lammas. This was another important date in the calendar. It was an old pagan festival that Christianity had baptised (and no doubt related in Shakespeare to the folklore narratives of Queen Mab). Lammas marked the end of summer and the beginning of autumn. It was a harvest festival, for the word comes from 'loaf-mass'. On this day loaves of bread were baked from the first grain of the harvest and laid on the church altars as sacrificial offerings. It was a day representative of 'first fruits'. We will return to the association of Juliet with sacrifice and the eucharist later, only observing here that Romeo, like Juliet, was a first and only born. Lammas was also the favoured day for the feast of St Catherine. The action of the play then takes place within the liturgical calendar, itself part of the seasonal cycle.

The Nurse's colloquialisms offer an important insight into the speech of the Catholic commoner, with her 'God rest all Christian souls', 'by th' rood', 'by my holidame' and 'God mark thee to his grace'. But they also help to blur the distinction between the sacred spaces of court and church. In fact, a liturgical fluidity between court, theatre and church is evident that finds its clearest expression in the first encounter between Romeo and Juliet at the 'solemnity':

Romeo: If I profane with my unworthing hand
This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

Juliet: Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

Romeo: Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

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- Juliet:* Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.
Romeo: O then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do:
They pray: grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.
Juliet: Saints do not move, though grant for prayer's sake.
Romeo: Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take.
Thus from my lips, by thine, my sin is purg'd.
Juliet: Then have my lips the sin that they have took.
Romeo: Sin from my lips? O trespass sweetly urg'd.
Give me my sin again.
Juliet: You kiss by th' book. (I.5, 92–109)

Romeo's erstwhile mention of 'religion' has now become his 'faith'. As Aquinas expressed it in article 3 of *quaestio* 81 of his *Summa Theologiae*, 'true religion professes faith in one God'. Drawing on the connection made in the New Testament epistle of St James, religion is understood as worship and service. It is a moral action devoted to pious ends, Aquinas argues:

Religion has two kinds of acts. Some are its proper and immediate acts, which it elicits, and by which man is directed to God alone, for instance, sacrifice, adoration and the like. But it has other acts, which it produces through the medium of the virtues which it commands, directing them to the honour of God, because the virtue which is concerned with the end, commands the virtues which are concerned with the means.

Religion is the virtuous practice of the faith. In fact 'faith', rather than 'religion', was the dominant appellation throughout pre-modernity. Wilfred Cantwell Smith observes: 'no one, so far as I have been able to ascertain, ever wrote a book specifically on "religion" [in the Middle Ages]'.³ It was Protestantism, and Calvin in particular, whose most disseminated work was entitled *Christianae Religionis Institutio*, which popularized the term *religio*, Smith argues. Interestingly, and significantly, Calvin's earlier work of 1537 was entitled *Instruction et Confession de Foy* – equating *religio* with *foi* – religion with faith. At this point, then, the term retained its older associations: a 'religious' was one devoted to the practice of piety, one who was often in holy orders. 'Although the name "religious"

may be given to all in general who worship God, yet in a special way religious are those who consecrate their whole life to the Divine worship, by withdrawing from human affairs', Aquinas stated. The term *religio* was also beginning to be employed politically to distinguish Protestantism from Roman Catholicism, as is evident in Zwingli's 1525 *Commentarius de vera et falsa religio*. By 1547, Cranmer's *Homily of Good Works* can speak of 'ungodly and counterfeit religions', by which he means 'papistical superstitions and abuses'.⁴ 'True religion' was the right practice of the faith – a practice not founded upon superstitions or folktales – and it was not a practice viewed primarily as a clerical or monastic one.

The stirrings of love in Romeo once more invoke religious metaphor; but here not *simply* metaphor. What Juliet calls forth is also religious gesture and practice. This liturgical cameo serves not only to lift and isolate the couple above the crowded festivities; it serves also to solemnize their exchange, producing a sacred space that transfigures the ordinary. The appeal to the Catholic veneration of saints, the intercession of saints, sacramental confession and the significance of pilgrimage ring nostalgically. There had been wave upon wave of iconoclastic wrath since Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries and the raiding of reliquaries. The three great pilgrimage sites of England (Walsingham, Ipswich and Canterbury) had been plundered and empty niches in many a parish church testified to the disappearance of the saints. Veneration of holy things was explicitly forbidden by the 22nd of the 39 Articles agreed upon by the archbishops and bishops in 1563 and subscription to which was required of all clergy in the Church of England: 'The Romish doctrine concerning purgatory, pardons, worshipping and adoration as well of images as of relics, and also the invocation of saints, is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warrant of scripture, but rather repugnant to the word of God.' And yet here Romeo constructs Juliet as a 'holy shrine', while courtly etiquette ('You kiss by th' book') and theatrical production fuse with a liturgical act of devotion. Later, in the balcony scene, in which Juliet is again invoked as 'dear saint', the liturgical act of naming, baptism, is rehearsed and they come close to a solemn exchange of vows. If at the end of the balcony scene the liturgy of their encounter does not conclude with their being one flesh, they are one soul – as Romeo recognizes.

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It is this easy transit between different symbolic worlds which is significant. The transits are marked (as in this exchange between Romeo and Juliet or the scene between the Nurse and Lady Capulet) by a certain levity or playfulness. We find this fluidity throughout the play, where sexual innuendo and true affection, the worlds of nature and of church, intermingle. The Elizabethan social world was one such that a hat worn by Cardinal Wolsey could end up as a prop in a theatrical cupboard. The fluidity stands in dramatic contrast to the jarring clashes of feuding passions – it is the contrast that produces and drives the dramatic action itself. However (and this is where *Romeo and Juliet* fits uneasily into the tragic worldview), the play moves inexorably towards a resolution. Like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the play moves towards the overcoming of the conflictual and not just the restoration but the full realization of the interrelation of different worlds. Fundamentally, the vision behind this interconnectedness is a sacramental one – a Catholic cosmology in which the secular is not a distinct realm of socio-economic and political operations, but a realm suffused with divine activities. Romeo's allusion to the present confusion in the relation between creation and chaos is corrected by Juliet's recognition that what her encounter with Romeo has delivered is a certain impregnation. In terms which seem to echo both a Marian role and the sentiments of Christ, she speaks of a 'Prodigious birth of love it is to me / That I must love a loathed enemy'. Both of them are caught up in a divine comedy in which together they will temper extremities. And hence realms terrestrial and celestial, spheres and stars and seas and angels, frame the poetry of their love.

