The Diffusion of Religion in the Cinematic Spectacle: A Typology

By Dimitris Oulis*

1. The "Invisible" Religion – made "Visible" again

The significance of a small book, originally published in German and then in English under the title *The Invisible Religion*[1], lies in the fact that it seeks an epistemological view of religion that dares to move beyond the dichotomy of *institutionalization* and *secularization*. It is probably the first time that this has happened in the field of the sociological study of the religious phenomenon within the "Western" world. The book's author, Thomas Luckmann, had experienced firsthand the stormy socio-political and cultural changes of the 1960s in Europe and America, which contributed to the emergence of a *New Religious Consciousness* – that is, an alternative way of experiencing, understanding, fulfilling, and social functioning of the religious phenomenon[2]. In this book, Luckmann

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1. Th. Luckmann, *Das Problem der Religion in der modernen Gesellschaft: Institution, Person u. Weltanschauung*, Rombach, Freiburg in Breisgau 1963. English translation, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*, The Macmillan Co, New York 1967.

2. For the historical background of the New Religious Consciousness, see St. Papalexandropoulos, *Δοκίμια Ἱστορίας τῶν Θρησκειῶν*, Hellinika Grammata Pubications, Athens 1994, pp. 143-171. Regarding the mapping of the phenomenological features of this conscious-ness, we consider the collective work R. Bellah & Ch. Glock (eds.), *The New Religious Consciousness*, University of California Press, Berkley/Los Angeles/London 1976 to be unsurpassed. Also, we consider the recording made in D. Bekridakis, «Ἐναλλακτικὲς Θρησκευτικὲς Ταυτότητες στὴ Μεθόριο Μοντέρνου-Μεταμοντέρνου: ἡ Περίπτωση τῆς Νέας Πνευματικότητας», in: D. Magriplis (ed.), *Κριτικὲς Προσεγγίσεις στὸν Ὀρθόδοξο Πολιτισμό*, Stamoulis Publications, Athens 2007, pp. 225-268, to be schematic but

makes two major epistemological innovations. On the one hand, he condemns as historically out of date and analytically inadequate the usual tendency of the sociologists of his time to explain the religious phenomenon based entirely on its ecclesiastical expression alone. On the other hand, he questions the fundamental position of the secularization theory, according to which the loss of the social influence of religion is equivalent to its social disappearance. In the context of the New Religious Consciousness, which characterizes the postmodern cultural condition, Luckmann views secularization more as a dual process of privatizing religion and simultaneously shifting it culturally into areas and fields of meaning that have little –or no– relation to its traditional institutional formulations.

Luckmann considers that religion is being privatized, to the extent that a predetermined and ready in advance inclusion of subjects in the respective religious institutions is no longer conceivable. Religious institutions no longer "choose" their members, but rather *are chosen* by them – often on purely utilitarian criteria. At the same time, however, Luckmann argues that religion *is shifting to cultural areas outside of itself*, since the process of choosing religion on the part of the subjects is often accompanied by a process of reversing their institutional identification. This means that, in choosing their "religion", people are essentially doing two things: either they, selectively and often unconsciously, internalize certain fundamental moral principles and beliefs of the so-called "world" religions –without nevertheless feeling that they "organically" belong to them[3]– or they derive moral principles, worldview orientation and meaning of life from secular belief systems, which they then invest with *ultimate* (i.e. "religious") significance. In the eighth and final chapter of his book, Luckmann attempts to name some of these "secular" systems –such as, for example, the demands for autonomy, self-expression and self-realization, the ethics of social advancement (mobility ethos), or

informative.

3. This is the trend that will be naturalized in the sociology of religion by Grace Davie under the name "believing without belonging". See G. Davie, *The Sociology of Religion*, Sage, Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore 2007, pp. 137-156.

sexuality and adherence to the demands of the family (familism)[4]. To the extent that these narratives determine the subjects' perceptual patterns and worldview orientation, while dictating to them ultimate devotions, commitments, and obligations, Luckmann argues that they inevitably define their relationship with a "sacred world": a world less mysterious and transcendent than that of the world religions, but a world that is *sacred* in every way, since without it the subjects feel that their lives sink into futility or chaos. People's relationship with their respective sacred world also constitutes their religion in an informal way; however, it is a private religion, without tangible social visibility and institutional parallel –literally an *invisible religion*.

It would be a mistake to claim that Luckmann's book can be understood in complete opposition to the particular historical and cultural context of which it is both an outcome and an expression; hence the frequent criticisms of conceptual vagueness and lack of originality, which were leveled against him mostly by fundamentalist and apologetic theological circles[5]. At first glance, the books seems to undertake the ambitious task of heralding a double death: the death of both religious institutionality (*θεσμικότητα*) and secularization. Upon closer inspection, however, it is easy to see that the book does nothing more than highlight the underlying, but dominant, religious trends of its time, heralding not so much the kind of religiosity that is passing away as the one that is now beginning to be clearly seen on the horizon of the Western world. Sixty years after the publication of *The Invisible Religion*, we can argue that Luckmann's insights were to a great extent prophetic. On the one hand, the rapid privatization of religion has contributed to the weakening of its institutional monopoly and the gradual emergence of a global "religious market", which has turned religion into a consumer choice product like any other. As Grace Davie aptly puts it, the idea of the "religious market" presupposes in itself the axiom that individuals are naturally religious and make their religious choices in the same way

4. Luckmann, *op.cit*., pp. 110-113.
5. See, for example, the scathing critique by Thomas F. Hoult, in *Social Forces*, 46, 2 (Dec. 1967), pp. 302-303.

they make their choices in general, with the ultimate goal of maximizing their personal gain (whatever that may be) and minimizing their losses[6].

On the other hand, the emergence of the religious market has led to the detachment of the religious product from its institutional monopoly, to its direct subjection to processes of religious "competition" and to its dynamic promotion through the most common "communication" strategies of direction and advertising. From this point on, the religious market functions as the market in general, i.e. as a belt of multi-level promotion ("diffusion") of religion in diverse cultural environments and fields of meaning, in order to serve its needs (and broaden its clientele) more effectively. We therefore observe that, if the processes described by Luckmann made religion institutionally "invisible" in the short term, these same processes simultaneously activated *new possibilities of its visibility*. In other words, while the dominance of the New Religious Consciousness in the Western world has more or less confirmed Luckmann's insights, it has at the same time erased their inner limits: it has demonstrated that institutionality (*θεσμικότητα*) is by no means the only way to achieve the "social visibility" of religion, and that this purpose can equally well be served through the commercialization of religion and its transformation into a spectacle. In the context of the global "postmodern" religious market, religion may be socially invisible as an institutional monopoly, but it is fully visible as a consumer product and primarily as a *spectacle*.

The above findings may sound provocative to those audiences who have continued (for mainly historical reasons) to subject their religious needs to the monopoly of the "official" state religion and have remained aloof from the processes of transformation and evolution of religiosity that Luckmann's book attempts to hint at. These audiences are reasonably wary of the possibility of a religious "laissez faire", a radical liberalization of the religious market, on the one hand for reasons of national and cultural identity and on the other hand for reasons related to the stress and disorientation caused by the plurality and complexity of this market. Let us not forget that faith means above all *trust* – and people have a hard time trusting the unknown, or the unfamiliar. What is important

6. G. Davie, *op.cit*., p. 69.

for our study, however, is that even where religious institutionality (*θεσμικότητα*) remains socially visible (as is the case, for example, with the "official" state religions), its ideological dominance nevertheless depends to a large extent on its promotion and advertising strategies, its consumer direction, its communication profile. In spite of its loud claims to the contrary, the tight embrace of each official religion by the state is by no means sufficient for its survival and reproduction, nor does it make it unconditionally immune to the trends and transformations of the New Religious Consciousness. Hence we observe that the strong institutional supports of the state religions do not prevent them from fighting hard for the best possible representation in the media world. Nor do they prevent them from being willingly subject to various norms of commercialization and spectacularization (*θεαματικοποίηση*) –provided, of course, that their interests are safeguarded and their public image is enhanced.

