

## *Introduction: Authentic vs. Imperialist Christianity in Literature and Film*

*I distrust those people who know so well what God wants them to do, because I notice it always coincides with their own desires.* — Susan B. Anthony

*Theology without love is the theology of the demons.* — Symeon the New Theologian

It may not be true where you live, but in the rural regions of New York, Pennsylvania, and Oklahoma where I have resided, there is no shortage of preachers and cultural commentators on the local radio and television stations casting aspersions upon public figures and private citizens for not being sufficiently Christian. Certainly, such authoritarian figures can be found on national radio and television programming as well, and many of them make a lucrative living out of decrying the evils of secular humanism and fair-weather Christianity regardless of the denomination they themselves are members of. They are often known to wag their fingers at guests on their shows (or at absent, headline-making figures) and exclaim:

“You’re not a real Christian because your social views are too trendy.”

“You’re not a real Christian because you don’t go to church enough.”

“You’re not a real Christian because you are too interested in the historic Jesus.”

“You’re not a real Christian because you’re not into persecuting heretics and demonizing non-Christians.”

“You’re not a real Christian because your sect of Christianity isn’t valid. All members of your sect are destined for hell, sad to say. Nice knowing you.”

or

“You’re too *alternative* Christian to be *authentic* Christian.”

Whether they are self-appointed or representative of some sort of establishment organization with an axe to grind, these policemen of Christianity are tiresome and ubiquitous—on the radio and television, in the pulpits, and in powerful government positions. They act as if they speak directly *to* God, speak directly *for* God, and know exactly what is in the hearts of those whom they are demonizing. In fact, it is abundantly clear that they *do not* speak directly to God, they *do not* speak directly for God, and *they have no idea* what is in the hearts of those whom they are demonizing. Indeed, generally speaking, the only fake Christians are the ones pointing out the fake Christians. These modern-day Cotton Mather figures are often less the “true” worshippers of Christ and more the servants of Mammon and Ares. After all, more often than not they speak and act as the (un)acknowledged public relations voices of Wall Street and the military-industrial complex. Passionate as they are in their views, these modern-day Jeremiahs are judgmental and hypocritical, and I stand in defiance of their misanthropic, fire-and-brimstone message.

This book is about challenging preconceived notions of what constitutes authentic and alternative Christianity. The scholars who have contributed essays to the collection come from a variety of religious, academic, cultural, and political backgrounds, but what links their work is the shared contention that there is not always an oppositional relationship between authentic and alternative Christianity. Sometimes alternative Christianity *is* authentic Christianity. In other words, this book is about how some artists and thinkers, whose views have been long condemned as heretical, demonstrably represent a purer form of Christianity than the establishment Christian churches historically have engaged in and promulgated. Furthermore, when these artists and thinkers are condemned for being heretics, they are identified as such by preachers and religious institutions that have a history of endorsing belief systems and social actions that appear to directly contradict the teachings of Jesus as represented in the Gospels.

Almost invariably, when prominent artists or thinkers point out that the historic Jesus appears to have been a pacifist, anti-establishment, proto-feminist, proto-multicultural figure, certain members of the establishment Church level *ad hominem* accusations at these thinkers, calling into question the legitimacy of their religious views as Christians, non-Christians, apostates, agnostics, or atheists. Of course, these *ad hominem* attacks can easily be reversed, since most Christian churches do not have full credibility when they speak of what Christ did or did not “stand for.” After all, many priests, ministers, theologians, and Christian lawyers, businessmen, and heads of state have taken part in, or turned a blind eye to, imperial conquests, autocratic

regimes, genocide, institutional torture, endless wars, state economies built upon a foundation of slavery and social Darwinism, and the oppression of women and racial and ethnic minorities. Upon reflection, Jesus appears to endorse none of these aspects of (in)human civilization in his sermons and interactions with Jews and non-Jews alike.

Imagine Jesus himself performing the actions taken in his name by some of his more respected spokesmen in the Church and in government. Picture, if you can, Jesus standing shoulder-to-shoulder with John Hathorne at the Salem Witch Trials, Jesus himself echoing Pope Urban II's calls for the first Crusade, Jesus excommunicating Galileo, Jesus "curing" or lynching gays and lesbians, Jesus mass-slaughtering Jews and Native Americans, Jesus defending corporate personhood, and Jesus cheering Jefferson Davis' assertion that slavery "was established by decree of Almighty God ... is sanctioned in the Bible, in both Testaments, from Genesis to Revelation ... it has existed in all ages, has been found among the people of the highest civilization, and in nations of the highest proficiency in the arts" (Davis).

The prophets-dubbed-heretics who condemn the organized Christian churches for their history of misrepresenting Christ while promoting imperial and patriarchal interests often exert their moral authority by asserting that, at some time during the development of Christianity, something went "wrong" with Christianity. For Dante Alighieri, the moment of crisis came with "The Donation of Constantine," an infamous—and, as it turned out, forged—document that declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. For Dante, this document helped transform Christianity from a small, persecuted cult of devoted followers of Jesus who were thrown to the lions by the Romans into an establishment faith whose leaders eventually became the ones ordering people thrown to the lions—Dante metaphorically included.

In a similar vein, feminist historian Marina Warner argued in "Fantasy's Power and Peril" that the early Christian fathers made a tragic error in rejecting Origen of Alexandria's doctrine of universal salvation. According to Warner, in supplanting Origen's views with the theology of Christianized Zoroastrianism, Christians chose to embrace a view of a universe locked in an endless, mystical war between the forces of light and dark. This good/evil polarity encourages endless warfare on our material, human plane to this day and is the fuel that keeps conflict in the Middle East alive, Warner contends.

Though not taken seriously in most quarters, bestselling thriller novelist Dan Brown makes a compelling point in *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) that the cardinal sin of the Roman Catholic Church has been its exclusion of women from the Church hierarchy, erasure of women from Church history, and an aversion to sex that has prevented it from acknowledging the existence of

Jesus' extended family. The *Da Vinci Code* may be a mere potboiler and its historical assertions may be dubious, but its thesis regarding Church misogyny is sound.

