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The Master

Abstract
This is a film review of *The Master* (2012), directed by Paul Thomas Anderson.

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The Master is a movie with a great deal of promise for those interested in religion and film. It promises any of a number of approaches to religion. It might be a movie about Scientology or a similar organization, since there are elements of "The Cause" that compare with elements of Scientology. It could be a story about the origins of L. Ron Hubbard's controversial psychological/religious organization, or it could be a devastating critique of Scientology. But, it turns out to be neither.

It could be a comment on cult-like religions, whether the comment was positive or negative. But, at the end of the story we are focused upon only two of the characters and we have lost touch with the cult-like qualities of The Cause.

It could have been a story about charisma and its role in religion. To what extent does religion require someone with charisma to get started, to keep going, to grow? Adoration and veneration are also ideas that could be explored in this film. Any of these approaches would be of considerable interest to those interested in religions of all kinds. But, the film does not explore these possibilities.

This is a film that could explore the differences between religion and psychology. Or it could have explored the role of psychological ideas in religion--or the religious nature of psychology. But it does not. It could explore the importance of experiential knowledge in relation to shared knowledge--a topic of considerable importance to understanding religion--especially religion and reason. Again, it does not. Or, it might have explored the idea of the master/slave relation, either utilizing ideas from Nietzsche or critiquing those ideas. It does not happen. Watching the film you are intrigued by which of these possibilities the movie will explore and what it will say about any one of them. In the end, there is no exploration of religion or religious ideas.

The Master is an example of excellent film making. The acting is superb. There is no wonder why there already has been talk of Oscars for Joaquin Phoenix and Philip Seymour Hoffman. Even Amy Adams, in a relative minor role, gives an outstanding performance. The cinematography is marvelous. The music is even better. But, as story-telling, *The Master* loses its way. At the end you are left wondering what this remarkably made movie is all about.