The sacramental worldview is given full expression on the entry of Friar Laurence:

O, mickle is the powerful grace that lies
In plants, herbs, stones, and their true qualities.
For naught so vile that on the earth doth live
But to the earth some special good doth give.

Shakespeare's sympathetic treatment of the Friar is in contrast to the Protestant vilification of friars in Brooke's preface to the readers of his tale: 'superstitious friars (the naturally fitte instruments of

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unchastity) are listed along with 'dronken gossypes'. But, significantly, the tone of the preface differs markedly from Brooke's much more approving portrait of the Friar in the narration. Brooke recognizes, like Shakespeare, that the Friar is both the dramatic catalyst for the ensuing events and the guarantor of peace and friendship between Montague and Capulet. The Friar announces the bond of religious and civic unity:

The bounty of the fryer and wisdom hath so wonnne
The townes folks herts, that welnigh all to fryer Lawrence
ronne
To shrive them selfe the olde, the yong, the great and small.
Of all he is beloved well, and honord much of all.
And for he did the rest in wisdome farre exceede,
The Prince by him (his counsell cravde) was holpe at time
of neede.
Betwixt the Capilets and him great frendship grew:
A secret and assured frend unto the Montegue.

The sacramental worldview the Friar embodies and practises (as priestly confessor, physician of soul and body, and celebrant of baptismal, nuptial and burial rites) is the foundation for his roles as mediator and peace-maker. He not only interrelates the natural, commoner, courtly and ecclesial worlds; his movements across them makes possible the fluid transits between these worlds that we have noted. His use of invocations ('Benedictite', 'God pardon sin', 'Holy Saint Francis!' and 'Jesu Maria!') betrays the source of the Nurse's own speaking. Both are intercessory figures, figures relating and working for the sublation of factions. But the Friar is the focus for the circulation of the social energies as well as being one of the important interpreters of the significance of those circulations.

It is interesting to note how, following the discovery of the deaths of Romeo and Juliet in both Shakespeare's play and Brooke's narrative poem, the Friar ultimately submits to the judgement of the Prince. In the play, he receives from the Prince the acknowledgement that 'We still have known thee for a holy man'. The two sources of moral and political authority – like the Emperor and the Pope, the secular and the ecclesial arms of government – affirm and

support each other. They constitute the basis of the commonweal and the moderation of its dynamics. But the play depicts a new kind of commonweal in which a shift of power has been affected away from the sacramental offices of the church to the secular offices of the state. As such, the ending of the play establishes the tension between the Catholic refusal and the Protestant establishment of the secular space. One is now subordinate to the other, but a tension nevertheless is evident, for the sacramental offices of the church have been instrumental in bringing about the present peace and reconciliation. The Prince only gives judgement (and punishes) in the new situation created by the working of providence and grace, in the operation of which the Friar (as the sacerdotal arm of the church) is the central figure. The Prince ratifies what has come about, and yet nevertheless the play ends with submission of the church to a secular ruling. In his letter *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, Martin Luther stated: 'I say therefore that since the temporal power is ordained of God to punish the wicked and protect the good, it should be left free to perform its office in the whole body of Christendom without restriction and without respect to persons, whether it affects the pope, bishops, priests, monks, nuns or anyone else.' The church is superseded by the state at the end of *Romeo and Juliet*, the 'religious' as it was once understood gives way to a new secularizing force, in a manner which suggests not simply the contemporary *realpolitik*, but also the fact that the tension between these powers is not resolved, only suppressed. A certain understanding of 'religion' is being depoliticized, and as we will see in the next chapter this forces a new understanding of 'religion' (as depoliticized) to emerge. A set of contraries frames the ending of the play, just as a set of contraries frames the opening of the play. The local contraries of Montague and Capulet have been dissolved into other, larger, one might say socio-metaphysical contraries: church-state, soul-body, private-public. It is a 'glooming peace' that dawns.

It is moderation of these social and therefore religious dynamics that needs to be restored. The haste with which Romeo and Juliet rush towards the consummation of their desire both continues and perpetuates the immoderation. Their haste finds wider reverberations in other hot and urgent acts, from Tybalt's aggressive demand

for satisfaction from Romeo, to Mercutio's provocation of Tybalt, to Romeo's own turn upon Tybalt, to Capulet's sudden arrangement of Juliet's marriage. This series of interconnected acts brings to a fever-pitch the extremities abroad and the pace of the play. But the Friar embodies another timing, that liturgical timing which instils the Christian virtue of temperance. In the quiet retreat of his cell he upbraids Romeo for his 'wild acts' and reacts to Paris's demands for an imminent wedding with 'The time is very short'. Liturgy, which had in subtle ways dictated events earlier in the play – the 'old accustomed feast' and Juliet's birthday – now begins to dominate as order is restored. Confession and absolution, marriage, eucharistic and funeral rites will all play their part in the human submission once again to the liturgical cosmos. The Friar is the focus now for effecting a transposition of time and action – 'out of thy long-experience'd time' Juliet seeks present council – but this can only be effected through entry into death and a rising to new life. The deaths of Romeo and Juliet are necessary for the restoration of peaceful order and the transmutation of the two lovers into gilded saint-like figures. At the Friar's hand they will become a living sacrifice that will enable a new communion. This is his ultimate priestly act. 'God's bread!' exclaims Capulet to Juliet, recalling her earlier association with a lamb when he tells her to 'Graze where you will'.