For their parts, both Thomas Jefferson and Nietzsche have asserted that Jesus' biographers, not the least among them St. Paul, distorted his message by placing their own, highly subjective, gloss on his life and by waiting too long after his death to set his words down. Jefferson and Nietzsche both attempt to excavate the true message of Christ from underneath the surface texts included in the New Testament in a manner that predicts the scholarship published by members of the Jesus Seminar. Interestingly, four scholars who are part of that seminar — Arthur J. Dewey, Roy W. Hoover, Lane McGaughy, and Daryl D. Schmidt — are not only concerned with the accurate historical representation of Christ but also with that of Paul. In their book *The Authentic Letters of Paul* (2010), these scholars break with the precedent set by Jefferson and Nietzsche and attempt to rescue Paul from the way in which he himself has been misrepresented, first by those who may have edited his original prose or written texts in his name, and then by his later interpreters— Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Martin Luther — who have left an inaccurate and indelible impression on our minds concerning who Paul was.

Such orthodox and alternative theology is often expressed in preaching and encyclicals, or in the scholarly works of historians and theologians, but this book is primarily concerned with the kinds of theological statements made in fiction by writers, poets, artists, and secular thinkers. Many of the popular and literary works of fiction found in these pages are regarded as classics of orthodox Christianity while others are well-known as “heretical” tracts: *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *The Passion of the Christ*, *The Jefferson Bible*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *A Christmas Carol*, *The Decalogue*, *De Profundis*, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, *Song of Myself*, *Androcles and the Lion*, *Lost*, *War and Peace*, and *Battlestar Galactica*. As this list indicates, for the purposes of this book, we will be discussing manifestations of alternative Christian thought in cultural studies artifacts from the broadest possible multitude of genres and media, including narratives constructed as novels, poems, short stories, films, pictorial art, and even radically rewritten and re-edited Bibles as “remixed” or “original” works of fiction. Indeed, to use a word popular in contemporary film and comic book criticism, many of these works were intended to, effectively, “reboot” Christianity by bringing it back to basics, retelling its “origin,” and getting the narrative back on track after it wandered to a dead end.

This book is about some of the most famous and infamous efforts that have been made over the years to reboot Christianity.

One of the goals of this book is to involve academics from a variety of



Tom Hanks as Robert Langdon and Audrey Tautou as Sophie Neveu — a character descended from Jesus himself — in Ron Howard's 2006 film adaptation (Columbia Pictures) of the Dan Brown novel *The Da Vinci Code*.

disciplines — including theology, literature, history, philosophy, cultural criticism, and film criticism — in rescuing cardboard prophets and heretics, saints and sinners from their one-dimensionality and helping us to see them anew with fresh eyes, fully aware of their complexity as human beings and thinkers. The end result is a book that suggests that those who have long been considered pure enemies of Christianity, including Thomas Jefferson, Frederick Nietzsche, and George Bernard Shaw, have much to say about what constitutes authentic Christianity, while those who are seen as champions of established churches, including Dante and the screenwriters of the religious television shows *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica*, have a more complex and anti-establishment religious view than one might think at first.

Let us consider an example of the above from Oscar Wilde, an author whose work is referenced in several essays included in this book. In his epistle “De Profundis” (1897), Wilde describes Christ as the ultimate suffering artist, whose miracles stemmed from his magnetic personality and empathy and capacity for forgiveness, not from any supernatural source:

His miracles seem to me to be as exquisite as the coming of spring, and quite as natural. I see no difficulty at all in believing that such was the charm of his personality that his mere presence could bring peace to souls in anguish, and that those who touched his garments or his hands forgot their pain; or that as he passed by on the highway of life people who had seen nothing of life's mystery, saw it clearly, and others who had been deaf to every voice but that of pleasure heard for the first time the voice of love and found it as "musical as Apollo's lute"; or that evil passions fled at his approach, and men whose dull unimaginative lives had been but a mode of death rose as it were from the grave when he called them; or that when he taught on the hillside the multitude forgot their hunger and thirst and the cares of this world, and that to his friends who listened to him as he sat at meat the coarse food seemed delicate, and the water had the taste of good wine, and the whole house became full of the odour and sweetness of nard [qtd. in Robbins 173].

As Ruth Robbins observed in her 2011 biography of Wilde, "What Wilde is describing of Christ's personality is, of course, very close to the common perception of his own. His conversation, the stories he told others, all acted like a charm on those who heard him. Even [Wilde's arch nemesis] the Marquess of Queensberry, when he met Wilde for the first time, was charmed, writing to Bosie, 'I don't wonder that you are so fond of him. He is a wonderful man' (Ellman 1988: 393). In this text, then, man is not made in the image of God; Christ is remade in the image of Oscar Wilde" (173).

Robbins' observation recalls Susan B. Anthony's admonition to avoid speaking for God when one speaks on one's own behalf. Wilde's depiction of Christ also reminds us of the extent to which Christ has become, over time, a sort of spiritual Rorschach test — people see in Christ what they wish to, employ out-of-context Biblical passages as precedent to justify their own personal theology, and ignore all Bible passages that clash with their preconceived vision of Jesus. In this way, for example, progressive Americans embrace a socialistic, pacifistic interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount and ignore the Christ that warns that those who betray the Son of Man would have been better off if they had never been born (Matthew 26:24), while conservative Christians embrace an authoritarian interpretation of Paul's Epistle to the Romans and forget Christ's admonition to "judge not, that ye be not judged" (Matthew 7:1). On the other hand, one might argue that progressive Christians have focused on one part of the truth of Jesus in the Bible and that conservative Christians have focused on another. Could both depictions of Jesus be true? One more than the other? One more "historically accurate" than another? One more "theologically sound"?

And what of Wilde's depiction of Jesus? As idiosyncratic and self-centered as it appears to be, it is, surprisingly, not without echo in Biblical scholarship.