Religious and sociological research confirms today, from its own point of view, the full "social visibility" of religion, not only as "God's revenge", as a radical claim to the political sphere by religious fundamentalisms[7], but mainly through the organic connection of religion with the "heavy" entertainment industry. Five illustrative examples could made this connection evident:

1. The ubiquity of religion on the Internet: countless websites, blogs and videos, discussion and live streaming platforms, e-churches, novel religious movements and cults, sacred places and sacred narratives. A simple search of the word "religion" in Google's search engine [08.01.2023] yields three billion, one hundred and thirty million results!

2. The excessive and pretentious use of digital media, especially by fundamentalist religious circles. It would be worth noting, for example, the "cinematic" way in which these circles stage the "charismatic" profile of their leaders, their public interventions –and even more so their terrorist

7. This claim is analyzed by Gilles Kepel in his –in many ways– prophetic book *La Revanche de Dieu: Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde*, Seuil, Paris 1991. In the Greek edition of the book, *Ἡ Ἐπιστροφὴ τοῦ Θεοῦ: Ἰσλαμικά, χριστιανικά, ἑβραϊκὰ κινήματα στὴν ἀνάκτηση τοῦ κόσμου*, transl. G. Fasoulakis, Livanis-Nea Synora Publications, Athens 1992, Fasoulakis renders (unsuccessfully) the word *revanche* as "return", which "smoothes" the radicality and above all the insight of Kepel's argument.

attacks. The case of ISIS is an emblematic (though not the only) example of this[8].

3. The almost total submission of the preaching and catechetical discourse of the world religions to the "rough guide of televisual correctness", as Bernard Pivot aptly calls the relentless demands of television viewing[9]. A sufficient evidence of this submission might be sought in the innumerable manifestation of modern Protestant televangelism[10].

4. The increasingly frequent subjection of religious worship to the directing specifications of the live concert and music video. This tendency is found to a large extent in the circles of enthusiastic and charismatic religiosity –but we might say that it finds perhaps its most characteristic expression in the gatherings of the Protestant Mega-Churches[11].

8. Cf. Davie, *op.cit*., pp. 185-186. For the use of digital technology by various religious fundamentalisms, see L. Rüdiger, "Fundamentalism and the Internet", *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 2, 2 (2016), pp. 56-74. For the use of digital technology by ISIS in particular, see I. Awan, "Cyber-Extremism: Isis and the Power of Social Media", *Society* 54, 2 (2017), pp. 138-149. See also J. Farwell, "The Media Strategy of ISIS", *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 56, 6 (2014), pp. 49-55.

9. B. Pivot, *Ἀμήχανοι Θεατές*, transl. Eleni Psichouli, Livanis-Nea Synora Publications, Athens 1998, p. 65. When we talk about "relentless" demands of television viewing, we primarily mean: a. television spectacle's high bid on "matters that do not challenge, but rather highlight, the various values of television viewers", that is, in the final analysis, the social status quo within which the spectacle itself operates (see S. Kastoras, *Ὀπτικοακουστικὰ Μέσα Ἐπικοινωνίας*, Papazisis Publications, Athens 1990, pp. 47-48); b. the tendency of television spectacle to invite its audience primarily into the role of consumer, while relegating (or excluding) other roles, such as, for example, that of cultured and critically informed citizen; and c. the television spectacle's obligation to overlook the individual characteristics of viewers, giving priority to programs of "broad acceptance", in order to reach an ever-expanding audience. As Pierre Bourdieu said, the more a news medium or a medium of expression wants to reach a wider audience, the more it must lose its hardening, anything that can divide, exclude [...] the more it must try not to shock anyone, as they say, never raise issues or touch on issues that have no history. See P. Bourdieu, *Γιὰ τὴν Τηλεόραση*, transl. Alexandra Sotiriou – Kaiti Diamantakou, Patakis Publications, Athens 1996, p. 65.

10. David Lyon rightly observes that, in their effort to secure donations from their television audiences, televangelists are increasingly being pushed into the path of more mainstream entertainment shows, replicating the stereotypes and style of their hosts. See D. Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2000, p. 63.

11. See the worship gatherings of the Mega-Churches Hillsong (https://hillsong.com), based in Australia, and Elevation (https://elevationchurch.org/), based in North Carolina,

5. Finally, the ongoing spectacularization (*θεαματικοποίηση*) of religion is evidenced by the expanding religious repertoire of contemporary pop culture: i.e. by the constant tendency of the latter to encapsulate, interpret and promote a multitude of religious ideas, narratives, symbols, practices and values, depending on the audience it aspires to address each time. It is commonly acknowledged that the products of pop culture, which have significantly enriched their religious repertoire in the last few decades at least, are the shows of pay TV channels, video games and cinema[12]. This enrichment is so obvious that some scholars have even suggested replacing the term "pop culture" with the term "occulture", which they consider more adequate in terms of description and more valid in terms of analysis[13].

The examples are by no means exhaustive; but they strongly suggest that an up-to-date and informed sociology of religion is impossible to be substantiated without the constant mediation of a communicative science of religion. Because, if Marshall McLuhan's well-known maxim that "the medium is the message" is true, then it is also true that the medium is the vehicle of the ever new social and cultural visibility of the message. To use a metaphor, we might say that the medium is like the negative film, on which the very form that until a while ago was impossible to discern gradually appears; it is therefore a place (*locus*) where the hitherto invisible object is regaining the possibility of an unexpectedly

U.S.A. These multinational church organizations today set the agenda for Christian worship throughout the evangelical world and house worship music groups, which enjoy worldwide success. C.f. the international career of the Atlanta-based worship music band Maverick City Music (https://maverickcitymusic.com/), as well as that of the music group of pastor Darlene Zschech (www.darlenezschech.com/).

12. For an indicative list of contemporary TV series dealing with religious themes, see "The Best TV Shows with Religious Themes" in: https://www.ranker.com/list/best-shows-with-religious-themes-v1/molly-gander. Christopher Partridge attempts a thorough analysis in the light of religion of certain television series that enjoyed worldwide success in the late 1990s, in: C. Partridge, *op.cit*., pp. 128-136. For an analysis of video games in the light of religion, see Io. Xidakis, *Τὸ Καλὸ καὶ τὸ Κακὸ στὸν Κόσμο τῶν Βιντεοπαιχνιδιῶν: Θρησκειολογικὴ Μελέτη*, PhD thesis, Athens 2018. The literature on the relationship between religion and cinema is vast; see below, n. 16.

13. See, C. Partridge, *op.cit*., pp. 119-142.

new manifestation. In this sense, we are justified in claiming that the media diffusion and spectacurarization (*θεαματικοποίηση*) of religion, far from being a cause for moral panic and predictions of doom, is nothing more than the current mode of its social and cultural visibility. It is the way in which religion maintains its social and cultural presence in the modern world, sometimes in competition with the traditional religious institution and sometimes in alliance with it.

2. Religion as a cinematic spectacle

In the limited context of this study it is of course impossible to go through all the types of religion's spectacularization (*θεαματικοποίηση*). We focus on its special connection with cinema, because we believe that film still retains a double privilege over all other spectacle products of pop culture. The first concerns its relatively short duration: each film must have completed its narrative within a time frame, which rarely exceeds three hours. Thus, in contrast to the television series and –much more so– to the soap opera, the objective possibilities of a film to indulge in unnecessary deviations are greatly reduced (although they are never completely eliminated). This means that the film combines the density of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* with the gift of *brevity* – that is, a spectator-friendly economy of time, which helps them to distinguish the essential from the non-essential elements of the cinematic narrative and to focus their interest on the former.