The timing of the play is such that Juliet, who goes to the Friar to confess before the 'evening mass', surrenders herself to a symbolic death (a day early because of the further rashness of Capulet) at the time the priest celebrates by performing symbolically the sacrifice of Christ. It is the sacrifice of Christ that brings about the restoration of the world and his return as bridegroom to redeem his bride, the church. The eschatological fulfilment of the covenant made between God and human creatures turns upon the resurrection of the dead. Shakespeare plays upon these theological motifs with a profound and perhaps disturbing irony. Juliet, experiencing her own Gethsemane, fears the tomb and wakes 'before that time that Romeo come to redeem me'. When she 'dies' it is mockingly announced by Capulet that 'The bridegroom he is come already'. To her rescue comes the Friar, who will affirm that married by God, Juliet is a bride of Christ by a conflation of marriage and funeral

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rites: 'Is the bride ready to go to church?' Love, death and the promised awakening consort together in complex metaphorical ways that transpose the secular and mundane in a manner which recalls another Catholic's religious vision and ironic distance bordering on parody – Donne in *The Canonization*, *The Relique* and *The Funerall*:

Wee dye and rise the same, and prove
Mysterious by this love.

Capulet announces over Juliet's body the epithet 'martyr'd' as time now slows on a return to the 'lasting labour of his pilgrimage'. The Friar rehearses (and again it is ironic how prophetic is his speaking) the doctrine of eternal life and the translation of Juliet to heaven. Romeo takes up the prophecy in his own life-after-death presentiments that follow the dissipation of the funereal dirge of Juliet's seeming-death begun by the musicians:

My dreams presage some joyful news at hand.
My bosom's lord sits lightly in his throne
And all this day an unaccustom'd spirit
Lifts me above the ground with cheerful thoughts.
I dreamt my lady came and found me dead –
Strange dream that give a dead man leave to think! –
And breath'd such life with kisses in my lips
That I reviv'd and was an emperor. (V.3, 85–6)

Romeo glimpses here an almost trinitarian participation – the lord upon the throne in apocalyptic fashion, the spirit stirring and elevating. And Juliet is called, as elsewhere, 'my lady', which subtly associates her with the Virgin Mary in this explicitly Christian theological framing. The dead will rise to new life, Juliet will herself 'die with a restorative'. These are the final forms of 'change . . . to the contrary', a motif which has governed the action of the play throughout. It is as if the play has become a rood screen on which is portrayed the saints beneath the sacrificial sign of Christ's crucifixion. The screen concealed and intensified the eucharistic celebration on the altar and recalled the last judgement of all things and the resurrection of the dead.

Religion Before and After Secularism

By the Act of Uniformity of 1559 every parish was required to have a Book of Homilies that were appointed to be read on certain occasions in the year. The 'Homily Against Contention and Brawling' opens:

This day (good Christian people) shall be declared unto you, the unprofitableness and shameful dishonesty of contention, strife and debate, to the intent, that when you shall see as it were in a table painted before your eyes, the evilfavouredness and deformity of this most detestable vice, your stomachs may be moved to rise against it, and to detest and abhor that sin, which is so much to be hated, and pernicious, and hurtful to all men.

The next sentence clarifies the focus for this injunction against civil disorder: 'But among all kinds of contention, none is more hurtful than is contention in matters of religion.' The contents of the homily that follows, the place appointed for its reading, and the minister appointed to give that reading all emphasize that obedience in matters of faith will therefore enable religion to maintain rather than threaten such good social order. What is significant for the development of my argument is that religion here is a series of practices by which the sacred and the secular are bound each to the other. Religion is piety, devotion, adoration, pilgrimage. It regulates and reaffirms certain understandings of the self and the social and their relationship to the cosmic and divine; through liturgies and sacramental offices it gives shape to time and meaning to space. The precious particularity of Romeo as Romeo and Juliet as Juliet, and their shared love, is maintained only because of the divinity that enfolds them and makes them to be much more than they are while being who they are. Love makes them wonder, and in wonder they do not so much transcend the mundane as transfigure it. That is the beauty of their first encounter at the Capulet feast. It is an incarnate spirituality that transfigures into angels, saints and worshippers the physical, sexual and social energies in which they both participate.

But the world in which they loved and in which even the 'woe' of this love can make sense – that is, effect a greater good – was

slipping away. A nostalgia marks Shakespeare's recreation of this Catholic worldview which the setting in the medieval city-state of Verona allows. The redemption of time and place is a product of artifice and is never fully able to conquer the tensions it has raised and treated. Religion was changing. The public affirmation of shriving, adoration of the saints, the church as regulating lived time, the social consciences and the commonweal, evident in the play, has to be placed alongside the note struck in that 'Homily Against Contention and Brawling' – religion was no longer a matter for open discussion. And it is in this way that Shakespeare's play lies strung between an older sense of divine comedy and a more modern sense of the tragic: where the modern account of tragedy – evident from Racine and Pascal to Beckett – concerns the hiddenness or absence of the divine and the rule of the arbitrary. For the last acts of the play are attempts to maintain and distil even further the purity of Romeo and Juliet's love and the moral and theological world in which such love is valued and validated, but through the very self-conscious employment of seeming, dissimulation, concealment of intention, transgression of the law and secrecy. The subterfuge compromises everyone – including the Friar – and generates confusion and ironies that leave behind dark shadows not easily dissolved. Emblematic here is the apothecary whom Shakespeare portrays sympathetically, and yet whose condition of being poor may well be the grounds for receiving a greater punishment. Of course the Prince does not specify who will be pardoned and who punished. The Friar is pardoned; does that mean the apothecary then is to be punished? In Brooke's narrative poem the apothecary is hanged. Shakespeare suspends the judgement, but the resonance of 'present death in Mantua' does not go away. The sun does not rise upon Verona at the end of the play, even though Romeo and Juliet are embossed in gold. And the very turning of their love into an aesthetic object (and the play is also one such object) strikes discordantly. The statue suggested by the Montagues and Capulets defeats classification: is it a piece of art, an effigy or the representation of two saints? The autocratic presence of the Prince likewise suggests an authority detached from and ready to rule with respect to the religious, moral, cosmic and liturgical order. The admission to the Capulets and Montagues that there was some 'winking at your