Indeed, one of the titular *Profiles of Jesus* (2002), “Jesus as Peasant Artisan” by Jesus Seminar scholar Arthur J. Dewey, portrays Jesus as a “crafty” word-smith who employs “humorous exaggeration” and a narrative “double focus” to discourage dogmatic thinking and collapse either/or choices and good/bad distinctions in on themselves (77–79). Consequently, Jesus’ parables and aphorisms confound his audience by making listeners ponder the ever-expanding ramifications of what he has said. Jesus employed his narrative brilliance and pedagogical skill to teach his audience about social injustice in first-century Palestine. Oscar Wilde used much the same narrative style and pedagogical tactic to instruct his audience about its own moral hypocrisies and social injustice in Victorian England. Living during a socially and politically turbulent time, Wilde employed a double-perspective that simultaneously looked back on Victorian values, anticipated 20th century modernist values, and meshed them together, wittily demonstrating both the relative truths and limitations of both perspectives, Robbins has observed.

Regarding the issue of Christ’s double-perspective, Dewey offers as an example, the ever-expanding ramifications of Jesus’ exhortation to love *every-one*:

The aphoristic command “Love your enemies” (Luke 6:27b; Matt 5:44b) also plays upon a double-perspective. First, it disputes the conventional wisdom that enjoins primary concern for those within one’s social group. Second, it admits the alienation in Palestinian society (village feuding, opposition by the rich, Roman occupation). The audience could easily identify their enemies. Third, it challenges the listeners to replace a simplistic obedience with a radical reconfiguration of their societal categories. As the Seminar rightly puts it in *The Five Gospels*, “Those who love their enemies have no enemies.” The challenge of the aphorism is clear: can you imagine acting differently towards those outside the circle of your people? The saying has a concussive effect; it keeps echoing in the resisting areas of the listeners’ hearts [80].

In the same essay, Dewey also examines similarly thought-provoking, double-perspective parables and aphorisms of Christ, including “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (79, Mark 10:25, Mathew 19:24, Luke 8:25), “[God] causes the sun to rise on both the bad and the good, and sends rain on both the just and unjust” (81, Matthew 5:45), “You see the sliver in your friend’s eye, but you don’t see the timber in your own eye. When you take the timber out of your own eye, you will see well enough to remove the sliver from your friend’s eye” (77, Thomas 26:12, Matthew 7: 3–5, Luke 6: 41–42).

Though Wilde’s pairing of opposites and unexpected reversals of commonly embraced truths seem, at first glance, more frivolous than Christ’s assertion to love your enemy, consider Wilde’s statement that “anybody can

sympathise with the sufferings of a friend, but it requires a very fine nature — it requires, in fact, the nature of a true Individualist — to sympathise with a friend's success." Here he notes well the rivalries and jealousies and egotism that lie at the heart of many friendships and — in pointing them out — prods us to be aware of such dark feelings ourselves and deal with them accordingly. Consider Wilde's similarly provocative observations concerning marriage ("The proper basis for a marriage is mutual misunderstanding"), history ("The one duty we owe to history is to re-write it"), cynicism ("A cynic is a man who knows the price of everything but the value of nothing"), and ambition ("In this world there are only two tragedies; one is not getting what one wants, the other is getting it"). All of these statements, and a seemingly endless parade of similar Wilde aphorisms, seem at once sparkingly humorous and starkly bleak, empathetic and misanthropic, wise and frivolous. They are also in the same subversive genealogy as the aphorisms and parables of Arthur Dewey's "peasant artisan" Christ.

The overlap between Dewey's portrait of Christ and Wilde's suggests that both the historic Jesus scholar and the Victorian decadent are not only offering overlapping Biblical exegesis, but potentially offering a truth about Christ that is not often discussed or pondered by more mainstream depictions of Christ. To this extent, both Wilde and Dewey have something to teach the skeptic and the believer alike about Christ the moralist raconteur.

Another potential source of Christian wisdom that is often overlooked is the wisdom of the atheist. As you will see in the essay on Nietzsche in this collection, atheists are able to examine aspects of theology, organized religion, and the life and teachings of Christ from the valuable perspective of the outsider looking in, and they can see things that those of us within religion cannot. In devout circles, the religious views of atheists are often deemed too dangerous to read since they "believe in nothing" and threaten to kill genuine faith; however, in my experience in discussing religion with atheists, they believe in a great deal and they often act more like bona fide Christians than most devout Christians do in the way they interact with the world around them.

One of the most famous atheist directors in the history of world cinema, and one of the greatest directors who ever lived, Luis Buñuel, made a number of films that criticized religion in general and the Catholic Church in particular, including the classic films *Viridiana* (1961), *Simon of the Desert* (1965), *The Milky Way* (1969), and *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972). As in the case of John Lennon's secularist manifesto "Imagine," several of the aforementioned films are so relentlessly cynical, atheistic, and materialist that they achieve an odd religiosity that is difficult to describe, especially to the skeptical, incredulous, conservative Christian. In an essay on Luis Buñuel,



“Damned If You Do...,” Michael Wood offers his own take on Buñuel’s odd relationship with God:

A good friend of Luis Buñuel’s suggested in conversation that the director was likely to be damned twice: once for being an atheist, and once for joking about it on his deathbed. The friend, a priest, certainly knew what he was talking about, but I don’t believe he really thought Buñuel would be damned. God can’t ultimately condemn serious atheists. They pay far more attention to him than half-hearted believers do, and they help keep him in business. On the soundtrack of Buñuel’s film *Nazarin* (1959), we hear a barrel organ playing an old song called “Dios nunca muere” (God Never Dies). The song itself is a bit of popular piety, an assertion of enduring faith. In Buñuel’s movie, it is an ironic tribute to the director’s everlasting antagonist, a correction of Nietzsche’s premature announcement of God’s death. And when Buñuel says, as he frequently and famously did, “Thank God I’m still an atheist,” the remark is not only a witty paradox, it is a form of courtesy. Why wouldn’t an atheist want to show gratitude to the nonexistent deity who never lets him down? [5].

Buñuel’s friend was a Catholic priest and many of his fans were — and are — devout Christians who, nevertheless, believe that his film art has much to say about life and religion that is worth contemplating. In a similar vein, many of Federico Fellini’s devotees are religious Catholics who enjoy his work despite — or, in part, because of — his biting satire of the Church in films such as *Roma* (1972), *La Dolce Vita* (1960) and *Nights of Cabiria* (1957).