The second privilege of film over other types of popular spectacle concerns its primary place of projection and viewing: the big screen. We can always, of course, watch a movie on our computer, mobile phone or TV; we must, however, acknowledge that no film was originally created to be shown in these media. Given that the choice of words we use is never innocent, we would argue that there is a specific reason why the big screen is called "big". The definition implies first of all a focal point around which a live gathering of spectators is organized and takes place, and therefore a *social* place for the promotion and presentation of the spectacle – which is none other than the cinema hall. But at the same time, the term "big screen" implies a social

perception of the enjoyment of the spectacle. This is the fundamental belief that it is precisely because of the social place defined by the big screen that the spectacle gives much greater pleasure when viewed by a collective subject (e.g. a live audience), which consciously decide to give up for a few hours all the distractions of life and to gather in the same place, in order to immerse themselves in a space and a time that break the symbolic order of everyday life. All serious cinema fans know that cinema also has a "mystagogical" (*μυσταγωγική*) dimension, that cinema hall can be paralleled with a kind of "heterotopia"[14], and that part of the pleasure of this "mystagogical" (*μυσταγωγική*) immersion is fatally lost in private viewing[15]. Therefore, if cinema remains to this day one of the most popular forms of mass entertainment, and if people of all ages continue to flock to cinemas despite the possibilities offered by their individual gadgets, it is, in our opinion, due to the fact that no other form of popular spectacle has succeeded –so far at least– in effectively competing with the double privilege of cinema: on the one hand, the density and brevity of the spectacle it conveys; on the other,

14. The term *heterotopia* was coined by Michel Foucault and denotes a realized utopia in which the traditional places of a culture are simultaneously represented, disputed and reversed. Heterotopia differs from utopia in the degree of its objective, historical and social localization, that is, precisely in the fact that it is realized. According to Foucault, the phenomenological characteristics of heterotopias are six: a. their timelessness and universality, that is, the fact that the invention of heterotopias is a structural characteristic of all cultures without exception; b. the possibility of differentiating their function, transferring their social significance and changing their value; c. their ability to juxtapose and combine in a dialectical way mutually incompatible places, functions and meanings; d. the fact that they interrupt the flow of objective historical time by introducing temporal discontinuities (heterochronies); e. the existence in them of a controlled system of entry and exit, which isolates them from the rest of the world at the same time that it makes them permeable to it; and f. their ability to re-establish space, either by cutting off their members from the "outside" space or by installing an ideal –and largely virtual– space within the existing one (see, M. Foucault, "Different Spaces", in: J. Faubion (ed.), *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 2, The New Press, U.S.A. 1998, pp. 175-185). As can be readily seen from the aforementioned characteristics of heterotopias, c, d, e and f apply par excellence in the case of cinema.

15. The fact that the cinematic experience is not reducible, precisely because of its collective character, is defended with arguments that we consider exhaustive by Julian Hanich. See J. Hanich, *The Audience Effect: On the Collective Cinema Experience*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2018.

the sociality and collective enjoyment defined by the big screen –and consequently, the cinema hall.

But, in what way does this double privilege contribute in particular to the diffusion of religion? What exactly do we mean when we refer to religion "as" a cinematic spectacle? In what sense is religion contained in cinema and "diffused" through it? In an article which should be considered guiding for the construction of the present study, religious scholars William Blizek and Michele Desmarais point out the four most popular ways in which this diffusion is usually carried out: an interpretive, a critical, a catechetical and a moral one[16]. Let's see them in more detail.

2.1. *Sub Speciae Religionis* – or: when religion interprets cinema

The narratives, ideas, values, symbols and performances of religion offer first of all an interpretive guide, through which we can highlight meanings and significances of a film that would otherwise go unnoticed. By using religion as an interpretive tool, in other words, Blizek and Desmarais argue that we have the ability to bring out latent religious motifs and meanings even in films that present themselves as "secular". Of course, this does not mean that every film necessarily has a "deeper" religious meaning; it just means that watching a film in the light of this or that religious idea may reveal to us a completely unexpected perspective of understanding it. In other words, it helps us to understand that even a film, which does not formally aspire to serve a religious agenda, can nevertheless be imbued with religious values and meanings –albeit in an indirect and suggestive way. Subjecting, for example, Miloš Forman's

16. See W. L. Blizek & M. Desmarais, "What are we teaching, when we teach 'Religion and Film'?", in: G. Watkins (ed.), *Teaching Religion and Film*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2008, pp. 17-33. It would be worth noting that William Blizek is the editor of the most comprehensive (so far) companion volume on the relationship between religion and cinema; see W. L. Blizek (ed.), *The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film*, Continuum, London/New York 2009. At the same time, he is the co-founder (along with Ronald Burke) of the most authoritative scientific journal on this subject, namely the *Journal of Religion and Film* (www.unomaha.edu/jrf/).

film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) to a religious interpretation, the authors of the article make the crucial observation that McMurphy has many characteristics in common with Jesus: he is betrayed by Billy Bibbit, who falsely accuses him to Nurse Ratched of forcing him to have sex with "that woman". Billy commits suicide just like Judas, while McMurphy is "crucified": he undergoes a frontal lobotomy, which completely destroys his personality. Nevertheless, the courage and strength of the Great Chief, as they are inspired by McMurphy's spirit and words, lead him to his salvation, because he manages to escape from the mental institution[17].

In The Wachowskis' film *The Matrix* (1999), it is correspondingly noted that the main character Thomas Anderson has been clearly created as Christological figure. His name is "Neo" and he is the "Chosen One". Although he is killed, he comes back to life and it is prophesied that he will one day return to the matrix. In addition, Neo fights the agents of Evil and brings to people the possibility of their salvation[18].

Once we grasp the significant interpretative potential of religious ideas, the possibility of a multitude of analogous parallels emerges. The latter may at first sight seem excessive or far-fetched, but this does not mean that they should by definition be dismissed as arbitrary. We consider it more appropriate to argue that these parallels merely presuppose an expanded epistemology, which does not wish to dogmatically prejudge the paths that the interpretative process should follow, but instead prefers to draw inspiration and insights from disparate theoretical fields, stubbornly keeping "all the books open on the table"[19]. In obedience to such an epistemological precept, Blizek and Desmarais trace a number of religious meanings in Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986) and Gore Verbinski's *The Mexican* (2001) – which they read, the first as a secularized version of the apocalyptic battle of the Lamb with the Beast, the second as a

17. Blizek & Desmarais, *op.cit*., p. 18.

18. Blizek & Desmarais, *op.cit*., p. 19. For an extensive religious and theological analysis of the entire *Matrix* film series, see D. Oulis, *Ἡ Εὐδαιμονία τῆς Ἄγνοιας*, Harmos Publications, Athens 2022.

19. The wording belongs to P. Ricoeur, *Λόγος καὶ Σύμβολο*, transl. Mavina Pantazara, Harmos Publications, Athens 2002, p. 13.

humorous commentary on the book of *Esther* and the secret character of Divine Providence[20]. Moving within a similar epistemological context, Joel Martin and Conrad Ostwalt highlight the messianic and "Christological" characteristics displayed by the leading roles of the films *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), *Rocky* (1976) and *E.T.* (1982)[21] – while, for his part, the Catholic Bishop Robert Barron provides a convincing Christological reading of *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994)[22].

Harold Ramis' fantasy comedy *Groundhog Day* (1993) is another perfect example of the different meanings that can be attributed to a film, depending on the religious categories we apply to its interpretation. The film can be seen as a Buddhist allegory on the eternal cycle of reincarnations (*saṃsāra*) and man's need to free himself from them (*nirvāṇa*) by "burning" "bad" Karma through acts of love and selfless social service. At the same time, however, it can also be seen as a Roman Catholic allegory of the soul's stay in Purgatory (*Purgatorium*), in order to be purified of its self-love –or as a Jewish allegory of the soul's stay on Earth, in order to fulfill the divine commands (*mitzvot*) left unfulfilled[23].