discords' suggests a legislative power that does not always see aright; it suggests a pragmatics of power that renders ruling open to the charge of being arbitrary. These troubling dissonances Shakespeare will treat again in characters like Fortinbras in *Hamlet* and the Duke in *Measure for Measure*, but we can note that in *The Winter's Tale* 'redemption' is wrought when the 'statue' returns to life. It is as if the sacramental world Romeo, Juliet and the Friar inhabit is being preserved in amber, and yet it is in that very preservation being silenced. 'The sun for sorrow' will not reveal the way ahead.

Close to the date when the play was being written, close to the place where Shakespeare was writing, John Donne and his brother Henry were being visited by their own 'ghostly confessor'. It is difficult to believe that Shakespeare did not know of the event, since the London chronicler, John Stow, reports on it. John Carey relates the story:

In May 1593 a young man called William Harrington was arrested in Henry Donne's rooms on suspicion of being a priest. Henry, of course, was taken into custody too. When charged, Harrington denied that he was a priest, but poor Henry, faced with torture, betrayed him. He admitted that Harrington had shriven him while he was staying in his rooms . . . Like other Catholic martyrs, he refused to be tried by a jury because he did not wish to implicate more men than necessary in the guilt of his destruction. He was condemned and, on 18 February 1594, taken out to die. In the cart, with the rope around his neck, he began to address his 'loving countrymen', only to be interrupted with insults by Topcliffe [Elizabeth's chief torturer]. But his courage did not fail, and he denounced Topcliffe from the scaffold as a 'tyrant and blook-sucker'. Like the Babington conspirators, he was disembowelled alive. Stow records that, after he had been hanged and cut down, he 'struggled' with the executioner who was about to use the knife on him.

Henry Donne, having knowingly harboured a priest, was guilty of felony. But he did not live long enough to come to trial. Imprisoned at first in the Clink, he was moved to Newgate, where the plague was raging, and died within a few days.⁵

Romeo's 'religion' was being expunged and a new understanding of 'religion' was already emerging that we will investigate in the next chapter. What the play details and bears witness to is a tension involved in the dissolution of a certain discursive formation (that is, specific networks of practices, gestures and ways of speaking) that 'religion' was implicated in in a premodern context. Catholic beliefs and practices organize the space in which the play is produced; they organize the sociality and subjectivities represented in the play. This Catholic religious network, and the system of ideas which constructed a sacramental view of the world, was breaking up, being challenged, being transformed, being caught up in dissimulations, parodies, internalizations of violence, ironies and confusions. A certain crisis is evident which the religious worldview is trying to accommodate but cannot – for the crisis is within the religious worldview itself. From new practices came new pieties, new discursive formations giving rise to other understandings of 'religion'.

As I said at the beginning of this chapter, as the understanding of religion changes so does the understanding of related concepts, particularly the secular. In the traditional worldview the *saeculum* had no autonomous existence. In a liturgical cosmos no one and nothing remains separated from divine providence – 'all are punish'd' and all are recipients of grace. What we witness at the end of *Romeo and Juliet* is a certain tension between the sacramental world and a secular politics with respect to the government of that world. The tensions registered in the play signal a separation into two kingdoms of the sacred from the profane. The secularization processes throughout the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI and Elizabeth had been carried through in the name of a greater spiritualization and purification of the true faith. The Protestant radicals opposed not the Christian faith as such but abuses of the faith. Pilgrimages, the adoration of the saints, the apotropaic rather than the symbolic understanding of the sacraments (what came to be labelled superstitions and idolatries) were religious decadences that had to be scourged. This profoundly affected the liturgical understanding of the world. To abrogate holy days was to change the nature of time and the relationship between work, leisure and worship. To take over church lands, dissolve monasteries, call for the destruction of statues even of patronal saints, and forbid pilgrimages and processions, was to change the

nature of space and the relationship between one's home and sacred place. The mapping of holy loci, therefore the networking of sacred power, was redrawn. To rethink the sacraments and ceremonies as symbols or 'mere outward forms' (1549 Book of Common Prayer) was to transform the nature of materiality itself, rendering the natural world opaque, silent and inert. No longer was materiality caught up in the Friar's doxology: 'O, mickle is the powerful grace that lies / In plants, herbs, stones and their true qualities'. These changes to time, space and materiality affected the very body itself – its labouring, its movements, its actions, its extensions beyond itself with respect to other bodies (the guilds, the parish, the community of the saints). At the end of *Romeo and Juliet* bodies are frozen – either in death, or in proposed statuary, or in waiting for a dawn that cannot come. A new space and a new understanding of the body were emerging, a space and a body in which God's presence was only available through the eyes of faith – and faith understood as a set of doctrinal principles to be taught, a set of interpretative keys to be passed down, passed on, for one's experience in the world. The understanding of secularity itself changed as such a space began to open.

If the above can be taken as a reading of 'religion' and 'secularity' as they are operating in and through the event of *Romeo and Juliet* at a time not yet ripe enough to call 'modernity', what then is revealed to us about these terms when that cultural event of *Romeo and Juliet* is replayed in postmodernity?