None of the above films are lives of Christ, but “Jesus movies” have been fascinating and still more controversial than the aforementioned classics thanks to the narrative content of the films themselves and the religious beliefs of the filmmakers. For example, it is interesting to note that some critics and scholars believe that Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964) is morally and spiritually superior to Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) because Pasolini focuses on the words and deeds of Jesus the teacher and healer while Gibson’s film is concerned primarily with Jesus’ death — and with graphically recreating the historical methods that soldiers would use to torture and execute the Roman Empire’s political prisoners. That Gibson is a devout conservative Catholic and Pasolini is a Marxist, atheist, and homosexual makes this contrast between the focus and dramatic effect of their two filmic lives of Christ all the more intriguing. Commenting on the fruits of Pasolini’s labor, film critic Roger Ebert observed: “Pasolini’s is one of the most effective films on a religious theme I have ever seen, perhaps because it was made by a nonbeliever who did not preach, glorify, underline, sentimentalize or romanticize his famous story, but tried his best to simply record it.” Ebert added *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* to his online list of Great Movies in March 14, 2004, in response to the popularity of Gibson’s



In Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960, Koch-Lorber Films), Marcello Mastroianni (Marcello Rubini) is a dispirited journalist who looks for love and spiritual fulfillment in the wrong places. He flirts with a glamorous Hollywood actress (Anita Ekberg as Sylvia), covers two small children who are pretending to see visions of the Virgin Mary, and lives vicariously through an intellectual friend who only seems to be living the perfect life.

recently released opus. Ebert thought the story of how Pasolini came to make the film was particularly noteworthy. The filmmaker "had accepted [an] invitation [to attend a seminar at a Franciscan monastery in St. Francis' hometown of Assisi] after Pope John XXIII called for a new dialogue with non-Catholic artists." During the course of his stay in Assisi, Pasolini read the Gospels through and was enraptured by the figure of Jesus, whom he saw as a counter-culture figure with stunning contemporary relevance. He was then inspired to make a film based on the most socially aware Gospel.

Again comparing Pasolini's film to Gibson's, Ebert writes: "To see [this] film a few weeks after seeing Gibson's is to understand that there is no single version of his story. It acts as a template into which we fit our ideas, and we see it as our lives have prepared us for it. Gibson sees Christ's suffering as the overwhelming fact of his life, and his film contains very little of Christ's teachings. Pasolini thought the teachings were the central story. If a hypothetical



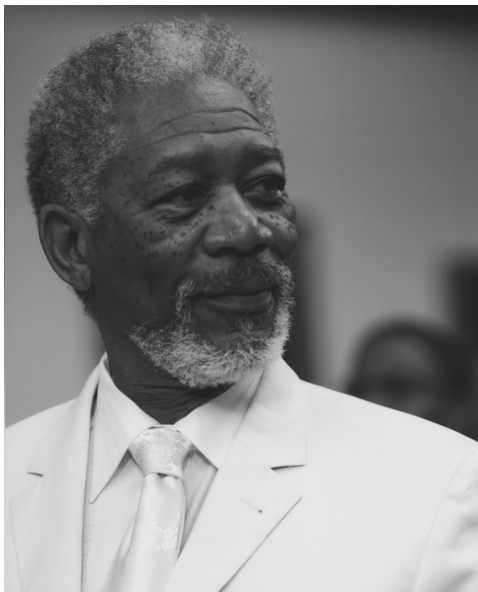
Jim Caviezel as Jesus Christ in *The Passion of the Christ*, a 2004 film (Newmarket Films) directed by Mel Gibson. The mirror image of *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), this movie was enormously popular with many of the same conservative Christians who hated Scorsese's epic and criticized by liberals who felt that the film was offensive due to its extreme violence and anti-Semitic undertones.

viewer came to *The Passion* with no previous knowledge of Jesus and wondered what all the furor was about, Pasolini's film would argue: Jesus was a radical whose teachings, if taken seriously, would contradict the values of most human societies ever since."

Go tell it on the mountain, Roger.

Admittedly, theology presented as a narrative is particularly controversial because it makes potentially subversive forms of Christianity more available to the public. Furthermore, these narratives often compound the problem by violating the Hebraic law against making graven images found in the Pentateuch. Despite the understandable anxieties caused by these narratives, those that are classic stories of elite and popular culture deserve better than to be dismissed out of hand or censored, especially since some of these narratives, and their creators, can potentially teach their audiences important truths about Christ and Christianity. However, more often than not, priests and ministers do not want their interpretation of the word of God to be challenged

or supplanted by a work of popular art or literature that has the power to reach a much broader audience than any individual sermon. They fear not only a loss of power and authority over their brothers and sisters, but also that a popular and wildly inaccurate new reading of the Bible will corrupt the faith of the individual Christian, or the integrity of Christianity itself. They



To paraphrase an oft-asked question during the 2008 presidential election: “Is America ready for a black depiction of God?” If it is Morgan Freeman, then yes! Freeman plays God in the film comedies *Bruce Almighty* (2003) and *Evan Almighty* (pictured above, 2007, Universal Pictures).

recall Christ’s warning against false prophets and stand guard against any and all who appear to be such figures. Hence, out of fear, churches and individual preachers tend to condemn unauthorized Christian narratives out of hand, even when the moral of these narratives can be safely summarized as “thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” These moral condemnations sometimes lead to efforts at censorship — either direct or indirect (including calls for the cutting of funding for the National Endowment for the Arts)—consequently placing conservative Christian values at odds with freedom of speech and the First Amendment, adding another troubling layer to an already emotionally fraught conflict of values. Some of the most famous examples of these controversies include the

outcry against Andres Serrano’s “Piss Christ” and Chris Ofili’s elephant dung-covered painting “The Holy Virgin Mary,” the latter of which outraged Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and many New York Catholics in 1999. (For a particularly insightful essay on the ramifications of the Ofili controversy, see Andrea Fraser’s “A ‘Sensation’ Chronicle.”)