A religious interpretation of The Wachowskis' film *Cloud Atlas* (2012) is able to highlight the film, respectively, as a study on the concept of Karma: that is, the consequences that our present actions have not only for the condition in which our future reincarnations will take place, but even for the lives of people who will come centuries after us. The relevant literature is replete with examples of this kind, which herald the opening of a highly original field of convergence between film analysis and the sciences of religion[24].

20. Blizek & Desmarais, *op.cit*., pp. 19, 20.

21. See J. Martin & C. Ostwalt (eds.), *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film*, Westview Press, Colorado/Oxford 1995, p. 15.

22. See "Bishop Barron on 'The Shawshank Redemption'" (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sp7Fvia3aMg&ab_channel=BishopRobertBarron).

23. For these interpretations, see the "Thematic Analysis" section on the *Groundhog Day* film page on the English *Wikipedia* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Groundhog_Day_(film)#Thematic_analysis).

24. We have attempted to systematize this convergence in D. Oulis, *Ὁ Διάβολος στὸ Celluloid: Ἐξορκισμοί, Πνευματικὸς Κόσμος καὶ Ἄλλα Ἄνθη τοῦ Κακοῦ στὶς Ταινίες Ὑπερφυσικοῦ Τρόμου*, Harmos Publications, Athens 2021, as well as in: *Εὐδαιμονία τῆς Ἄγνοιας*, *op.cit*. We have attempted similar theological and religious readings of cinema

Two important questions arise at this point. The first concerns the number and density of religious motifs that legitimize a religious interpretation: is it enough, for example, the sacrifice of a protagonist for the sake of others to attribute Christological characteristics to him? The second question concerns whether the search for parallels between a film's script and a religious idea exhausts the meaning of the religious interpretation: are there deeper points of convergence between a religious and a cinematic narrative beyond obvious parallels and isomorphism?

Regarding the first question, Blizek and Desmarais argue that its answer depends entirely on the demands and expectations of the interpreter: one willingly undertakes the religious interpretation of a secular film, even if he detects only one religious idea in it; another requires the presence of more religious ideas to engage with the religious interpretation of a film. One interpreter may consider the religious interpretation of a film legitimate, even if its script echoes a religious idea in a general and vague way –for example, that "love saves the world"; another may consider such an endeavor futile, as long as the film is not permeated by denser religious ideas and stronger symbolisms. Without discrediting any interpretive effort, our approach tends more towards the second version, because we believe that a film dense in religious ideas, on the one hand, is more thought-provoking and, on the other, demonstrates more convincingly the possibility of religion's diffusion, even in fields of meaning that typically deny it. Regarding the second, question we would say that the answer depends on the definition of religion that we adopt each time. An extremely broad, general or "journalistic" definition of religion will probably not pose challenging questions to the cinema, but will be content to meet it at the level of some common assumptions

in a series of smaller essays. See D. Oulis, «Καλὸς Ἐγκληματίας/Κακὸς Ἐγκληματίας: Ἀναπαραστάσεις τοῦ Ἐγκληματία στὴν Ταινία "Τὸ Πράσινο Μίλι"», *Ἐκκλησιαστικὸς Κήρυκας /Ecclesiastikos Kirykas* 28 (2022), pp. 131-140; *idem*, «Μέσα ἀπὸ τὶς Χαραμάδες τῆς Ἐλπίδας: Χριστιανικὰ Μοτίβα στὴν τεχνο-ουτοπικὴ ταινία Interstellar τῶν Jonathan καὶ Christopher Nolan», *Θεολογία / Theologia* 90, 3 (2019), pp. 173-199. In a trajectory of articulation of a theological interpretation of cinema –but of a different epistemological direction than ours– also moves the book Io. Vogiatzis, *Ἡ Ἐκκλησία πάει Σινεμά: Ὁ Διάλογος τῆς Ὀρθόδοξης Θεολογίας καὶ τοῦ Κινηματογράφου*, Harmos Publications, Athens 2020.

or generalities. On the contrary, a dense definition of religion, which incorporates within itself multiple contexts and levels of meaning, is likely to seek out an equal number of or corresponding levels of meaning in the film it aspires to interpret, which allows to conclude that how many and what religious meanings a "secular" film will give us depends on the epistemological glasses through which we watch it; and that the degree of diffusion of religion within the cinematic spectacle is related to what we are initially willing to recognize as "religion" within it.

2.2. *Contra Religionem* – or: when cinema criticizes religion

If the first way of cinematic diffusion of religion is to use it as an interpretative guide for cinema, then the second is, in a sense, the reverse: the cinematic criticism of religion. If the first way answers the question, "what does religion tell us about films?", the second way answers the question, "what do films tell us about religion?"[25]. A film can, of course, talk about religion in a laudatory or judgmental way – making a halo or a crown of thorns of religion. When, however, cinema succeeds in criticizing religion, avoiding both the Scylla of idealization and the Charybdis of demonization, we can be sure that it also functions as a vehicle for its effective diffusion. This is so for two reasons: firstly, because the cinematic criticism of religion represents the latter's actual social shortcomings, and therefore makes its social pathology blatantly visible. And secondly, because by highlighting the problematic elements of religion "A" or "B", the cinematic criticism of religion indirectly dictates a more general attitude towards religion. It is worth noting that this attitude does not necessarily imply the discrediting of religion; it may just as well imply its further social and cultural diffusion – just as the warning sign about the dangers of smoking on a pack of cigarettes is one of the most effective ways of promoting it. We should not at all underestimate the productive and provocative character of the "negative": even the most vitriolic criticism of religion promotes it at the same time; and it is a common business secret that nothing advertises a product better than its anti-advertisement.

25. Blizek & Desmarais, *op.cit.*, p. 21.

But if this is the case, then we are equipped with a sufficient presumption which allows us to include in the cinematic criticism of religion not only the fiction films we are familiar with, but also a series of documentary films, which claim a kind of empirically certified and "realistic" recording. These documentary films aspire, on the one hand, to highlight the corrupting and generally "dangerous" character of the New Religious Movements, and, on the other, to underline the degree of manipulation of these movements by their respective "charismatic" leaders. Although one can hardly overlook the ethnographic and anthropological interest of these films, Blizek and Desmarais refuse to include them in their theoretical project, perhaps confirming, by their silence, the slippery epistemological ground on which they rest: the fact that, despite their clear intention to constitute an up-to-date critique of specific forms of the New Religious Consciousness, these films fail to effectively differentiate themselves from the perceptual patterns and rhetoric of the so-called "counter-cult movement"[26]. On the contrary, watching them attests to the ease (and frequency) with which they sometimes give in to the temptation of conspiracy theory, sometimes to the complacency of "uncovering" a collusion – and sometimes to the combination of the two[27].

The most important reason, however, why we believe that the two scholars oppose this particular genre of films, is that they wish to focus exclusively on the cinematic criticism which does not use religion as a pretext to promote moral panic, but it is primarily interested in highlighting the inadequacies of the "official" religious institution, as

26. For an overview of the institutional expressions of the counter-cult movement, as well as its strategies, see G. Chryssidis, *Exploring New Religions*, Continuum, London/New York 2001, pp. 342-365. For an informative summary of the key perceptual patterns and the rhetoric of the counter-cult movement –but also for a convincing reconstruction of them, see L. Dawson, *Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements*, Oxford University Press, Canada 1998, pp. 104-127.