Romeo and Juliet II

The violent originality of Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film version of *Romeo and Juliet* might best be appreciated if viewed alongside Franco Zeffirelli's famous production almost thirty years earlier. Zeffirelli cast two unknowns among a galaxy of well-known Hollywood actors such as Michael York and Milo O'Shea, in a film which placed great emphasis upon the innocence and inexperience of the two lovers. For example, Romeo's violent declarations of affection for Rosaline (Act 1, scene 2) are omitted. The pure, childlike nature of their love stands in tension with the overwhelming opulence of

their surroundings and the knowing innuendos being bartered around them. Two contrasting aesthetics emerge: the beauty of innocence that the filming associates with the lush Italian landscape and natural elements (trees and flowers, gentle breezes and sunlight) and the cultured, sumptuous beauty of the film's production. It was shot on location in Italy and, through its framing and cinematography, attempts to recreate a city-state in the Italian Renaissance. Costume, colours, set-designs, camera angles, even poses by characters, self-consciously allude to masterpieces of Renaissance art. The camera lingers, the narrative flows inexorably towards its tragic ending, but in a leisurely manner reminiscent of a visit to an art gallery. The fresh, virginal, idealized relationship between Romeo and Juliet sets them apart from the bawdiness and stunning sensuousness of their real context, establishing a soft-focused critique of nascent capitalism and the world of the *objet d'art*. The film catches, then, something of the 1960s social critique offered by the hippy movement, Woodstock and flower-power. It ironically turns that critique into a box-office success.

The 'religious' scenes support the critique, although not entirely. The Franciscan side of Father Laurence is accentuated, though the poverty of his calling and the simplicity of his approach to life are somewhat at odds with the luxurious woollen folds of his habit. We find the same tension inside his 'cell'. The church used is austere in its colours, with white/grey walls reflecting the purity and intensity of the Italian light, but a magnificent painted crucifix hangs above the chancel steps. The church seems to mediate between the opulent wealth of the city-state and the guilelessness of a love that it solemnizes but does not quite embody. The spiritualization and naturalization of Romeo and Juliet's virginal affections are given historical religious colouring; the religious itself is not the point, just a backdrop, a staging. Zeffirelli's film is a visual expression of a lyric written by the 1960s and 1970s American folksinger Don Maclean about Vincent van Gogh's suicide: 'I could have told you Vincent / The world was never made for one as beautiful as you'. It plays out a theme familiar in Hollywood cinema at the time, of innocence and experience (cf. *The Graduate*).

Contrast this with Luhrmann's film, which is more than thirty minutes shorter and makes considerable use of jump-cuts to give

pace to the narrative and provide the film with a certain jagged edge. The action and the pace run rough-shod over the poetry. There is none of Zeffirelli's reverence for Shakespeare's iambic pentameter. Shot in Mexico City, Verona is a contemporary urban landscape with its extremes of poverty and decadent wealth, its drug-taking and weapon-wielding, its disaffected (seemingly unemployed) youth and its heavy policing. There is a radical ironization of Shakespeare's opening sentiments, narrated by a newsreader as part of the headlines: 'In fair Verona (where we lay our scene)'. The ironization (and the iconoclasm it sets up) ricochets like the bullets throughout the film, heightened by the cutting, the rapid shot-reverse-shots, the panning, tracking and zooms.

Speed is of the essence and theatricality is the idiom. The broadcasting of news events on the television opens and closes the film, so that the whole narrative is portrayed as a hyped news item. The production is self-consciously theatrical – even to the point of using a stage-set ruin of an open-air theatre on the beach as a frame for several scenes (including Mercutio's Queen Mab speech). The back wall of the stage has been blown apart, so that the incoming tide is viewed through the ruined proscenium arch. The natural is a cultural creation.

As with the Bernstein/Sondheim recasting of *Romeo and Juliet* as *West Side Story*, the violent tensions are given racial colouring: the Spanish/Italian (with hints of Mafia connections) Capulets versus the white-skinned Montagues, ruled by the black chief of police (the Prince) who is the uncle of the black transvestite and drag artist Mercutio.

Irony and theatrical hype blend with elements of the camp, the macho-masculine and the sexually ambiguous. At the Capulet party Mercutio performs a dance routine in a white sequin bra and tight skirt flanked by six male dancers, Capulet capers about as the Emperor Nero in a toga of blue sequins, standing at one point on a table with the toga drawn up to show his underwear, and Lady Capulet, dressed as Cleopatra, passionately kisses Tybalt who has donned the horns of Satan and the dark suit of a 1930s gigolo. The 'old accustomed feast' has turned into a millionaire's fancy dress ball. The camera spins and focuses as it views the scene through the eyes of Romeo, dressed as a knight in shining armour, on ecstasy. The

visual ostentation of the film, its excess of movement and colour and sound – captured in montage shots of fireworks and a fair-ground Ferris wheel at night – transform the film itself into a consumer delight. It is extravagant and ephemeral, precious and kitsch and, picking up on Shakespeare's intuited association of pricks and sword, the film possesses an erotic and violent intensity.

Fetishism is pervasive. The camera adores objects – and this adoration, this worship, has analogues with the dramatic heightening of the Catholic religion. Tybalt's shoes, the handling of guns, Juliet's ring, clothing that draws attention to itself or to the bodies of those who wear it, bullets, tablets, vials of coloured liquid, cars, tropical fish, ornamental decor – all become endowed with dramatic and magical allure. Of course, there are elements of this fetishism in Shakespeare's play itself, where attention is given to significant stage props, but in Luhrmann's world everything is a stage prop. All objects are given an aesthetic status that, in the context of the Catholicism, turns the visual experience into a form of idolatry. Each object announces that it has been chosen to play a part in the cinematic production, so that nothing is ordinary, nothing is allowed to be just background. Everything is self-consciously 'produced'; everything is a special effect.