Some of the books, films, television programs, and works of art examined in this book were deliberately designed to provoke a strong reaction from a Puritanical audience on principal, others were intended to generate controversy to generate profits, and still others are seriously intended religious statements. Sometimes it is difficult to separate these motivations, and some pieces

were crafted for all of the above reasons. For example, should Dan Brown's work be treated as serious theological statements when they are clearly, first and foremost, thriller novels? And what of the disclaimers attached to both Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Kevin Smith's *Dogma*? Do they show an 11th hour repentance that undermines the power of a work originally intended to be taken totally seriously, or should we all just pretend that those disclaimers were never written? By and large, the scholars who have written essays for this collection have decided to take apologetic views of the works and their creators, discussing original intentions, offering serious and nuanced critiques of their controversial theology. Some scholars come to strong and controversial conclusions, while others leave the solution to an arguably unsolvable puzzle to you, the reader, to determine.

For my part, as the editor, one of my chief concerns in collecting essays from this variety of genres, time periods, nationalities, and religious sects is that I believe all of these works have something to teach American readers in particular about Christianity. Since the birth of the nation, the darker side of American religious belief has been unduly influenced by the worldview evident in Jonathan Edwards' "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Many of the critics whose essays are included in this collection share my desire to see the misanthropy inherent in the worldview mitigated. After all, this kind of religion underlies some of the greatest historical and cultural sins committed in America in the name of religion. Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King both wrote strong statements about the role Christianity played in supporting the institution of slavery and of the hypocrisy of Christians who did not support abolition or equality for blacks in America. Norman Dain observed in "Madness and the Stigma of Sin in American Christianity" that one of the reasons that public funding for treatment for individuals with mental illnesses is entirely inadequate is because individuals with such conditions are falsely believed to be sinners and unworthy of treatment.

Authors and cultural critics from overseas have matched these criticisms made by American citizens. As a case in point, Anthony Burgess, author of the classic British science fiction novel *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), wrote a defense of his censored work that was, in its way, illustrative of the differences between British and American religious and political values. His novel was originally intended to be a redemption story that concerned the reform of a young gangbanger who ultimately "grows bored with the violence and recognizes that human energy is better expended on creation than destruction" (vii). While the book was published around the world in its unedited form, Burgess was horrified to discover that his American publisher refused to include his intended ending and, instead, omitted the final chapter that featured the redemption segment. Consequently, the American version of the

book ended at precisely the point when protagonist Alex DeLarge declares himself an unrepentant rapist and evildoer. The film adaptation directed by Stanley Kubrick also followed the lead of the American publisher, joining the eviscerated American version of the novel in inverting Burgess' intended moral.

As Burgess wrote in his introduction to the 1986 edition of the book, "A Clockwork Orange Resucked,"

My New York publisher believed that my twenty-first chapter was a sellout. It was veddy, veddy British, don't you know. It was bland and it showed a Pelagian unwillingness to accept that a human being could be a model of unregenerable evil. The Americans, he said in effect, were tougher than the British and could face up to reality. Soon they would be facing up to it in Vietnam. My book was Kennedyan and accepted the notion of moral progress. What was really wanted was a Nixonian book with no shred of optimism in it. Let us have evil prancing on the page and, up to the very last line, sneering in the face of all the inherited beliefs, Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Holy Roller, about people being able to make themselves better. Such a book would be sensational, and so it is. But I do not think it is a fair picture of human life.

I do not think so because, by definition, a human being is endowed with free will. He can use this to choose between good and evil. If he can only perform good or only perform evil, then he is a clockwork orange — meaning that he has the appearance of an organism lovely with colour and juice but is in fact only a clockwork toy to be wound up by God or the Devil or (since this is increasingly replacing both) the Almighty State. It is as inhuman to be totally good as it is to be totally evil. The important thing is moral choice [viii–ix].

Burgess' sentiments seem to me to be very Christian and very much in the spirit of Origen. They also speak to the main themes of several of the essays included here, especially the intersection of Christianity, culture, politics, and art.

In a similar vein, the dark side of American Christianity has been criticized by those who arrive to the country as immigrants and find themselves victims of racially and religiously motivated bigotries that point to larger problems at the heart of American Christianity. One of the most historically significant victims of anti-immigrant sentiment was Bartolomeo Vanzetti — an anarchist who may have been wrongly convicted of murder and executed primarily on the basis of his ideological beliefs and immigrant status. While Vanzetti's outspoken supporters included Albert Einstein, Dorothy Parker, H.G. Wells, and George Bernard Shaw, his left-wing views and ethnic background did not inspire empathy from most American conservatives then or now. Indeed, one could see where his inflammatory views would have the potential to offend a great number of 21st century American readers, especially the portrait he paints of American culture, and American justice, in a January



12, 1911, letter to his sister, Luigia. The letter is damning to the point of sounding wholly anti-American, but one might wonder what experiences he had that compelled him to develop such feelings about the United States. He wrote:

Here, public justice is based on force and brutality, but not that the foreigner, and in particular, the Italian, should dare to enforce it with energetic means: for him there are the police batons, prisons and the penal code. Don't think that America is so civil, though there are no qualities missing in the American people and more yet in the cosmopolitan population, if you take away their dollars and the elegance of their dress, you'll find semi-barbarians, fanatics and delinquents. No country in the world hosts so many religions and religious extravagances like the holy United States. Here, he who makes money is good, it doesn't matter if he steals or poisons. Many have and are making their fortune by selling their dignity, spying on and persecuting their compatriots. Many reduce morality to a level lower than that which nature bestowed on animals [qtd. in Muscio].

These words are cruel, but there is truth in them worth pondering and responding to. When Christian values take second place to the concerns of white privilege, the amassment of wealth and prestige, then the religion of Mammon has both supplanted authentic Christianity and masqueraded as the religion of Jesus of Nazareth. However, this is not to say that American religion and American culture is beyond remedying. The patient is critically ill, but has not flatlined yet. Like Burgess, I believe that living, breathing people are capable of change, and if good examples of true Christianity taken from art, literature, history, film, music, and theology can be placed before individuals who have embraced a broken form of Christianity, there is always the hope that they will see the error of their ways and consider reforming their own religious views. If enough individuals are inspired by this book to look within themselves to determine for themselves the extent to which they are embracing a healthy or unhealthy religion, an authentic or a corrupt inversion of Christianity, then there is hope. There is hope that those Americans who have embraced fire-and-brimstone Christianity may, at long last, learn to love themselves, love their neighbors, love their enemies, and love God — even if God turns out to be a big old softie and not the hanging judge they had been raised to worship and fear.