27. We can trace this "slippery" epistemology in the most important documentary films that we know of: *Manson* (1973), by Robert Hendrickson and Lawrence Merrick, *Waco: The Rules of Engagement* (1997), by William Gazecki, *Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple* (2006), by Stanley Nelson, *Jesus Camp* (2006), by Rachel Grady and Heidi Ewing, *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief* (2015), by Alex Gibney, *Prophet's Prey* (2015), by Amy Berg, and *Holly Hell* (2016), by Will Allen.

well as the established attitudes, beliefs and values that derive from it. To put it more bluntly, we would say that Blizek and Desmarais are oriented exclusively towards the cinematic criticism of mainstream religiosity, perhaps because they are unwilling to acknowledge how mainstream the New Religious Consciousness itself has now become and how established its modalities, obsessions and clichés must be considered. This epistemological negligence of theirs does not, however, prevent them from making their subject that kind of cinematic criticism, which focuses primarily on the gap between the ecclesiastical institution and the community of believers: that is, between the internal conditions of the constitution and operation of the institutional Church on the one hand and the real needs of the ecclesiastical body on the other.

The film *Going my Way* (1944) by Leo McCarey is proposed as the first film depicting this gap. The film defends in the character of Father O'Malley the priority of the ministry of the ecclesiastical community over the sterile adherence to the official ecclesiastical structures[28]. John Duigan's film *Romero* (1989) is proposed as a second depiction of this priority – but in a political context this time. Based on true events, the film chronicles the gradual transformation of Salvadoran Archbishop Óscar Romero from a modest church minister to a passionate defender of the life and dignity of the community of believers. At the same time, the film criticizes the Catholic Church's alignment with the dictatorship of El Salvador and denounces its complete unwillingness to resist the authoritarian practices of the latter[29].

Roland Zoffé's film *The Mission* (1986) redirects this criticism to the crypto-imperialistic agenda of Christian mission and represents in black colors the Roman Catholic Church's attachment to the spirit of brutal economic and political interest. As the two scholars rightly point out, the film aims to show that the institutional rigidities of the Church have

28. According to the two scholars, the message of the film is that what matters in God's eyes is not the official structure of the Church or its public image, but what the Church does for others – the way it helps them to live a better life. See, Blizek & Desmarais, *op.cit*., p. 22.
29. Blizek & Desmarais, *op.cit*., p. 23.

over time come to the detriment not only of its community of believers (and converts), but also of the good intensions of its own missionaries[30].

Martin Scorsese's film *Silence* (2016), based on the novel of the same name by Shūsaku Endō, could be proposed by us as a further development of the above criticism, since the script now focuses not so much on the overt or implicit political expediencies, which every mission is obliged –even unwillingly– to serve, as on the disproportionately painful price it has to pay in order to satisfy its ecumenical demands. Judging by its final outcome, we would say that the film takes a clear stand in favour of an ecclesiology of the community of believers, which is primarily structured "from below", rather than a priestly and bishop-centered ecclesiology: if there is a Church, it is due more to fraternal solidarity and the blood of its martyrs, and less to the presence of its priests, who are crushed under the weight of insurmountable moral dilemmas and eventually defect to the enemy's camp.

But alongside the sociopolitical effects of the gap between the institution and the community of believers, the cinematic criticism of religion also extends to the moral effects of this gap. Blizek and Desmarais draw our attention to the films *Priest* (1994) by Antonia Bird and *The Apostle* (1997) by Robert Duvall. The first addresses the taboo of homophobia, which divides the ecclesiastical body throughout time like an earthquake fault; at the same time, it explores the oppressive (and largely hypocritical) morality that derives from the vow of priestly celibacy and shows that the formalist adherence to the "proper" performance of the sacraments can serve as an ideal pretext for the clergy's disengagement from the *real* problems of the local community. The second film aspires to be an objective, if possible, mapping of the positive and negative elements of American Evangelical Christianity. Its ability to enable people to convert to more creative, ethical and socially supportive ways of life is recognized as its positive element. Its inability to curb favouritism, person-worship and haughty attitudes, which are developing within it and allow certain

30. The film advocates the idea that the *mission* of the Church is to save the world –in this case, to protect the Indians from slavery and death– and not to go along with the political expediencies of power, Blizek & Desmarais, *op.cit*., p. 23.

institutional functionaries to manipulate and exploit the community of believers, is recognized as its negative element[31].

Cinematic criticism of the religious institution does not exclude, of course, its advanced version: the Monastery of repentance. The gap found here is even greater, as the real needs of the subjects –the need for understanding, for mercy, for inclusion– are sacrificed on the altar of inhumane moral "perfectionism". Extending the reasoning of the two scholars, we would suggest in this context Peter Mullan's film *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) as an excellent representative sample of this inhumanity, which denounces the use of repentance as a medium and its transformation into an authoritarian mechanism for crushing the personality of "sinful" women, in the name of their salvation ("I torture you, to save you"). John Patrick Shanley's film *Doubt* (2008) takes to an even more "existential" level the syndromes of sadism, persecution mania and suspicion fostered by worldly monastic asceticism, since it insists on placing ascetic virginity in higher regard than even the all-encompassing evangelical virtues: love, generosity and charity. It is, indeed, characteristic that in Stephen Frears' film *Philomena* (2013), the moral advantage of virginal devotion makes such absolute claims that it reaches the point of literally claiming the unaccountable: the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary turn their convent into a profitable business of fostering illegitimate children into wealthy American families, taking it for granted that no secular court has jurisdiction over such a practice ("the Lord Jesus Christ will judge me, and not men like you!", angrily replies the abbess of the convent, Sister Hildegarde, to the journalist Martin Sixsmith)[32].

If, nevertheless, the gap between the ecclesiastical institution and the community of believers often proves to be unbridgeable, it is because the virus of religious hypocrisy does not remain encapsulated in the former, but usually spreads and infects the latter. Reasons of scientific integrity therefore compel us to admit that, contrary to what Blizek and Desmarais' study suggests, the institution's effort to comprehend the needs of the

31. Blizek & Desmarais, *op.cit.*, p. 24.
32. *Philomena*, 01:27:02 – 01:27:06.

community and help it is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the cure of religious hypocrisy; the community also needs to live up to the moral demands of its faith. For this reason, we believe that a cinematic criticism of religion cannot be considered complete if it does not take into account specific contributions, which are made against sanctimony and fanaticism not only of the institutional representatives of religion but also of its lay members. We could, first of all, set as the starting point of this criticism a program of "enlightening" leading moments of Christian history. For example, Alejandro Amenábar's film *Agora* (2009) invokes the example of the 4th-century Church of Alexandria to demonstrate that the "miracle" of the Christianization of the Roman Empire was largely founded on phenomena of fanaticism, violence and ruthless political opportunism on the part of the entire Church – and not individually of its clergy. Similarly, in a modern cultural context, Nicholas Hytner's film *The Crucible* (1996) highlights with particular representational power the guiding role of religious hysteria, which indiscriminately gripped clergy and laity in the notorious Salem witch trials during the 17th century.

These are, indeed, pivotal historical examples which do not prevent us from observing contemporary transformations of religious hypocrisy in social contexts of less historical and cultural tension – but no less confusion. In a general sense, what we call "religious hypocrisy" is nothing more than the improvised patches that we badly affix to the holes in the moral canvas of our religion, when the latter fails to provide adequate answers to fundamental moral, social and political questions relating to its contemporary historical context. Behind every act of religious hypocrisy, therefore, we have to guess a question that our religion has answered inadequately or fragmentarily, a moral, social or political problem that has been dealt with poorly, an agenda that has never been addressed – or has not been fully addressed – during our theological discussions. Hence dark Christian comedies like Brian Dannelly's *Saved!* (2004) and Karen Maine's *Yes, God, Yes* (2019) trace religious hypocrisy to precisely such neuralgic agendas: queer sexuality, "unwanted" pregnancy, freedom of erotic expression and masturbation. Ulrich Seidl's film *Paradise: Faith* (2012) locates the field of hypocrisy in the frequently observed deadly proximity of fervent religious faith

to mental disorder, marital estrangement, romantic frustration, or to the desperate attempt to find a meaning in life – even if that meaning is the declaration of an informal crusade for the Roman Catholic "re-evangelization" of Austria[33]. For its part, Paul Schrader's film *First Reformed* (2017) locates the field of hypocrisy in the naïve sentimentality of "charismatic" religiosity and the Church's rudimentary (to the point of non-existent) concern for the catastrophic ecological scenarios portended by climate change.