It is not only objects that are fetishized: it is scenes themselves, cinema itself. Like many of Shakespeare's plays, *Romeo and Juliet* has its famous set-pieces, scenes that theatrical history has turned into points where the audience's attention is pre-focused. There is Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' speech, there is Lear on the heath, there is Titania's infatuation with Bottom and Macbeth's banquet when the ghost of Banquo appears. In *Romeo and Juliet* there is the balcony scene. Tourists in Verona can be shown a balcony where they are told Romeo first exchanged his vows with Juliet. Luhrmann's balcony scene is a theatrical set-piece trumpeting itself as such. Its ingeniousness is extravagant. Zeffirelli's balcony scene could have been staged in a theatre and caught on camera. Luhrmann's balcony scene is pure cinematography. The transformation of medium (from stage to film set) is signalled in the move from air to water, from balcony to swimming pool, from the night to the fluorescence of underwater illumination. As Leonardo diCaprio and Claire Danes circle about each other, twisting and turning in an underwater

embrace, what is spoken (the content of the action) issues from beneath what is shot and how it is shot. What is conveyed is the enchantment, the alchemy, of cinematography. The significance and value of the image lie less in terms of what is *being* imaged, than in the composition of the image itself. This has the effect of transfiguring the nature of what is being filmed – turning the scene itself into an aesthetic and erotically pleasing object. It is not an object desired for its own sake, but desired because, in being rendered desirable (by the camera), it makes us desire it. Immersed in the sounds of water, human voices exchanging intimacies, and a light piano music, we are invited to enjoy our own desiring. We forget this is Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (the dialogue has been radically cut), we no longer desire to see performed for us Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* – what we desire is the continuation of this spectacular production, we desire the prolongation of the allure of the image as image. What is found breathtaking, what is aesthetically experienced, is not the Shakespeare but the spectacular itself, which comes by way of the commodification of both Shakespeare and the history of the transmission of his work. In his next film, *Moulin Rouge*, Luhrmann has the plot revolve around a musical extravaganza entitled 'Spectacular, Spectacular'. The special effects become – as Juliet whispers to Romeo – 'the god of my idolatry'.

This pervasive fetishism in which objects have aura, and the idolatrous culture it invokes, give the film a quality that is a distinctive hallmark of Luhrmann's work. *William Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet* is the second in a trio (*Strictly Ballroom* was the first and *Moulin Rouge* the third) of what Luhrmann calls his Red Curtain phase. Each film situates a dramatic, even sincerely sought, relationship in an irreality. Let me explain what I mean by that, for it is the manner in which religion is rendered an aspect of that irreality which is a significant indicator of the role religion is playing in postmodernity. Again, a comparative contrast with Zeffirelli's film is useful. As I have pointed out, Zeffirelli attempts to recreate the authentic lifestyle of an Italian Renaissance city. Historical accuracy is important in conveying a sense of the historical past. The play is underwritten, then, by a certain realist appeal; a certain state of things as they once were and which can be replicated by returning to actual Italian locations and filling the sites with people dressed in researched

costumes, bearing researched stage props, and acting in ways appropriate to that period. Renaissance music and dancing are performed at the Capulet feast, for example. Zeffirelli wants to make the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* credible for the contemporary audience by means of the realism of the setting. The camera *records* this detailed reproduction. Luhrmann's world refuses this photographic realism, but it refuses also a surrealism; that is, the film is not dream-like, nor does it attempt to depict the realms of the unconscious. Luhrmann's world is more hallucinogenic: what is recorded as 'out there', composing the nature of things and actions in the world, is bent continually by the way it is perceived or received. The camera mimics the actors in the scene, adrenalin-rushed and narcotically heightened. People, objects and events are excessive to their material condition, such that what is real is forever in question. Frequently, Luhrmann films *through* other media – mirrors, a curtained window, a fish-tank, a drugged state of mind, water. Things never just appear as such; their appearance is always produced – in fact, over-produced. This is what I term the irreality of the film. The French sociologist Jean Baudrillard might term this 'hyperreality'. In 1981 in his provocative book *Simulacra and Simulation* he writes of the 'loss of communication' that both produces or is produced by the 'escalation of simulacrum', such that there is a 'hyperreality of communication and of meaning. More real than the real, that is how the real is abolished.'⁶ With irreality, reality *is* a special effect; and as such it is always and only virtual.

The role religion plays in the creation of this effect is emphatic in Luhrmann's film. In fact, one could say that the Roman Catholic church is its main character and sacramentalism the film's dominant theme. In the opening montage of shots a huge statue of Christ atop a church is circled, spliced with close-ups of his face. In a zoom-out shot the tower blocks of Capulet and Montague stand either side of the figure. Civil strife is focused on the mediating figure of the Christian church. Christ stands with his arms open in welcome to both sides of the quarrel. When we descend to the violence played out on the street between rival gangs at a petrol station, the religious theme is picked up quickly: a nun ushers some convent girls into a bus while the Montagues make lascivious gestures towards them; Abba Capulet opens his mouth to show that his front teeth have

been replaced with a metal plate on which the word 'sin' is scratched; a crucifix dangles like a charm from Benvolio's gun and when Tybalt invites Benvolio to look upon his death, he opens his jacket to reveal a t-shirt with an image of Christ printed on it in lurid colours. Of course, this is symbolic over-kill and that is the point.

Religious excess is prevalent throughout the film, from the collection of images of the Virgin Mary, saints and angels and the array of votive candles in Juliet's bedroom, to the tattoo of the cross that covers Friar Laurence's back; from the choirs in the church and the images of the sacred heart to the huge canvas of Mary on the staircase of the Capulet mansion. The ultimate expression of this devotional excess is the deathbed scene itself. Romeo locks himself into the echoing spaces of the church. Through a crack in the door he views the nave. The approach to the high altar is flanked by rows of blue-neon crucifixes, flowers, and lamps fashioned like glowing tapers. As we slowly track towards the centre of the church the altar has been replaced by a catafalque-cum-bed on which Juliet lies, surrounded by a baroque fantasy of candles and statuary. Sex and death are indistinguishable; the bed is the altar on which the two lovers will offer themselves eucharistically. Death is the consummation, the final celebration of an aesthetic ecstasy; as death is the consummation in *Moulin Rouge* of 'Spectacular, Spectacular'. The film is emphatic that Romeo and Juliet *take* their lives; that they are forced towards an excessive gesture by the heightened emotions, the evident indulgences and violences around them.

