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Manichaeism, Redemptive Violence and Hollywood Films: (Un)Making Violence through Media Literacy and Theological Reflection

Abstract

This essay identifies the Manichean worldview and redemptive violence prevalent in American films and explores some of the reasons these stories are told so often. Filmmaker interviews and commentaries reveal ways in which many American filmmakers feel compelled by film's a) time-limited b) character-driven c) visual and d) affective natures to change their source materials into stories of redemptive violence. In the process of exploring these themes, this essay models a method for leading groups in media literacy exercises and theological reflection that educators can use with all ages.

People do not learn world and life views in classrooms alone, but from a variety of sources including the mediated stories of a culture. For this reason, many religious educators and other cultural critics raise concerns over the way numerous American films resolve their narrative's conflicts through violent means, thereby perpetuating a myth of redemptive violence. Rather than simply identifying and condemning examples of this, this paper engages in a more sophisticated level of film analysis and theological reflection, identifying the Manichean worldview and redemptive violence prevalent in American films and suggests some possible reasons why this is so. By introducing the theological concepts and showing clips or stills from the films discussed in this article, religious educators can help their communities of faith engage in both media literacy reflection and theological reflection on violence.

MANICHAISM AND REDEMPTIVE VIOLENCE

One approach to understanding the nature of evil is a dualistic approach that views Good and Evil as two equal and competing forces that simultaneously control the universe. This approach is commonly associated with the dualistic religious philosophy known as Manichaeism, based on the belief system taught by the Persian prophet Manes in the third century C.E.

As a young adult, Augustine of Hippo held to Manichaeism. After his conversion to Christianity, however, Augustine became one of Manichaeism's most ardent critics (Augustine 2006). While Manichaeism has its own ancient traditions and its own nuances (see Coyle 2009), many philosophers and religious scholars today follow Augustine in referring to Manichaeism as a heresy and focusing on its potential liabilities. Critics of Manichaeism today argue that it opens itself up to some problematic philosophical and ethical implications as well. They argue that those who believe that there is a universal struggle between Good and Evil are tempted to see themselves as fighting on the side of good or the side of God while seeing their enemies as evil ones who are part of the universal force of Evil. As a result, say its critics, those who take a

Manichean approach are tempted to justify all sorts of methods to defeat those who they see as evil.

Political and social critics raise concerns about those who enter into wars with Manichaeian rhetoric or policies. Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, for example, Rodrigue Tremblay criticized what he saw as Manichaeian rhetoric and methodologies by leaders on both sides of the conflict. Tremblay writes,

For a manichaeian leader, debates and discussions are out. Any policy is justifiable, since the goal is to fight absolute Evil. It is all-out war, jihad, with the blessing of God or Allah. (Tremblay 2003, 7)

Tremblay continued,

When leaders succumb to a manichaeian classification of "Good" and "Evil," it is not only to demonize their enemy, although that can be a prerequisite before killing them or committing atrocities, but especially to assure themselves and their people that the enemy is 100% in the wrong and that they are 100% in the right. (Tremblay 2003, 6-7)

Tremblay expresses the concern, held by many, that a Manichaeian worldview can potentially lead people to justify any means, including violent means, to defeat their enemies and save their own communities.

Related to these issues, many scholars of religion today express unease over the pervasive belief that conflicts can be resolved and communities can be "saved" or "redeemed" through individual and communal acts of violence. Christian theologian and Bible scholar Walter Wink refers to this idea as the "Myth of Redemptive Violence." According to Wink, "This Myth of Redemptive Violence is the real myth of the modern world. It, and not Judaism or Christianity or Islam, is the dominant religion in our society today." (Wink 1998, 42) The ideology of redemptive violence stands in stark contrast to the teachings of many religious leaders of the past century, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Dalai Llama, who have drawn upon the sacred texts and teachings of their faith communities to teach their followers to seek nonviolent means for redemption, reconciliation and social change.

MANICHAEISM AND REDEMPTIVE VIOLENCE IN FICTION AND FILM

Works of fiction are sometimes criticized as being Manichean when they present one side, the heroes, as totally good and the other side, the villains, as totally evil. Film viewers can easily recognize the dynamics of Manichaeism and redemptive violence in action adventure films such as *Die Hard* (1988), *Ransom* (1996), and *Taken* (2008) in which the protagonist saves captives by using a gun to kill antagonists. Tales of redemptive violence are not only told in R-rated action adventure films; Disney films from the 1990s such as *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *The Lion King* (1994), and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996) perpetuate the myth as well. The films structure their narratives in ways that demonize the antagonists and making their deaths an emotionally satisfying resolution to the conflicts. The protagonists, then, must simply become determined enough (and righteously angry enough) to carry out acts of redemptive violence.