This is by no means the first and only book to analyze the extent to which works of classic literature are orthodox or not and authentically Christian or not. *Milton and Heresy* (2009), edited by Stephen B. Dobranski and John P. Rumrich, asks why an author who supported the execution of Charles I, opposed infant baptism, and supported divorce and polygamy could be deemed a religious conservative. *Dante and the Unorthodox* (2005), edited by James Miller, examines Dante's anticlericalism, female prophet figures, and

the pagans that he places in Heaven in the *Commedia* (one of whom, ultimately, may be Virgil, should Beatrice's prayer on his behalf be heeded). *Dante and the Unorthodox* also deals heavily with the writings of T.S. Eliot, which is why he is not covered in this text. A similar book has been written about the influence of the Wycliffite heresy on Chaucer and his contemporaries—Andrew Cole's *Literature and Heresy in the Age of Chaucer* (2008).

Just as these books have asked literary scholars to reconsider their rarified visions of the three most venerable Christian authors of the Western literary canon, other books have asked readers to see that which is “religious” in secularist or heretical figures. In *Myth* (1997), Laurence Coupe argues that even those who attempt to start new religions or eliminate religions altogether are ultimately doomed by “The Anxiety of Influence” to reflect the belief system that has come immediately before and start a new myth for a new generation. Consequently, Sigmund Freud not only founded a new science and academic discipline but a new religious worldview based on an unsubstantiated prehistoric fratricide myth. Similarly, Coupe argues, Karl Marx not only founded a political party but also wrote a secularized Christian myth that prophesized an earthbound Socialist paradise in an eschatological future. (Coupe did not use this example, but I wonder if his reasoning might also explain why John Lennon's “Imagine” calls for a world without religion yet seems to be the most fervent of hymns.)

Other works of cultural criticism have found theological ideas embedded in popular culture artifacts that are worth serious academic attention. Eric Michael Mazur's *Encyclopedia of Religion in Film* (2011) is a superb reference book replete with insightful essays that examine the full scope of film history to uncover the most culturally significant religious films representing all of the major world religions produced by the most prominent international film communities. I, myself, am proud to have included essays on the unorthodox Catholicism found in vampire films and the works of Sergio Leone and Luc Besson. Of course, Mazur's text is only one of the most recent and most comprehensive efforts in the project of examining religion and film. While it is not a book that is solely about film, Chris Hedges' *Losing Moses on the Freeway: The 10 Commandments in America* (2006) explores how *The Decalogue*, Krzysztof Kiésłowski's television miniseries about the Ten Commandments in the modern day, offers a more compelling and loving model of how contemporary Christians should follow God's laws than the self-righteous and authoritarian model offered by Bible-thumping fundamentalist Christians and neoconservatives. (This is a theme he explores further in *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America* [2008], a Christian book that condemns the reactionary followers of Pat Robertson who wish to transform America from a democracy into a super-nationalist theocracy.)



In addition to these texts, several books on religion in comic books and graphic novels have appeared recently, including Ben Saunders' monograph *Do the Gods Wear Capes? Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes* (2011) and the anthology *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels* (2010), edited by A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer. Similar books have also examined religion in television, popular music, art, and so on, and they are too many to enumerate here. However, a great number of them are *Gospel According to \_\_\_\_\_* books (such as *The Gospel According to Oprah* and *The Gospel According to Peanuts*) that are examined in greater detail by Mazur in the essay he wrote for this collection. In focusing on the religious messages of popular art, these books collectively elevate the literary and theological significance of what was once deemed "trash" culture — with fascinating results.

As comprehensive as the above-mentioned books are, they are limited by their focus on genre and time period. One of the goals of this anthology is to collapse the difference between literary and popular culture studies, and the walls standing between academic disciplines, thereby offering a truly interdisciplinary study of authentic and alternative Christianity in fiction that covers both popular and elite texts and eschews snap qualitative judgments. Indeed, as A. David Lewis and Christine Hof Kraemer have argued, "particularly in light of Americans' increasing detachment from mainline churches, the religious explorations taking place in and around popular culture should be taken seriously as one of the ways Americans express their religiosity" (3–4). Of course, the scope of this anthology, and its interdisciplinary leanings, make it an ideal secondary source for undergraduate Western literature and humanities courses that include the subjects of many of these essays on their syllabi (i.e., Dante, Milton, Wilde, Whitman, Dickens, the Founding Fathers, etc.).

In recent years, excellent work has been done within academia and for the popular market on the very socially relevant, very contested, and very political topic of authentic Christianity in America. Robin Meyers, for one, has written several books arguing that Americans adopt a more progressive view of Christianity (which he calls "underground Christianity" instead of authentic Christianity, but the concepts are similar). Among his works are *The Underground Church: Reclaiming the Subversive Way of Jesus* (2012), *Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshiping Christ and Start Following Jesus* (2010), and *Why the Christian Right Is Wrong: A Minister's Manifesto for Taking Back Your Faith, Your Flag, Your Future* (2008).

Joerg Rieger's scholarship concerns the history of progressive forces in Christianity, including historical liberation movements in the United States. He has argued recently that still more Christians should embrace the economic

justice causes underlying the Occupy Wall Street movement. (Notably, some members of the Occupy movement agree, as one headline-making sign held aloft by a protestor read; “Obama is not a dark-skinned socialist. You’re thinking of Jesus.”) Among Rieger’s works are *Christ & Empire: From Paul to Post-colonial Times* (2007), *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (2009), *Globalization and Theology* (2010), and an upcoming book co-authored with Kwok Pui-Lan called *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude*.

Interested parties should also consider consulting the other works written by contributors to this collection, most of which speak to themes that this book explores. They are noted in the About the Contributors section at the end of the book.