From the above sample of films we can draw the conclusion that cinema has recorded in its history a multifarious, expansive and particularly apt criticism, which makes religion much more visible and culturally present than this particular criticism would be willing to admit. In this sense, we perhaps better understand our initial position that the cinematic criticism of religion denies the latter only to affirm it –*ex contrario* – twice. Nothing proves more convincingly how alive religion remains in the modern world than the breadth and quality of its criticism.

2.3. *Magnus Catechismus Spectaculi* – or: when cinema catechizes

Let us now move on to the third way of cinematic diffusion of religion, which should be considered the most obvious: the direct promotion of religion. This is accomplished through: a. the promotion of appropriate religious attitudes, perceptions and practices, or b. the dramatization of specific sacred narratives and biographies. Oddly enough, when it comes to (a), Blizek and Desmarais refer again to two "secular" films: Robert Zemeckis' *Contact* (1997) and Tim Robbins' *Dead Man Walking* (1995). In the first, they see an interesting effort to investigate the limits of scientific positivism, but also the experiential content of religious faith[34]. In the second, they find a convincing representation of the dual

33. The film's main character, Anna Maria, is a member of a prayer group that is trying to achieve this very goal; see *Paradise: Faith*, 00:24:45 – 00:26:02.

34. As Blizek and Desmarais point out, the protagonist of the film *Contact*, Ellie Arroway, does not believe in God because she is convinced that there is no empirical evidence for His existence. Because of her beliefs she is not allowed to travel in space, even though she was the first to discover strong evidence of the existence of extraterrestrial intelligent

content of Christian forgiveness: the desire to be forgiven and the need to forgive[35]. Regarding (b), the two scholars refer to the film *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) by Mel Gibson. Despite the (unjust) criticism leveled at it for antisemitism and a non-faithful rendering of the biblical text, this film is praised as a serious theological reflection on the Passion[36]. We would say that this is perhaps the first serious attempt at a cinematic *theologia crucis*, which is the opposite of the pompous and moralistic sentimentality of many films with a similar theme, including Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977).

Once again, however, we fear that the rudimentary examples of the two scholars are not sufficient to illustrate the overtly catechetical role that cinema often assumes. In a previous context[37], we saw that a secular script can be a pretext for telling a religious story in a different way; we would like to add at this point that in an equal number of cases this pretext is negated, in the sense that cinema openly assumes a preaching and catechetical role. Leaving aside a series of film adaptations of Gospel episodes with a clear catechetical intent[38], it would perhaps be appropriate to mention here the film *Risen* (2016) by Kevin Reynolds. As Catholic Bishop Robert Barron rightly observes, the originality of this film lies in the fact that it observes the Resurrection through the eyes of a Roman

life. Circumstances change, however, and Arroway travels into space, where she comes into contact with intelligent life [among other things, she is given the opportunity to have a heart-to-heart conversation with her long-dead father]. But when Arroway returns to Earth, she cannot provide any empirical evidence for what she saw. *She* is now a believer – but her faith is not based on evidence that she can share with others. See Blizek & Desmarais, *op.cit*., p. 25.

35. According to Blizek and Desmarais, in *Dead Man Walking*, the first request is made by Matthew Poncelet, a racist, white prisoner, who has been sentenced to death for the murder of a teenager and the rape and murder of his girlfriend. The second request is made by the parents of the murdered teenagers – who finally forgive the unforgivable. See, Blizek & Desmarais, *op.cit*., p. 26.

36. Blizek & Desmarais, *op.cit*., p. 27.

37. See above, § 2.1.

38. See, for example, the films *The Nativity Story* (2006) by Catherine Hardwicke, *The Bible* (2013) by R. Downey and M. Burnett, and *The Young Messiah* (2016) by Cyrus Nowrasteh. These films are added to the well-known multitude of classic Hollywood religious films, which the Greek television audience has the special pleasure of watching every Easter, during Holy Week.

official who is outside the circle of Christ's disciples – and therefore, through a theological perspective which defends the Resurrection not merely as a "subjective" experience of the members of that circle, but as an objective historical event[39]. Jon Purdy's film *Joshua* (2002) pushes the catechetical ambitions of cinema even further, turning an eschatological narrative of ineffable mystical depth, like the Second Coming, into a moralistic pretext: Jesus visits as a stranger a small American village and radically changes the lives of its inhabitants, helping to rebuild the local Baptist Church. A closer look at the history of cinema could, however, show us that similar attempts at catechetical "domestication" of the end times –albeit in much more dramatic tones– are already familiar from supernatural horror films: we only need to recall the tetralogy *The Omen*[40], as well as a host of exorcism films[41]. Despite their terrifying scenes and grotesque decoration, these films should be considered catechetical, not only because they portray the Christian God as the ultimate regulator and judge of the worldly drama, but also because they vividly shape the Christian conception of History, giving rationality, coherence, and meaning to even its most chaotic ("demonic") elements.

Preaching and catechetical norms are also applied in the case of non-Christian sacred narratives. Watching, for example, Jean-Jacques Annaud's film *Seven Years in Tibet* (1997), it is hard not to notice that it is imbued with an ambition to introduce the Western audience to "exotic" Tibetan Buddhism ("Even in our wretched condition, we feel the attraction of the holy city of Tibet", says the film's protagonist Heinrich Harrer)[42]. Only six years later, what starts as a pretext or a

39. "Bishop Barron on *Risen*" [www.youtube.com/watch?v=z7I32vUweo4&ab_channel=BishopRobertBarron]. We are particularly looking forward to Mel Gibson's film *Resurrection* (2024), in order to contrast his theological version of the Resurrection with that of Reynolds and to reflect more broadly on the prospects and limits of cinema's attempt to dramatize the eminently non-spectacular event of the Gospel narrative, which is the Resurrection.

40. *The Omen* (1976), by Richard Donner; *Omen II: Damien* (1978), by Don Taylor; *Omen III: The Final Conflict* (1981), by Graham Baker; *Omen IV: The Awakening* (1991), by Jorge Montesi and Dominique Othenin-Girard.

41. For an extensive theological and religious analysis of exorcism films, see Oulis, *Ὁ Διάβολος στὸ Celluloid*, *op.cit*., pp. 72-222.

42. *Seven Years in Tibet*, 00:54:14 – 00:54:21.

hint in the cinema of Annaud, is fully realized in the cinema of Kim Ki-duk. The film *Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring* (2003), not only does not hide its catechetical goal, but is directed with the programmatic ambition to be a modern parable on the fundamental Buddhist concepts of life-as-suffering, the eternal recycling of the Self (*saṃsāra*), and the emptiness of mundane forms (*śūnyatā*). The *Star War* film franchise and the tetralogy *The Matrix* serve a similar purpose, except that their script does not draw exclusively from one religious tradition, but it is a masterful bricolage of various religious ideas and narratives[43]. The same is true in the case of the spectacular blockbusters *Avatar* (2009) and *Avatar: The Way of Water* (2022). Their director, James Cameron, states in a series of interviews that through this franchise he wanted, on the one hand, to communicate his environmental concerns globally and, on the other, to make his films a kind of *iconic* protest against the ecological abuses and evils of neoliberal techno-capitalism. Hence their roots in neo-pagan motifs, such as the Mother-Goddess (*Eywa*), the energy bond between beings (*tsaheylu*), the spirituality of the body (*corpo-spirituality*) and the sanctity of Nature as an antidote to the temptation of its technocratic exploitation.