Tales of Manichaeism and redemptive violence are, of course, not limited to films. Stories in which the use of physical violence saves individuals and society go back to the days of ancient myths such as the *Enuma Elish* and permeate our culture through television, film, video games, comic books, and novels. Still, they are pervasively present in today's popular commercial films. Many filmmakers even make significant changes from their source material, whether it be a novel, comic books, or original screenplay, that turn their narratives into ones that reflect a Manichean view of the world and that resolve their conflicts through acts of redemptive violence. While all of the following examples include acts of violence in their original form, in the original source material redemption is not achieved by killing the enemy in an act of redemptive violence, but through subtly different means. When transmediated to film, however, the conflict is ultimately resolved only when the hero or heroes kill the enemy through an act of violence and proving themselves to be more powerful or more effective at killing than the evil ones.

Recent popular films such as *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part II* (2011), *Warm Bodies* (2013), and *Man of Steel* (2013) are all examples of this phenomenon. While the novels and comic books that these films are based upon contain much violence, in each case the authors of the source materials made sure that the climaxes of their books were affected through love, mercy or defensive acts rather than acts of violence intended to kill the enemy. In each case, however, the filmmakers made subtle but significant changes in which the heroes initiated forceful action to kill their enemies, suggesting that the conflict was ultimately resolved only through the hero's act of killing the enemy.

The special edition DVDs of two films, *Daredevil* (2003) and *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003) provide particularly compelling case studies in the way films are drawn towards stories of redemptive violence. The writer/director of *Daredevil* (2003) Mark Stephen Johnson was so unsatisfied with the theatrical release of his film that, in 2004, he released *Daredevil: Director's Cut* (2004) on DVD, which featured a cut of the film that more closely followed his original screenplay. This later version received much more positive reviews from both critics and fans than the theatrical release. What changed? In both versions of the film, Matt Murdock is a troubled man who works within the law as an attorney by day and who dons a red devil outfit and violently beats up villains at night. In Johnson's original screenplay for the film, however, Murdock pursues the case of murdered prostitute. It was this case, with a victim that no one else cared about, that ultimately brought down the Kingpin of crime. Johnson based his screenplay on Frank Miller's famous issues of the *Daredevil* comic book. Johnson appreciated how it was not Daredevil's actions as a violent vigilante, but Murdock's determination to work within the law to stand up for those without power that ultimately won the day. A featurette called "Giving the Devil His Due," available on the director's cut DVD, details how studio executives had Johnson remove virtually all the court scenes from the film and instead cut the film to emphasize Daredevil's acts of violence as what won the day. As a result, Johnson admits that the theatrical release of the film ended up looking like a violent revenge fantasy. As Johnson put it, "In the process of making a film you can forget what got you into making it in the first place."¹ In the case of the film *Daredevil*, Johnson's original vision offered a subtle critique of vigilantism and redemptive violence, but the theatrical release of the film actually celebrated those very things (see Dalton 2011a, 165-170).

¹ See the Featurette "Giving the Devil His Due," on the *Daredevil: Director's Cut* (2004) DVD.

Perhaps the most extensive case study for this phenomenon can be seen in Peter Jackson's adaption of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. Tolkien did not agree with the philosophy of Manichaeism (see Tolkien 1981, 243; Tolkien 1981, 121; and Shippey 2002,135). So, while Tolkien's novel is undeniably extremely violent, Tolkien took care to craft the two climaxes of his novel in such a way that the forces of grace, sacrifice, and providence saved the day rather than acts of violence in which the hero kills the villain (cf. Wood 2003, 101-102 and Dalton 2011b, 174-176). So, for example, in Tolkien's novel the One Ring is destroyed not by Frodo killing his nemesis Gollum, but precisely because Frodo showed grace and mercy to Gollum, sacrificed his own desires, and allowed providence to play its part (Tolkien 2002b, 957). In the same way, in the novel's other climactic scene, Aragorn does not win the day by stabbing and killing Sauron, but by sacrificing himself and his army to give Frodo a chance to destroy the Ring (Tolkien 2002b, 891). As the bonus feature "From Book to Script: Forging the Final Chapter" on the Extended Edition DVD of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003) reveals, however, Peter Jackson originally wrote and filmed these climaxes in a very different manner. In Jackson's originally filmed ending, Frodo ultimately murders Gollum by shoving him into the Crack of Doom. In the same way, in the climactic scene Jackson originally shot for Aragorn, Sauron takes on bodily form and Aragorn saves the day by stabbing him with a sword and killing him. While Jackson was talked into reshooting and revising most aspects of these climactic scenes, the fact that he was tempted to make such significant changes, especially given his stated intention to stay true to Tolkien's novels, is instructive.

These films, then, seem so focused on presenting a Manichean worldview and climaxes of redemptive violence that they change the stories from their source materials to make them so.

THE INFLUENCE OF FOUR CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMERCIAL FILM

What compelled these filmmakers to make these significant changes to such popular source material? Based upon the filmmakers' comments, the changes appear to be due, at least in part, to film's visual nature, character-driven nature, time-limited nature, and affective nature.

1. Film as a Visual Medium

Film is a visual medium and in a visual medium it is simply not that interesting to watch two people or, for that matter, two societies sit down and talk through their conflicts and resolve them through a long period of compromises, grace, forgiveness, and mutual understanding. It is more visually compelling to watch internal conflicts enacted and resolved externally and visually through physical combat.