This collection of essays is a continuation of the work scholars such as these have already done, only it involves the application of the principle of authentic Christianity to narratives from other disciplines—works of literature, films, TV shows, comic strips, personal manifestos, and other narratives. During my formative years, my parish priest admonished me to stay away from works of art and literature that had been condemned by the Catholic Church. I listened to him for several years and I regret that I did. Later I decided that—as a literate, thinking person—I needed to seek out at least some of these condemned works to see just how “evil” they really were. When several such works turned out to be not only *not* evil but, indeed, quite moral, I knew it was time to go on safari and examine every classic work that I had been hitherto avoiding on the grounds of its suspect Christianity. These days, the only artistic works I avoid exposing myself to are those that appear, from a distance, to have no artistic or moral merit whatsoever (i.e., advertising, television news, *The Human Centipede* films of Tom Six, and the in-name-only adaptation of *Dante’s Inferno* video game), not those that authority figures have told me to avoid for suspect reasons.

As I designed this book, I invited scholars to help me complete my odyssey through landmark works of fiction and nonfiction that have been dubbed morally suspect by Church authorities and consider the extent to which these judgments have been fair. Together, we will also examine several landmark works that the Church has deemed “safe” for public consumption that may also, to a degree, undermine the very authority the establishment Church guards so jealously.

While I was once tempted to write this whole book myself, I was worried that attempting to do so would brand me a dilettante and an egomaniac. I was not an expert in all of the academic disciplines that I would be engaged with throughout—theology, political science, theater, art, literature, history—nor did I know all of these writers and storytellers, the history of these

works, or the cultural context in which these works existed. It was apparent that I would need help from an array of Virgils and Beatrices to guide me through all of these sacred and profane texts and to help me give them the fair chance that they may have been denied by the anti-intellectual contingent of Christian thinkers and believers. It would also be interesting to see such an eclectic mix of texts examined from so many methodological angles. Of further interest would be the varying political and religious perspectives of the contributors, many of whom never disclosed their ideologies to me in advance of being commissioned to write an essay. I have disclosed my biases to you here, in this introduction. I know for a fact that several of the contributors do not share my political party or Christian sect allegiance, so each scholar's work should be judged on its own terms and not solely as a piece of the overall argument made by me here or as a part of the narrative thrust of the book as a whole.

The essays are divided into two parts, "Rewritten Bibles, Alternative Christs" and Angels and Demons Among Us: The Politics and Economics of Heaven and Hell in Popular Culture." The first part deals with authors, philosophers, poets, and thinkers who have dared to edit, update, modernize, or replace the Bible, and who have presented their own interpretations of the values Jesus Christ represented and what humans should do to imitate him. The second part examines representations of evil in the Bible, literature, and popular culture and considers how religious Christians could strive to be better themselves and the extent to which they are called to combat corruption in society or forgive it in their enemies.

Part I begins with perhaps the most famous alternative Bible ever written. Presidential historian Tim H. Blessing examines Thomas Jefferson's perennially controversial religious views alongside those of other foundational American leaders, including George Washington and Andrew Jackson, in his essay "Revolution by Other Means: Jefferson, the Jefferson Bible, and Jesus." Jefferson famously created his own Gospel Harmony by melding the four canonical gospels into one coherent narrative and—in the process—took it upon himself to excise passages that he felt were unhistorical or corrupted Jesus' message. While some commentators have argued that the endeavor reveals Jefferson to be a secularist humanist, Blessing demonstrates that Jefferson was clearly a religious man who believed in angels, heaven, and hell, and who sought to rescue Christ from being defined solely by his foolish Biblical biographers. Blessing also discusses the nature of Jefferson's anti-Semitism and its troubling but fascinating role in inspiring the Founding Father to complete not one but two versions of his Gospel Harmony.

The second essay is "Portraying Jesus as Human: *The Last Temptation of Christ*," Katherine Brown Downey's case study of one of the most controver-

sial rewritings of the Christ story. She considers all that is authentically Christian about both the classic novel by Nikos Kazantzakis and the film adaptation directed by Martin Scorsese, as well as the political and theological firestorms surrounding the film's release in 1988. She compares the two versions of *The Last Temptation* to the narratives of the life of Christ found in the New Testament and in the Mel Gibson film *The Passion of the Christ*, and finds the depictions of Jesus in both versions of *The Last Temptation* to be inspiring and orthodox. (Other Jesus films, such as *Jesus of Nazareth*, are also touched upon.)



Co-writer and director Franco Zeffirelli collaborated with Anthony Burgess and Suso Cecchi d'Amico to tell a story of the life of Christ synthesized from the Gospels and historical research in the miniseries *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977, Incorporated Television Company). Pictured above is Jesus (Robert Powell) in his crown of thorns, shortly before the crucifixion. Zeffirelli was one of Martin Scorsese's most outspoken critics following the release of *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988).

Marc Lucht's essay, "Nietzsche and Tolstoy on Authentic Christianity," challenges pre-conceived notions of Nietzsche's religious beliefs by demonstrating with compelling textual evidence how the philosopher's harsh criticisms of establishment Christianity do not extend to the historical Jesus, whom Nietzsche admired. Indeed, in Lucht's view, Nietzsche's interpretation of Jesus' life and teachings emerges as strikingly similar to Leo Tolstoy's post-conversion writings about Jesus as the ultimate peacemaker.

In "Lamb Unslain: Animals and Shelley's Panentheism," Ruth Vanita argues that Hindu philosophical texts influenced Percy Shelley's worldview and passionate opposition to cruelty against non-human animals. Drawing on ancient Greek and ancient Indian thought, Shelley re-

reads the Bible in an attempt to expand Christian compassion and ultimately envisions non-violence to humans as impossible without non-violence to non-humans, and human dignity as inseparable from animal dignity.

