Imaging Religion in Film

New Approaches to Religion and Power

Series editor: Joerg Rieger

While the relationship of religion and power is a perennial topic, it only continues to grow in importance and scope in our increasingly globalized and diverse world. Religion, on a global scale, has openly joined power struggles, often in support of the powers that be. But at the same time, religion has made major contributions to resistance movements. In this context, current methods in the study of religion and theology have created a deeper awareness of the issue of power: Critical theory, cultural studies, postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, feminist theory, critical race theory, and working class studies are contributing to a new quality of study in the field. This series is a place for both studies of particular problems in the relation of religion and power as well as for more general interpretations of this relation. It undergirds the growing recognition that religion can no longer be studied without the study of power.

Series editor:
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M. Gail Hamner

Imaging Religion in Film
The Politics of Nostalgia

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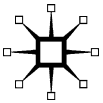

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This book is dedicated to my children:
Elena Claire Bingham Seth Daniel Bingham

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Preface: Film at the Intersection of Religion and Power

> In pedagogical terms, an ethical discourse needs to regard the relations of power, subject positions, and social practices it activates. This is an ethics of neither essentialism nor relativism.
>
> —Henry Giroux

This is an unusual book about religion and film. Instead of diving immediately into recent blockbusters that image religious rituals, traditions, or characters, I argue that the interpretation of religion and film requires examination of the assumptions and connotations of "religion," both in terms of its conceptual referents and in terms of its discursive (or disciplinary) (dis)connections to film studies. The question of how to interpret religion in film thus relies on the prior question of how to work in the subfield of religion and film. This interdisciplinary task involves a set of difficult hermeneutic maneuvers and compromises, which typically are occluded by that little word, "and," because the discourses of religion studies and film studies assume fundamentally different ways of dealing with what Giroux calls "the relations of power, subject positions, and social practices." A similar difficult dynamic shapes the scholarly subfields of "religion and popular culture," "religion and critical theory," and "religion and feminist theory." In each case, the historical inertia of "religious studies" as a rather tame and proper examination of people's beliefs and practices slams up against studies of how specific relations of power both constitute the "being" of subjects and groups and naturalize assumptions about who is sanctioned to have (much less discuss and analyze) beliefs and practices. Instead of facing these discursive contradictions head-on, research in these subfields of religious studies tends to be described and conducted in one of two ways, as if the only salient choices were ones of

a simple and neutral methodology. On the one hand, scholars work with an essentialist or structuralist approach that assumes a real or "strategic" ability to capture the two terms transparently. On the other hand, scholars deploy deconstructivist approaches that articulate and exploit the blurs and fissures within the operative concepts and as produced in and through their juxtaposition. This methodological divide occludes the fact that what is at stake is nothing less than the ethics and politics of interpretation and most particularly the role and place of the subject in practices of interpretation. To reverse Giroux's words in the epigraph, essentialism and relativism imply different ethics. Essentialism deploys an ethics of (strategic) universality, privileging stability and clarity over the messy movements and transformations that always can be lifted as "exceptions," while the ethics of deconstruction gives priority to semiotic mutations over the various inertial forces that do, materially, enact a stabilizing or reifying effect on meaning. As Giroux intimates, however, both essentialism and deconstruction fall short of the vital dynamics generally expected from the pedagogy of ethical discourse, precisely because they fail to situate these methodological tendencies squarely within "relations of power, subject positions, and social practices." In other words, these methodologies fall short of the politics they inevitably deploy.

This book responds to this "falling short" of politics by outlining a theory of interpreting religion and film that foregrounds the social power it involves. That is, the book attends to the ethicopolitical dimensions of subject formation and social practice within the imbricating hermeneutic of religion and film. To view film at the intersection of religion and power, then, is to read and experience film as enabling reflection on the ethics of subject formation. The book's most basic goal is to demonstrate how the viewing of film can function as an ethical "pedagogy of self."

Ethics is a contestable word in critical theory; in using it I am drawing on Foucault's trenchant analysis of how all discourse produces ethical effects. In his writings and lectures from the 1980s, Foucault analyzes ethics as the *rapport á soi,* or relation to oneself, and he sutures the contemporary discourse of ethics to the dynamics of biopower. In a useful mnemonic, Foucault quips that under monarchic sovereignty, the king's power over a subject's body would "let it live or make it die," whereas under modern conditions, in which sovereignty persists only in the diffuse and headless power of capital, the power of state apparatuses over a subject's body functions to "make it live or let it die." Hence, instead of worrying about the guillotine or the king's torture chambers, most of

today's citizen bodies worry about things such as vaccination records, flu shots, hydrofracking under their water reservoir, and whether the waste treatment plant will be built in their neighborhood.