The "Giving the Devil His Due" featurette on the *Daredevil: Director's Cut* DVD, for example, suggests that the studio executives felt the exploits of a vigilante in a red devil outfit, for example, were more visually compelling than staid images of a blind lawyer standing up and talking in a courtroom, thus compelling Johnson to remove almost the entire courtroom plot from the film.

In the “From Book to Script” feature included on the Extended Edition DVD of *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, Peter Jackson explains the reason he was drawn to have Sauron don his black armor and battle Aragorn. He says, “We felt that we really had to do something more than just have Sauron staying in his tower as this flaming eye, that we had to have him make an appearance outside the Black Gates at the end of Return of the King.” As a filmmaker, Jackson, felt compelled to have Sauron take on human form and have Aragorn defeat him in physical combat.

The world is often divided into good and evil in terms of physical appearances as well. According to Tolkien’s novel, Aragorn is quite homely on first sight. In the film, however, as portrayed by Viggo Mortenson, Aragorn is quite handsome. The orcs, meanwhile, are portrayed as ugly and entirely evil.

Film’s visual nature, then, appears to play a role in filmmakers’ decisions to tell Manichean tales with acts of redemptive violence.

2. Film as a Character-Driven Medium

It is often said that great books are about great ideas, while films are about great characters. Films are often better at helping viewers care about the characters they see than they are at helping viewers understand abstract ideas or principles. In the “From Book to Script” feature Jackson explains, “[We] felt that Aragorn has come this distance with his journey, and that Sauron is his enemy and that we had to somehow have this personal dual between Aragorn and Sauron. And it’s not in the book but we felt it had to be in the movie.” In the same feature Phillipa Boyens explains that they felt that film audiences also needed to see Frodo play an active role in the destruction of the Ring, saying, “Peter had this notion or this sense that he wanted Frodo not to be inactive. That we can’t have invested all this energy and time with this character and then just have him be a bystander in that moment.” Individual characters, rather than communities or unseen forces, must be seen resolving the conflicts and redeeming communities themselves.

3. Film as a Time-Limited Medium

The time limits of commercial films often influence the nature of the stories they tell. While novels have the luxury of time to develop subtle themes and sophisticated ideas, most films only have approximately two hours to establish characters that the audience cares about and to tell a story that the audience can follow.

In *The Lord of the Rings* Jackson did not have as much time to nuance the character of the orcs as Tolkien did, and so just established them as ugly, savage beasts to be killed. In the film *Daredevil*, the studio executives seem to have felt that they needed to keep the action moving and had no time to develop the plot of the court case so key to Johnson’s original screenplay. For many directors working under the restraints of time, it is vital to quickly establish the hero as noble, the villain as evil, and then to offer a quick and clean resolution to

the conflict by having the villain die. There is little time to portray the long process of conversation and compromise that is usually necessary to resolve conflicts in the real world.

4. Film as an Affective Medium

While print is a highly effective medium for conveying cognitive content, films are a highly effective medium for transmitting affective or emotional content. The typical action-adventure film will use camera angles, framing of shots, acting performances, and soundtracks to rouse one's sympathy and empathy with a hero and ignite one's anger towards the villain. When the heroes of a film finally get angry enough and determined enough, they set their jaws toward defeating the enemy and ultimately defeat him or her out of their force of will. As Jackson and Boyens's comments suggest, it is very emotionally satisfying for film audiences to see their heroes win the battle and the villains who caused them such grief to be crushed and destroyed.

Nothing in the interviews or commentaries with the directors or studio executives of these films suggest that the stories were intentionally changed into stories of redemptive violence that reflect a Manichaeic worldview because of any ideological views of the filmmakers. Instead, the changes appear to be due, at least in part, to these four features of the medium of film itself.

CONCLUSIONS

The medium of film can be and has been used to tell much more hopeful tales of reconciliation and redemption. Films such as *The Many Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* (1977), *Babette's Feast* (1987), *Juno* (2007), and many films directed by Robert Redford, Wes Anderson, and others offer visions of peaceful redemption and patient, negotiated reconciliation, rather than simply demonizing others and resolving conflict through violence. Still, it is important for religious educators, members of our communities, and our faith communities in particular, to be taught to recognize the embedded ideologies of violence manifest in many of the films they watch and to understand some of the dynamics that lead to the plethora of portrayals of redemptive violence seen on screen.

Religious educators can easily adapt this type of media literacy and theological reflection for use with adults, youth, and even with older children. Sessions that use text readings of source materials and then show film clips from the films noted above, together with clips of DVD bonus features that explain the changes, can help conscientize their faith communities and wider communities to the embedded theology of violence present in so many popular culture narratives. In the process, religious educators can help people become aware of the implicit ideology of redemptive violence embedded in many of our culture's most popular stories and begin the work of breaking the cycle of violence and offering more helpful approaches to redemption and reconciliation.

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