We, therefore, observe that old and new sacred narratives are diffused into and through cinema, not incidentally, but in a programmatic and constitutional way – as is also the case with sacred biographies, as well as individual religious attitudes, perceptions and practices. One can hardly overlook, for example, the catechetical scope of films that undertake to narrate the life and work of prominent religious personalities. These films hold the position of an informal cinematic "synaxarion", in the sense that they are the only point of contact of younger generations in particular with the hagiological tradition of the religion to which they belong[44]. At the same time, however, we could not overlook the

43. For the religious references of the film *Star Wars*, see Partridge, *op.cit*., p. 139. For the religious references of the tetralogy *The Matrix*, see Oulis, *Ἡ Εὐδαιμονία τῆς Ἄγνοιας*, *op.cit*., p. 37, n. 1.

44. See, for example, the following hagiological contributions of cinema: 1. Christian: *Francesco* (1989) by Liliana Cavani, about St. Francis of Assisi. *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (1999) by Luc Besson, about St. Joan of Arc. *Vision* (2009) by Margarethe von Trotta, about St. Hildegard of Bingen. *Man of God* (2021) by Yelena Popovic, about

contribution of cinema to the promotion of "appropriate" religious perceptions and practices, through which the subjects are encouraged to a deeper and more meaningful expression of their faith. Tom Shadyac's film *Bruce Almighty* (2003), for example, demystifies the concept of divine "omnipotence", showing that it creates more problems than it solves, and contrasts it with the virtues of humility, selflessness and social giving, which it champions as the only "authentic" fruits of the Christian faith. Randall Wallace's film *Heaven is for Real* (2014) invokes the narrative of near-death experiences, in order to advocate anew the acceptance of the Kingdom of God by children: during a critical surgery, four-year-old Colt Burton "has" a kind of out-of-body experience, which allows him to see Heaven. Here, as in similar Christian dramas (we refer to the films *Miracles from Heaven* (2026) by Patricia Riggen, and *The Girl Who Believes in Miracles* (2021) by Richard Correll), we see that cinema aspires to affirm the historical realism of the Christian faith, openly preaching the possibility (and "objectivity") of the miracle. At the same time, cinema assumes the role of an official preacher of that trend of charismatic religiosity, which goes by the name of "healing through faith": "All you have to do is believe and pray to God, and He will help you", says little Sara Hopkins in cheerful catechetical tone[45].

Of course, we know that often people believe and pray to God, but He does not help. This does little to discourage the catechetical ambitions of cinema; it merely turns them towards deeper catechisms and more comprehensive sermons, the apprehension of which requires not only a certain theological and philosophical background, but also a greater familiarity of the spectator with symbolic thought. The films *Adam's Apples* (2005) by Anders Thomas Jensen and *The Tree of Life* (2011)

St. Nectarios of Aegina. 2. Islamic: *Uwais al Qorni* (2013) by Amir Kaidel, about the homonymous saint and friend of the Prophet. *Yunus Emre: The Voice of Love* (2014) and *Somuncu Baba* (2016) by Kürsat Kizbaz, about the homonymous Sufi saints. 3. Hindu: *Sant Tucaram* (1936), by Vishnupant Govind Damle, about Bhakti saint Tucaram. *Kabirdas* (2003) by Raju V. V., about saint Kabir Das of Varanasi. 4. Buddhist: *Milarepa* (2006) by Neten Chokling, about the homonymous Tibetan yogi. *Zen* (2009) by Banmei Takahashi, about the Japanese Buddhist Dōgen Zenji.

45. *The Girl Who Believes in Miracles*, 01:30:21 – 01:30:28.

by Terrence Malick would seem to fall into this exact category, as they oppose to the naïve theological positivism of Christian dramas a genuinely "negative" search for God. With regard to the external form, both films constitute an interpretive commentary on the book of *Job*; with regard to the content, however, it would perhaps be more correct to treat them as a cinematic *judicium dei* (*θεοδικία*), confronting the scandalous question of the "suffering innocent" and, by extension, of the purpose which could justify the presence of Evil before God. Jensen's film in particular can be seen as an excellent "Kierkegaardian" parable on the "absurdity" of belief in a benevolent Divine Providence, as well as on the power of that belief to sacrificially shoulder the responsibility for Evil, to transform it inconspicuously into goodness and, in this way, to prevent the complete demonic alteration of the world – that is, its total transformation into Hell.

So it must be clear by now that cinema, besides alluding or judging religion, at the same time professes and preaches it openly. To put it another way, we would say that in cinema religion becomes not only a game of symbol interpretation or an occasion for social complaint, but also an *object of catechism*. We are even justified in claiming that, in relation to traditional forms of catechism, cinema's catechism proves to be much more informed and comprehensive, as it includes religious motifs and sacred narratives of all shades, of all degrees of complexity and for all tastes.

2.4. *Ethica ut Via Regia Religionis* – or: when cinema promotes moral values

It remains to explore the fourth and final way of cinematic diffusion of religion, which is the promotion of certain cultural values, "friendly" to religion – and vice versa: the discouragement of cultural values that hardly conform to it. Blizek and Desmarais point out that most religions embrace some values and discourage others; that sometimes the tenets of a religion are consistent with popular cultural values, and sometimes they do not fall in line with them. They go on to point out that when there is a conflict between religious and popular cultural values, it is

important for religions to reveal the latter, mainly because they exert a special influence on people – often without them realizing it[46].

This means that the fourth way of cinematic diffusion of religion can be defined as that of *critique of dominant cultural values*. It is certainly an indirect way, since it does not focus primarily on religion; however, in judging the dominant values of a culture, cinema indicates (or at least seriously hints) which of them can be included in religious contexts (and which cannot), which may enrich or sensitize a religious consciousness (and which may not), which are "friendly" to religion (and which are not). To put it differently, by judging dominant cultural values, cinema elevates morality to the status of royal road (*via regia*) to religion, in so far as it promotes certain moral ideas over others, and encourages people to live by them.

Such a way of understanding, allows us to realize that the values promoted by "revenge" or "slasher" movies, for example, cannot claim a place in any religious morality. When Michael Corleone confesses as the godfather at his nephew's baptism that he "renounces Satan", while his executioners are murdering the Corleone family's main rivals in cold blood, we can be sure that his behavior is not Christian (and that, in fact, he is at this very moment being "baptized" a godfather of the mafia)[47]. The four friends who gather to eat themselves to death in Marco Ferreri's brilliant social satire *La grande abbuffata* (1973) are certainly not in touch, in any way, with the austere and ascetic morality that most religions wish to promote. And we certainly do not think that there is any point of convergence between the adventurous morality of the film *The Hateful Eight*[48] or the nihilistic morality of the film *Joker*[49] and the morality of any religion.

But this is not the case with a film like Lawrence Kasdan's *Grand Canyon* (1991). Here the humanity and solidarity shown by the stranger or the passer-by unknown to us are elevated to the status of virtues

46. Blizek & Desmarais, *op.cit*., p. 28.
47. The classic scene, in *The Godfather* (1972), by Francis Ford Coppola, 02:36:30-02:41:29.
48. Directed by Quentin Tarantino in 2015.
49. Directed by Todd Phillips in 2019.

that can save the world (in this context, the Canyon is an allegorical representation of the kindness that manages to unify our insignificant and fragmentary lives in a Big Picture). In the film *Breaking the Waves* (1996) by Lars von Trier, the "folly" of Bess's love for her husband Jan is elevated to being a healing and miraculous power, which "resurrects" the latter's paralyzed body, breaking nay conventional measure of secular as well as "religious" morality. In this sense, the film is not only a straightforward defense of "God's eternal disobedience" –that is, His resistance to any attempt at His institutional containment– but also a defense of love against any attempt to entrench it "morally". In Gabriele Muccino's – otherwise "secular"– film *Seven Pounds* (2008), we find perhaps the boldest defense of the idea that guilt is not a "negative" emotion, but rather the womb from which the very possibility of repentance spurts –that is, the desire to make to make amends for the Evil we have committed. Although there is nothing to suggest that the main character, Tim/Ben Thomas, has any connection with religion, yet the acts of self-sacrificing charity and love in which his sincere repentance pours out, we believe do not fall short compared to a "religious" conception and execution of them. In a similar way, we find it difficult to think of a more poignant cinematic depiction of the spirit of Christian forgiveness than Jonathan Teplitzky's *The Railway Man* (2013) and Denis Villeneuve's *Incendies* (2010). In the first case, forgiveness comes as a consequence of sincere and confessed repentance on the part of the offender, but also as a desire to forget the trauma and quench the hatred that caused it, both on the part of the offender and on the part of the victim[50]. In the second case, forgiveness spurts from "maniacal" maternal love, which manages to fit into its womb –as another Virgin– the pain of civil war that "cannot be contained" and a horrible physical torture.