The film's irreality is an expression and extension of this religious world in which the two families live. It is not a world issuing from Shakespeare's poetry; it is rather an elaborate staging for the poetry. The priestly role of the Franciscan is reduced to a perfunctory office. Though the performance by Pete Postlethwaite is colourful, even erotic, we rarely see him dressed liturgically. The action issues not from the play-as-liturgy as from a certain emotional and cultural distemper that the church both figures and transcends. For despite its kitsch attachment to holy accessories and paraphernalia (the baroque is an aesthetic forerunner of the kitsch), there are moments when the transcendent is taken more seriously, when we view the action from above, from the head of Christ. There are moments of devotional awe and reverence relating both to what the lovers feel for

each other and to Christ's own love. These moments run counter to the iconoclasm which sometimes borders on the blasphemous (lending an added *frisson* to the film). The tone of the film's portrayal of Roman Catholicism is ambivalent and irreducibly so.

Luhrmann seems to want to explore what possibilities remain for genuine relationships that can transcend the cultural conditions of postmodernity; whether 'genuine' can ever be used as a descriptive term again. Religion figures in those possibilities, in terms of a distinctive and particular piety. The deathbed scene points to the inability to escape the excess superficialities which decadent attention to 'staging' brings, yet before each kills themselves they glance up like martyrs to the heavens. But there remains an inability to gain any moral high ground, any perspective that can change the situation. When Juliet shoots herself we view the scene twice: once from her level and once from above, from the Christic perspective. Even so the elevated perspective only permits a certain pity. It achieves not a transcendence but only a distance that betrays an inability to change the situation below, or to intervene. The only transcendence is experience of the spectacular itself; a cheap, commercial transcendence that undermines any potential for tragedy in what happens to Romeo and Juliet. We have enjoyed the spectacle too much. As an audience we are drawn into the rhythms and the riots of colour and shot. We not only accept the excess; we feast upon the visual extravagance that is filtered through a tasteless yet gilded Roman Catholicism. We too are seduced, hooked, stimulated, doused in the sensuous music, and rendered incapable of either laying the blame or feeling guilty. We leave the lovers on their bed, the camera floats above them turning the scene below into an image of a constellation above, the classical music draws to a sweet finale, and we flashback nostalgically over the high points of their affection. Romeo and Juliet are already a romantic memory – the raw emotion quickly disappearing into the rich and clichéd surfaces captured on celluloid.

We are distanced quickly from the action or what it might mean. When we return to the world outside the church, the colour has been filtered from the film and a grey and grainy texture imposes a new alienation. The closing scene takes from the original play the most minimal of lines. The chief of police screams that all are

punished and underlines ‘That heaven finds mean to kill your joys with love’, but no one else speaks and there is little sense of punishment for the parents, since the relationships between each child and their family has been estranged and strained throughout. There is no sense of contrition or reconciliation and the Friar is missing. There is no sense of the restoration of civic and/or moral order, only a cessation of violence that seems, at best, temporary. The aggressive policing remains; its very aggression symptomatic of a defensiveness, a need to protect. The events seem not to close, but rather to withdraw, and the emotional disengagement is completed when the audience get up to leave the cinema. From the scene on the steps of the church we cut to the newsreader again and the television screen framing the events. The drama becomes one more ‘story’ of urban ‘woe’ reported that evening. The camera pulls out from the screen so that the words and image increasingly retreat into a darkness surrounding the set. If the film is watched on video then screen frames screen: we have been entertained and the entertainment has concluded. The final withdrawal is the retreat from movies and media themselves – but towards what? Only the flickering background darkness of an otherwise empty studio.

This self-conscious staging fuses media with religious hype, just as the transcendent, Christic perspective is also a Skycam and an overhead tracking shot. The camera is god-like in its fashioning, framing and in its all-seeing. As such the religious cannot be separated from the theatrical, the cinematic and the aesthetic. I pointed out earlier the ways in which Shakespearian theatre overflowed into the public and religious domains, just as these domains overflowed into the theatrical world. I drew attention to the circulation of social energies. But in Luhmann’s world it is not that the cinematic and the religious influence each other, so much as they cannot be discerned to be at all distinct – both mediate, both fetishize, both transcend the human comedy, and both bestow a melodramatic attention on the sign. For both, the content (Catholic doctrine and Shakespeare’s play) takes second place to its presentation; and for both a world is created which constantly displaces and frustrates positivist or realist handlings of it. The irony, the play, the excess, the ambiguity, the overcoding are irreducible – and it is this very irreducibility that demands and articulates the assimilation of the religious with a camp

aesthetic. Religion is cultural production and nothing more. The religious worldview does not announce a *sacramentum mundi*, a moral ordering, an affirmation of the transcendental significance of each person, act and object. Instead of the liturgical time of confession and mass, the merging of the ecclesial with the seasonal calendar, the jump-cuts accentuate the more general collapse of time to the 'now', the moment of optimal intensity. Luhrmann's production portrays a profound loss of the sacramental in exactly the sites where one might hope it could be found. But the film is not concerned with the possibilities for its restoration. Neither does the ending of the film capture the tensions of whether such a restoration is possible. The film questions order itself, questions power, questions authority as it questions authenticity. The agonistic and arbitrary nature of power in Luhrmann's world is not judged by the practices of piety nor shaped by the liturgical cosmos. If the events are at all controlled from above, the star-crossed lovers are the victims of a dark unknowing fatality. The destiny theme of the play, for example, turns, for Luhrmann, upon Mercutio's dying curse: 'A plague a' both your houses!' The chromium-blue sky now becomes bruised and foreboding. This staging of fortune turns destiny into a power no less arbitrary than the chief of police's. For given that Mercutio picked the fight with Tybalt in the heat of a febrile madness, fortune's entrance is not as an agent of the good, the just and the true. Hence, Luhrmann's film finally withdraws into its own irreality rather than resolves the conflict between Capulet and Montague; for the conflictual itself is the transcendental principle.

