

Part 5 - Afterword: Context and Applications

5. Afterword: Context and Applications

One question that always dogs essays like these is the dreaded “So what?” What practical good does such a reading of an American television show do? Allow me, therefore, to draw back the curtain on some of the motivations behind the essay above as they apply to our understanding of evil. This paper serves two purposes: first, to underline the necessity of critical reflection in the consumption and reception of popular culture; and second, to explore the displacement of religious discourse on evil in a secularized environment.

A. Popular Culture, Reflection, and the Visceral

First, concerning critical reflection and popular culture . . . One of the dangers attending popular performances like *24* is that the visceral always threatens to trump reflection on evil. This happens in two ways. One is that the show (or movie or video) uses the shock of evil to turn popular entertainment into a sort of amusement park thrill ride. Each particular act of evil then functions as a sort of commentary on the performance as a whole, in essence saying: “Hang on, kids! This is going to be *wild!* Wheeee!” In other words, the shock-value of these acts consigns the show to a genre where reflection is assumed to be unnecessary. It’s a show to be bathed in, not thought about.

The second way the visceral trumps the reflective is in the presence of the hero. The popular hero is generically trustworthy – he is the good guy by definition.¹⁹ The evil that he might do along the way is not worthy of reflection compared to the admirable qualities immediately displayed by the hero (bravery, perseverance, physical prowess, and so on). Moral reflection upon evil is rendered unnecessary by fiat, by dint of the personality and skill-set of the hero. The hero becomes a savior who need not be questioned (more on that later).

This paper then acts as a corrective reading (and perhaps as a model for other readings). The type of reading recommended here allows evil to assume a voice, a specific gravity that would allow it to be reflectively weighed and sifted. Such readings always feel like swimming upstream and “spoiling the fun” of this kind of popular entertainment, but I believe it is all the more necessary. Without reflection, an attitude of acceptance and resignation with regard to evil slowly becomes the norm. The influence of such popular discourses of evil flies in under our radar, so to speak.

B. The Displacement of Religious Discourse on Evil

The second concern driving this paper (though kept much more in the background) is the social scientific debate over secularization, and specifically as it applies to how we weigh evil in the “secular” West.²⁰ Religion has been the traditional carrier of moral discourse in the West. That is, until relatively recently in human history. Beginning in the eighteenth century, an influential group of cultural and intellectual elites made a sustained effort to discredit religious discourse as an effective carrier of moral or metaphysical truth. That effort, combined with certain changes in key social structures during and after the Industrial Revolution, have attenuated traditional religions’ claim to speak Truth (with a capital “T”) on matters of morality, epistemology, or ontology. Sociologists of religion call this coupling of elite discourse and social change “secularization.”

All alike agree that something indeed has happened, that the texture of life *is* different since the onset of modernity in the West. But what secularization *means* and to what extent religion itself is truly impaired is by no means agreed upon.²¹ This paper is meant to be an indirect contribution to that debate, namely, that even though traditional religion has in some respects lost its social legitimacy as a carrier of moral and metaphysical truth, much of the slack has been picked up by

popular cultural discourses. In other words, it seems clear to me as a student of popular culture that secularization has not meant a decline in religion (as Steven Bruce and the “classical” theorists would have it). Rather, secularization has produced a religious *displacement*, a reorganization of the sacred arena in which discourse about evil is produced.

So my comparison of Jack with Jesus wasn’t (only) a bit of cheek – it was meant very seriously. The dynamics of *24*, by trumping traditional religious moral reflection with action and heroism *themselves take on a religious (or quasi-religious) weight*, complete with their own rituals, myths and savior figure.²² Such entertainments can have that sort of influence (with specific political consequences) without having to be taken seriously as religion. After all, it’s only a television show. But surreptitiously, something sacred is slipped in, something numinous that excuses the evils of torture, murder, or what have you. The sacred in *24* is “family” and “national security.” In other shows, it might be “romantic love” or “success,” or whatever. In this respect, I feel that the discourse of popular culture is the great overlooked wildcard with respect to debates on civil religion, and the fate of religion in general in the “secular” West.

As a way of understanding evil, I myself vastly prefer the grounded discourse offered by traditional religions such as Christianity.²³ Without such rooted reflection, moral discourse soon becomes weightless, nothing more than strongly felt sentiments – umbrage without ballast (and therefore, more easy to manipulate). But such a shift in perspectives on evil is indeed underway, and has been for some time. To my mind, this means that the kind of reflective reading of popular discourses on evil is all the more timely, all the more exigent. We need to know the lay of the land, the way the terrain of evil is being changed by this popular discourse. Otherwise, friends, you don’t know Jack.

Notes from this page

¹⁹ I am using the masculine hero here as an example. There are examples of this sort of undermining of reflection with female heroines (the film version of the Lara Croft character would be one such example). But typically this visceral role is filled by male characters. The typical heroine is configured very differently in Western popular discourse.

²⁰ I would argue that religion has been the main carrier of moral discourse not only in the West, but the world over. But my focus here is how we evaluate evil in the West.

²¹ Opinions over how best to understand secularization vary greatly. After the 1980s and 90s, when religion became once again a very public presence in various parts of the world, few of the “classical” secularization theorists remain. But those who do (such as Steven Bruce) are vocal. See Steven Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), and *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). Others critique the notion of classic version of secularization as overly simplistic. José Cassanova, for example, believes it is crucial to differentiate between secularization as social structural differentiation (which is indisputable) and secularization as religious decline (which is very disputable). See José Cassanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Others, such as Danièle Hervieu-Léger, see secularization as a sort of social amnesia that breaks the chain of tradition (but religion has a way of repairing those chains in creative ways). See Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, translated by Simon Lee (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000). In one case, Peter Berger, a notable theorist for the classical secularization view, reversed himself after the notable resurgences of religion in the 1980s and 1990s. See Peter Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, edited by Peter Berger (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999). For a helpful synopsis on the debate, see David Lyon, “Faith’s Fate,” chapter in *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000).

²² This is also one of the reasons why I prefer receptor-oriented readings of popular texts over sender-oriented readings. In cultural studies, sender-oriented readings tend to focus on how texts (such as TV shows) manipulate passive readers (or viewers). Receptor-oriented hermeneutics (like Ricoeur’s) tend rather to focus on the active appropriation of texts by readers, that is, how readers use texts to make meaning (in this case, meaningful perspectives about evil). I would argue that this activity of meaning making (or, more precisely, meaning re-making) lies at the heart of religion.

²³ Further, I would argue that moral discourse must assume a personal absolute (that is, the type of God worshipped in Christianity) if it is not to dissolve into relativism or abstraction. But arguing that in detail would, I am afraid, take us too far afield at present.

Part 6 - Bibliography

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