Thus coming full circle, our analysis returns enriched to its original position, in order to argue in a different way that "secular" films are capable to serve at the same time religious values; with the difference

50. "I don't want to relive that day", says Takashi Nagase. "Me neither", replies Eric Lomax adding immediately afterwards: "At some time hating has to stop". See, *The Railway Man*, 01:46:16 – 01:46:56.

that we do not now specifically need a "religious" interpretation, which will undertake to integrate the "religious" into the "secular", because at the level of the actualization of values –and not merely their theoretical conception– we consider these two fields to *overlap*: they may start from different worldview and symbolic starting point, but in practice they result in the same moral attitudes and promote the same moral ideals, just with a different coating. To put it simply, this means that whether we look at it from a "religious" or "secular" perspective, forgiveness in action is always forgiveness; whether we look at them from a "religious" or "secular" perspective, kindness and solidarity in action are always kindness and solidarity. This is why we believe that, by promoting certain "high" cultural values and rejecting others, cinema becomes once again a mechanism for the diffusion of religion, a factor for the cultural reproduction of its values and a field of constant reflection on the relations that can be woven between the "sacred" and the "profane", the "religious" and the "secular".

But let us recapitulate by closing our whole reasoning, in order to formulate with greater clarity the typology of the ways of cinematic diffusion of religion.

3. Provisional Conclusions

In the context of present study, we initially referred to Thomas Luckmann's book *The Invisible Religion*, in order to trace the cultural transformations through which religion regained its social visibility in the Western world despite its institutional crisis. By citing five illustrative examples, we have tried to show that this new social visibility is inextricably linked with processes of commercialization and spectacularization (*θεαματικοποίηση*) of religion –processes that constitute indicators of global cultural diffusion of diverse religious attitudes and trends, beliefs, values, narratives, sacred worlds and symbols. If our study has focused specifically on the cinematic diffusion of all of the above, it is because we believe that cinema retains a double privilege over other forms of popular entertainment: a. the density and brevity of its narrative, and b. the sociality and collectivity of its enjoyment.

Utilizing the typology of the relations between religion and cinema, proposed by William Blizek and Michele Desmarais, we then attempted to look into the more specific ways in which the diffusion of religion through cinema takes place. In the course of the development of our arguments, we had the opportunity to indicate certain gaps in the epistemological basis of the project of the two scholars, as well as in the cinematic examples they cite. Where this was possible, we have tried to fill in these gaps and update our film references, in order to defend the validity of their basic typology – which we consider otherwise valid and enlightening.

2. At first glance, the contribution of "secular" films to the cinematic diffusion of religion seems negligible. We have seen, however, that the application of religious ideas and narratives to the analysis and interpretation of certain films may reveal to us that they incorporate a multitude of religious motifs – albeit in a covert, indirect or suggestive way. A religious interpretation of secular cinema is therefore epistemologically legitimate, to the extent that it makes evident the dialectic between the "religious" and the "secular" and indicates how often the one attends and alludes to the other, interprets the other, emerges as a particular "moment" of the other. By saying this, we do not naturally mean that a religious interpretation can integrate religion everywhere and always; but it can enrich our cinematic understanding with unexpected insights and show us that narrowing our view in the name of an interpretative "orthodoxy" can only be counterproductive for the entire interpretative process.

3. If it is true, however, that the sacred is a moment of the profane and that a religious narrative can be hidden behind a "secular" script, then it is also true that religion can be affirmed even through its criticism. It is not arbitrary to argue that a cinematic criticism of religion discredits the latter on one level, but at the same time affirms it on the contrary on another – just as an atheistic criticism of religion often proves more passionate and obsessive about religion than faith itself. We have seen that in many cases cinema judges precisely those "pathological" aspects of religion which, on the one hand, have shown remarkable resilience over time and, on the other, concern its entire social body – and not

just its "institutional" entity. In doing so, it is obvious that cinema is not limited to the role of a simple "rectifier" of religion, but also dictates a more comprehensive attitude towards it. Invoking Edgar Morin's apt wording, we might conclude that cinematic criticism of religion contributes to its further cultural diffusion, because it manages to keep religion alive, even in the very "heat of its destruction"[51].

4. It should nevertheless be considered obvious that the cinematic diffusion of religion does not follow only circuitous paths; alongside or complementary to them, cinema promotes religion in a direct and straightforward way, taking on the role of preacher and catechist. Cinema conveys religions, old and new, in their entirety or in the elements of which they are composed: religions of various philosophical, theological and religious orientations, for all audiences, demands and tastes. At the same time, cinema conveys appropriate religious attitudes, perceptions and practices, which act as factors in strengthening the faith of the subjects and encouraging them to a deeper and more meaningful fulfillment of this faith.

5. Is there a point of convergence between religious and cultural values? Is it legitimate for someone to claim that, to the extent that we are able to identify such a point, the promotion of one automatically implies the promotion of the other? Our analysis answered the above questions in the affirmative, not because it wishes to dissolve religious values into cultural ones, as a sugar cube dissolves into liquid, nor because it is incapable of perceiving the tension that often arises between these two fields. Even a first-year theology student knows that a religion, which is completely assimilated by its cultural environment, is nothing more than cultural "folklore". We believe, however, that at the level of *fulfillment* there is indeed a possibility of osmosis and coexistence of at least certain cultural values and certain religious values, a fact which allows cinema, through the promotion of the former, to indirectly promote the latter – and therefore religion itself. To put it another way, by judging the dominant cultural values and encouraging some over others, cinema

51. Cf. E. Morin, *Τὰ Δαιμόνιά μου*, transl. D. Dimoulas, Ekdoseis tou 21ou, Athens 1999, p. 93.

"surreptitiously" reintroduces religion into the debate about values, as it indirectly indicates which of these values are accommodated within religion, are promoted through it and can be a kind of "royal road" to it and which are not.

6. Interpretive diffusion of religion; critical diffusion of religion; catechetical diffusion of religion; diffusion of religion through values. Our study would like to propose this basic typology as a perceptual schema, which allows us to understand the ways in which cinema today makes religion socially and culturally visible. These ways are not mutually exclusive, but can coexist in all possible combinations – and it is precisely the fact that they complement each other which makes the study of the relations between religion and cinema such an interesting, but also such a demanding task.

We would venture to add, however, that the above typology is at the same time an epistemological safety valve against those new-fangled theological "analyses", which speak of cinema with sufficient literary grace and emotion, but without a clear epistemology and theoretical starting points, without having incorporated counter-argument and critique, without revealing their political agenda and without ever formulating the research questions they are supposed to answer. In other words, the typology we propose here defends the idea that a serious theological analysis of cinema cannot simply be an exercise in literary style, but must be understood primarily as a difficult theoretical enterprise, which serves a crucial stake: the cultural visibility of religions, that is, their potential to be road signs to the Continent of a meaning –or a truth– for the contemporary "postmodern" world[52].

52. We borrow the expression "continent of meaning" from C. Geertz, *Ἡ Ἑρμηνεία τῶν Πολιτισμῶν*, transl. Th. Papadellis, Alexandreia Publications, Athens 2003, p. 31.