Unlike Zeffirelli's production, Luhrmann, while drawing some associations between Juliet's virginity and the Virgin Mary's, views neither Romeo nor Juliet as innocent of conflict. Romeo can be as distempered as any of the other young men. Luhrmann includes the bawdy conversation between Benvolio and Romeo about Rosaline, and while allowing Romeo moments of Hamlet-like self-reflection the violence of his own emotions is never forgotten. There are moments when Juliet plays in turn the innocent and the sexually knowing. She can also irrupt into tantrums of her own. She is no coy child on the edge of womanhood. Their loving shares a violence towards each other comparable to the violence between the rival gangs. Their self-murder then does not expiate the more general

violence but constitutes one more violent act. Their suicide lacks sacramental significance and so it cannot effect a sacramental operation, while staging itself sacramentally – with Juliet’s bed as the altar upon which their love is ultimately consummated. The suicide dresses itself dramatically in kitsch sacramental garb. Any economy of grace, translating the taking of their lives into the offering of their lives – suicide becoming sacrifice – is absent. And so the film does not end as it began, with freeze frames of the Christ figure opening his arms in a gesture of peace to the cityscape below. Nor does it end with the final transfiguration of Romeo and Juliet into statues of pure gold. The two covered bodies are wheeled out of the church on stretchers and into waiting ambulances. There is no sense of resurrection here.

Religion is not a word used in the film at all. The early scene in Shakespeare’s play when Romeo employs the word in conversation with Benvolio (Act 1, scene 2) is cut. Nevertheless, as I have shown, religion permeates the whole production such that the city of Verona offers no secular, civic space. The Prince as chief of police accentuates the frenetic and intoxicating pace of the action. A cliché of Hollywood hard-action cop movies, he is closely associated with movement – fast emergency cars, surveillancing helicopters. He breaks into a scene and leaves it just as rapidly. He offers no sense of a stable civic order, distinct from and unembroiled with the dramatic devotional practices of the Catholic faith. Luhrmann’s world is not a secular world. And yet, as I have also suggested, it is not a surreal world or a real world either. The world is unreal – mythologized and yet shallow. As we will see in chapter 4, postmodern religion can employ a magic realism of various kinds, from Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* to Philip Pullman’s *Dark Materials* trilogy, to Kevin Smith’s film *Dogma*. The supernatural comes from the other side of C. S. Lewis’s wardrobe and enters the house, garden and urban landscape itself. But the supernatural is lofty and impersonal in its presence, not close to hand and down right ordinary. It figures a certain aporia, an unnameable, operating powerfully in, through and beyond the conspicuous consumption that makes the material order so over-inflated and superficial. It is as if religion remains – in the accoutrement of Roman Catholic devotions – but it has been eviscerated, turned into gaudy and tawdry surfaces. Religion no longer

names that which brings about the star-crossed destiny of the main characters – and yet the shell of what was once religion serves still to figure forth a burden of transcendence pressing upon the material. There is a crisis here. The film not only marks that crisis but also situates itself with respect to it. The crisis is in trying to represent at all. The film is symptomatic, for it participates in a crisis with respect to representation itself. A certain loss of confidence is evident which the film articulates – who represents, on behalf of whom? What is represented and who decides? One might say that the real itself gets lost in the politics of the real. Certainly a number of postmodern thinkers – the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard and political scientist Paul Virilio in particular – bear witness to reality as a rhetorical effect, a performance. Computer-simulated realities – and cinematography is becoming increasingly dependent upon these realities, relying upon digitalized images or computer-enhanced perception for its special effects – are only a further expression of what Virilio describes as ‘the relative fusion/confusion of the factual (or operational, if you prefer) and the virtual; the ascendancy of the “reality effect” over the reality principle’.⁷ The optical and the cinematic become indistinguishable; representation *is* media presentation. Luhrmann’s film of *Romeo and Juliet* articulates this loss of the real, this loss of confidence in whether there is anything beyond constructions and effects of the real. Luhrmann does not always view the losses pessimistically (as Baudrillard and Virilio do). A new playfulness becomes possible, a new *commedia dell’arte* appears; new forms of baroque (or elsewhere gothic) fantasy can be explored. But the question I am posing is what cultural role does religion play with respect to this ‘ascendancy of the “reality effect” over the reality principle’? Does it confirm, critique, validate, act as a nostalgic retreat from or perform a counter-statement to what Virilio terms ‘synthetic illusion’? Furthermore, what future is suggested for religion when it comes to play such roles?

These questions cannot be adequately answered without understanding what postmodernity is both reacting against and also developing. That is, we need to appreciate the relationship between modernity, secularity, religion and theology. In this chapter I have simply wished to present the contrasting cultural roles religion is playing in these two performances of *Romeo and Juliet*. I observed

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with respect to the late sixteenth century that social energies were already moulding a new understanding of religion; a shift was underway. What is observed in Luhmann's cinematic production of the play four hundred years later is the working out of the logic of those transformations. My claim here is that the role religion plays in postmodernity is the *final* working out and that we are already beginning to enter another radical transformation in the understanding of what religion means. In the 1960s Wilfred Cantwell Smith had already pronounced the concept of religion to be bankrupt. In the 1990s Nicholas Lash proclaimed religion to be at an end. As we have seen with Luhmann, the end does not signal the falling into disuse or the oblivion of the religious. Rather, it signals exactly the opposite: the extension and hype of the religious as the ultimate vision of the excessive and the transgressive. We need to ask what this suggests about the culture of globalism and what does this bode. We need to understand the logic it is bringing to a culmination.