Under conditions of biopower, the most seemingly banal rhetoric about the self, captured in phrases such as "getting back to oneself, freeing oneself, being oneself, being authentic, etcetera" ends up ensconcing the most important political discourse of all. As Foucault writes in his 1982 lectures on The Hermeneutic of the Subject, "to constitute an ethic of the self . . . may be an urgent, fundamental, and politically indispensable task, if it's true after all that there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself." Because U.S. society tends to privatize cultural experience and tends especially to view film as mere entertainment, it is worth underscoring Foucault's conclusion to this passage. He writes, "if we understand by governmentality a strategic field of power relations in their mobility, transformability, and reversibility, then I do not think that reflection on this notion of governmentality can avoid passing through, theoretically and practically, the element of a subject defined by the relationship of self to self." What I grasp from Foucault is this: the "ethic of the self" is not a concept with any essential meaning and not a concept that self-deconstructs in a Derridean autoimmunity. Rather, the ethic of the self moves along bodies but outside of ontology—like electrical current passing in a field around the wires that guide it. It means nothing; it performs everything. Thus, if we acknowledge with Stanley Cavell that film watching is a kind of pedagogy, and if we acknowledge with Giroux and Foucault that pedagogy must be anchored in an ethic of the self, then we can cut through the dilemma of the "and" in "religion and film" by crafting a pedagogical hermeneutic that pulls the empty banality of "finding oneself" (as Foucault says) into a robust critique of one's "subject positions, social practices, and relations of power" (as Giroux notes). This robust critique is what I mean by the shorthand, "pedagogy of self."

In attending to film at the intersection of religion and power, I have found that the conditions of postmodernity, or the post-postmodernity of globalization, repeatedly generate two affects: nostalgia and transcendence. I will leave the Introduction to expound on this assertion. Here let me summarize the three overarching arguments of this book, as it is situated in a series on Religion and Power:

1) that we cannot interpret religion and film without examining what counts as "religion" in terms of its conceptual referents and

in terms of its discursive (or disciplinary) (dis)connections to film studies;

2) that this imbricating hermeneutic of religion and film inevitably involves ethicopolitical dimensions that generate a pedagogy of self;
3) and finally, that the conditions of postmodernity or postsecularity position religion nostalgically but not reactively, so that a generative politics of nostalgia becomes a necessary component of the pedagogy of self.

Acknowledgements

This book grew up with my children. It was conceived when my daughter was six months old, just after I received my doctorate from Duke University. The Chair of Duke's Religion Department, Bruce Lawrence knew that the timing of my daughter's birth had led me to miss the fall job market, and so he graciously hired me to develop and teach two courses for Duke's undergraduate program. "Religion and Film" was one of those two courses. I had no idea that stepping into that syllabus would so thoroughly reposition my intellectual questions and guideposts. My doctoral work had focused on the American Pragmaticism of C. S. Peirce and the philosophical and political pursuit of how different concepts button down differently in different discourses. In general, this manner of framing my intellectual commitments has not changed, but the movement from narratives about Puritanism to filmic images of religion and transcendence has required all sorts of unforeseen reading, discussing, and self-interrogation. I wish here to thank Bruce Lawrence, again, for hiring me to develop and teach that course, and to thank all my Duke mentors who have remained stalwart supports over the years, especially Elizabeth A. Clark, Michael Hardt, and Kenneth Surin.

Once I moved to Syracuse University I found myself surrounded by another warm and supportive circle of colleagues. I wish to thank the Religion Department and the College of Arts and Sciences for granting me two sabbatical leaves, for patiently allowing me to develop and expand my teaching of religion and film, and for granting me various opportunities to present parts of this work. I wish especially to thank my tenure mentor and friends Patricia Cox Miller and David Miller for their quiet advice and firm friendship.

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My first year at Syracuse ended with the birth of my son, so I have had two children to raise during these years, with the help of my husband Dan, whose own career has kept him out of the house more than in it. I stand convinced that mother intellectuals remain the least visible and least theorized group of knowledge-producers in the U.S. academy. It will be familiar for me to say that the labors, distractions, and obligations of teaching, committee work, and graduate student mentoring have often kept me from being the parent I have wanted to be. Indeed, it is with words such as these that the authors of many acknowledgments turn to thank their spouses or partners for picking up that necessary parental, domestic labor, thereby allowing the author to carve out time to write on top of his or her university schedule. The thing is, I am both the author and the spouse/partner. Clearly the labors, distractions, and obligations of raising my children have kept me from finishing this book in a timely fashion, but within the complex and unforgiving algorithm of what administrators term "the work-life balance," with trumpet lessons, Pilates classes, and teacher appreciation lunches on the one hand, and job searches, graduate admissions, and graduate students' dissertation drafts on the other, writing a book frequently seemed an impossible and, frankly, narcissistic task.

The dearth of time for sustained thinking and writing produces a gasping desperation in mother intellectuals. Four people have been instrumental in helping me name and process this desperation. Two were my colleagues on the American Academy of Religion's standing committee on the Status of Women in the Profession: Judith Plaskow and Anne Joh. Judith and Anne, thank you for your words of advice, empathy, and support. Your very persistence in the academy recommits me to what is at stake in this knowledge-producing work. The other two persons are colleagues at Syracuse University. I want to thank from the bottom of my heart these two friends who have seen, known, and shared my struggle to be both a thinker and a mother on a weekly, if not daily basis: Zachary Braiterman and Claudia Klaver. Zak and Claudia, without your presence and words, shared over a hastily grabbed coffee or a cell phone conversation between errands, I would not be as sane as

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I dedicate this book to the two body-minds who have already been most influenced by it: to my children, Elena and Seth Bingham, who continue to teach and challenge me and who constantly remind me that loving relationships are constituted through the temporal, bodily dynamics of simple things, like a hug, roasting marshmallows, or a moonlight kayak.