Gustavo A. Rodríguez Martín demonstrates how George Bernard Shaw's religious beliefs were informed by his life and politics in "Shaw's Subversion of Biblical Language." Martín provides textual evidence drawn from Shaw's personal writings, essays, and several of his plays, including *Androcles and the Lion*, *Man and Superman*, and *Back to Methuselah*. Those who read this essay after Marc Lucht's will see parallels between Shaw's view of Christianity and Tolstoy's and Nietzsche's, and will fully understand the reasoning behind Shaw's oft-made joke that "Christianity might be a good thing if anyone ever tried it."

In "Song of Myself: Teaching Whitman's New Bible Today," Tracy Floreani demonstrates how Walt Whitman's nineteenth-century opus *Leaves of Grass* appeals to a modern, pluralistic American sensibility and has much to offer twenty-first century students from a variety of religious, ethnic, and political backgrounds. She concludes that, in numerous cases, Whitman's theology has provided an alternative, liberating faith to students who have struggled with the sexual, intellectual, and social restrictions placed upon them by traditional Christianity.

The second part begins with a brief history of Christianity in popular culture since the 1960s. As Eric Michael Mazur observes in his essay "The Gospel According to Comic Strips: On *Peanuts*, *The Far Side*, and *B.C.*," the bestselling book *The Gospel According to Peanuts* (1965) helped launch a cottage industry of books that explored Biblical themes in popular culture, including 798 similar works offering *The Gospel According to*—among others—Bob Dylan, Oprah Winfrey, The Beatles, *Twilight*, *Harry Potter*, and J.R.R. Tolkien. Mazur contends that this phenomenon can be explained, in part, by the enormous changes in American culture from the 1960s to the present. The result has been a growing comfort with, and increasing informality of, religious expression, which can be seen in the plethora of books exploring theological concepts and conventions in popular culture, not only in *Peanuts* and *B.C.* but in the edgier, more satirical commentaries on religion provided by Gary Larson's *Far Side* cartoon library.

Val Nolan's "Religious Discourse in *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica*" considers the cultural significance of two recent, popular genre shows in a post-9/11 television landscape and explores their subversive theological underpinnings. While viewers who like their science fiction and fantasy free of the taint of theology tended to reject the religious content of the two shows as half-baked, Nolan explains that *Lost* and *Battlestar Galactica* both had profound messages to communicate about life, belief, community, and the dangerous tendency of religion to divide rather than unite.

"The Radical Theology of Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Decalogue*" is Matthew Yde's essay about the classic 10-hour Polish film named by Roger Ebert as one

of the best films ever made. According to Yde, *The Decalogue* shines a light on the most fundamental questions of what it means to be a human being, illuminating the relevance and even the complexity of the Ten Commandments within the context of our modern world in unparalleled and unconventional ways. Yde also shows how *The Decalogue* calls upon us to view the Commandments as encouragement to feel empathy for our fellow human beings and fellow sinners instead of as a justification for our own tendency towards judgmentalism and misanthropy.

In “Fanaticism and Familicide from *Wieland* to *The Shining*,” Dara Downey examines Gothic fiction’s portrayal of religious fanaticism in the domestic sphere from the first American Gothic novel through Stephen King’s landmark bestseller up to the 2001 Bill Paxton film *Frailty*. Downey notes that all these narratives feature a mentally unhinged patriarch who has visions of supernatural beings that prompt him to murder members of his own family. She considers how some of these stories grant the insane religious figure charisma and gravitas while others seek to undercut his legitimacy and narrative centrality by challenging his theological worldview and empowering his (often female) adversaries.

In “From Bedford Falls to Punxsutawney: Refashioning A *Christmas Carol*” Grace Moore explores how Charles Dickens hoped to make a fortune from his novella, but also firmly believed that it could play an important role in bringing about social reform. Ebenezer Scrooge’s tale has been adapted into numerous stage plays, cartoons, and films, and has inspired radically different re-imaginings that have themselves become classic holiday films about personal redemption, including *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946), *Scrooged* (1988) and *Groundhog Day* (1993). While Frank Capra’s film shares Dickens’ concerns regarding the vulnerability of families and communities in the face of risk, bank fraud, and finance capitalism, later adaptations—like *Groundhog Day*—focus their attention on romantic subplots and the rehabilitation of the individual Scrooge-figure, rather than on what “Scrooge” might do for his community once he has been re-claimed.

Finally, Joerg Rieger’s essay “Reclaiming the Relation of Religion, Politics, and Economics” acts as a closing argument for the book as a whole, explaining how the legacy of progressive Christianity and the example of Occupy Wall Street can help contemporary Christians bring an end to dogmatic thinking in politics, religion, and economics, and to restore practical, humanist, and compassionate real-world concerns to primacy in all of these areas of life worldwide.

Collectively, these essays consider how some of the greatest thinkers and storytellers in the history of Western philosophy, literature, film, and television have wrestled with the message of Jesus of Nazareth. The essays touch

upon a broad range of topics, some dealing with issues of faith, economics, human sexuality, and “just war” theory, but they are united by their interest in what Jesus really preached, who has the authority to interpret Jesus’ message, and how one might best live a life that embraces and reenacts Jesus’ value system in twenty-first-century context. These essays consider what Jesus’ message truly was. They consider the extent to which the churches founded in his name have and have not accurately represented his values and behaved in a truly Christian fashion. Finally, they consider the extent to which the individual Christian should have the right and the freedom to defy authority figures within the establishment Christian churches whenever those authorities seem to have strayed from the path of righteousness and asked their followers to think and act in ways that are not authentically Christian. Some essays even consider the possibility that Christianity’s day is done and assert that the Christian faith needs discarding altogether. Asking difficult questions about the nature of Christian faith and its role in global and domestic politics may be dangerous, but it is still more dangerous asking no questions whatsoever. Just as Socrates maintained that the unexamined life is not worth living, it is equally true that the unexamined faith is not worth practicing. The questions this book raises are fraught with controversy and the possible answers the authors herein provide may be more controversial still. In many ways this is, admittedly, a dangerous book. However, the contents of this collection should provide food for thought and prayer that will, hopefully, help inform any intelligent, moral, and devout discussion of the role of Christianity in the modern world. It may shake some readers up, but I believe Jesus would support shaking some readers up. After all, he certainly was adept at shaking up *his* audiences.

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