



10-1-2000

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Recommended Citation

Ford, James L. (2000) "Buddhism, Christianity, and The Matrix: The Dialectic of Myth-Making in Contemporary Cinema," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 1.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol4/iss2/1>

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Buddhism, Christianity, and The Matrix: The Dialectic of Myth-Making in Contemporary Cinema

Abstract

This essay analyzes the recent film *The Matrix* from the perspective of modern-day myth-making. After a brief plot summary of the film, I note the well-documented parallels to the Christian messianic narrative of Jesus. I then go on to highlight the often overlooked parallels to the Buddhist existential analysis of the human condition. In particular, I note a remarkable resonance between *The Matrix* and the fourth century (C.E.) philosophical school of Buddhism known as Yogacara. By highlighting the syncretic or combinative nature of the film's symbolic narrative, I submit *The Matrix* as a cinematic example of the dialectical process of myth-making by means of Peter Berger's theory of socio-cultural construction.

Humans are mythologizing and, as Peter Berger would suggest, "world-building" creatures. We appropriate elements from our past and present to fashion epic narratives and myths for a variety of existential, sociological, and religious ends. Myths are not fixed narrative forms, however. Studies of traditionally oral cultures evidence considerable elasticity in the details of a particular myth.^[i] And history also demonstrates that myths often evolve as a result of cultural diffusion and contact. Myths are constantly adapted to new cultural contexts and worldly realities. While the invention of writing inspired a more fixed status for some myths, it did not halt the ongoing adaptation and amalgamation of previously disparate mythological themes and concepts.

In this essay, I will examine the recent popular science-fiction film *The Matrix*, written and directed by Larry and Andy Wachowski, from this perspective of mythological adaptation. While the Christian metaphors throughout the film have been well noted, significant elements of a Buddhist worldview are often overlooked. In particular, the symbolic and existential parallels to a fourth century (C.E.) philosophical school of Buddhism known as "Consciousness-only" (Vijñavada/Yogacara) are indeed striking. In addition to noting such parallels, I will submit *The Matrix* as a provocative example of modern-day myth-making. Appropriating familiar symbols and motifs into a new epic narrative is clearly not a contemporary phenomenon and I will borrow from Peter Berger's dialectical theory of "world building" to elucidate this process. The foundation myths of many religions arguably reflect the same dialectical process I will try to illuminate here. Although *The Matrix* is not likely to become the foundation myth for a new religion, it will perhaps inform the worldviews, if only subtly and temporarily, of thousands of young adults. Indeed, this is the destiny of most myths. But who knows, this may become a classic along the lines of *The Wizard of Oz* or *Star Wars*.

To characterize a contemporary film as "myth" is not without problems, not the least of which is qualifying such a genre into an acceptable definition of myth. Here I will adopt a definition offered by Finnish folklorist Lauri Honko. She delineates four criteria of myth with respect to form (narrative of sacred origin), content (cosmogonic in terms of cultural origin or existential condition), function (model for human activity), and context (in the sense that myth provides "the ideological content for a sacred form of behavior").^[ii] I suggest that *The Matrix* qualifies in all respects as a mythological narrative. It is also important to note that myths are not disembodied texts divorced from time or place. Their language, symbols, and meaning are invariably tied to the context and worldview of origin. Moreover, the functional use of myths may range from a children's story hour to a mechanism of political legitimization. In other words, myths serve any number of social, religious, ideological, or pedagogical functions. Movies, like any narrative form, can be considered a form of myth if they meet the criteria noted above. *Star Wars*, *The Fisher King*, *Blade Runner*, and *2001: A Space Odyssey* represent appropriate examples according to this perspective.

[i] See, for example, Raymond Firth's "The Plasticity of Myth," *Ethnologica* 2 (1960), 181-88.

[ii] Lauri Honko. "The Problem of Defining Myth" in *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 49-51.

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The Matrix: A Plot Summary

For those who have not seen the film, I offer here a very brief summary of the plot. The basic premise is that the world as we know it is not objectively real but a computer simulation (the Matrix) wired into our minds by a species of artificial intelligence—"a singular consciousness that spawned an entire race of machines," we are told. This cyber-species was originally created by human technological know-how, but eventually took over after emerging victorious in a war waged for generations that virtually destroyed the world. It (they?) now breeds humans as an energy resource (sort of like living batteries) and inputs the virtual Matrix to keep our minds occupied—"And so," we are informed, "they built a prison out of our past, wired it to our brains and turned us into slaves." A small colony of humans has survived independent from the artificial race in a place called Zion, below the surface of the earth. They await a foretold messiah who will conquer the Matrix and restore human control to the world. That is the basic story line revealed through the first third of the movie.

We are introduced to the hero Neo (an anagram for "the One"), a talented computer hacker, as he sits before his computer. The screen blinks a message and Neo (Keanu Reeves) stares blankly—"Do you want to know what the Matrix is, Neo?" This is Neo's initial revelatory call. He is eventually led to Morpheus (the God of Dreams played by Laurence Fishburne) who is leader of a rebel band and

convinced that Neo is "the One," the long expected Messiah who will free humanity from its plight. Morpheus extracts Neo from his enslaved existence. He reveals the deluded nature of the Matrix and trains Neo in how to enter and manipulate the Matrix for his own purposes. "The Matrix is everywhere," Morpheus informs Neo. "It's all around us, here even in this room. ... It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth." But Morpheus can take Neo only so far; Neo's identity as a Messiah is a growing one and he must complete his own rite of passage and discover the path for himself. He is not even convinced he is "the One."

Two other key figures are worth noting. One is a woman named Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss), Neo's closest companion within the rebel group. She also is convinced, because of an oracle once received, that Neo is the One. The second is Cypher (Joe Pantoliano), an angry member of the rebel group who eventually betrays Morpheus and Neo to the cyber enemy. In the fast moving conclusion, Neo rescues Morpheus, battles virtual agents of the cyber enemy, is killed, resurrected, and finally appears to conquer the Matrix. The final outcome is left ambiguous as Neo warns the entity controlling the Matrix: "I know you're real proud of this world you've built, the way it works, all the nice little rules and such, but I've got some bad news. I've decided to make a few changes." In the final scene, Neo ascends to the sky like Superman. We must await the sequel to find out what those changes will look like.

Christian and Buddhist Parallels in *The Matrix*

The Christian messianic parallels are rather obvious. Neo, like Jesus, is the long-expected Messiah who is ultimately killed only to resurrect as a fully "divine" creature. The final scene even evokes the bodily ascent of Jesus to heaven. Also, Morpheus seems every bit the equivalent of John the Baptist, even to the point of baptizing Neo in a graphic scene in the liquid bowels of the human battery chambers. Trinity might be compared to Mary Magdalene and Cypher clearly parallels Judas. But where is God in all this? And what, we might ask, is the fundamental human problem suggested by this epic narrative?

Phenomenologically, most religious foundation myths suggest a basic existential problem of human existence. Confucian accounts of the idealized Chou dynasty, for example, inform its understanding of the fundamental problem—social disharmony due to the human tendency to neglect ritual and social propriety. For Hindus, it is bondage in the perpetual cycle of samsara, life after life, as illustrated in the *Bhagavad-Gita* and other mythological narratives. And for Christianity and Judaism, the fundamental problem is alienation from God due to our sinful nature and egoistic tendency toward trying to be like God, symbolized best in the Priestly Genesis creation narrative. The soteriological (relating to salvation) claim of Christianity is that God has offered his own son, the messiah, as a means to overcome that alienation. While *The Matrix* echoes the messianic motifs of the

Christian narrative, the "human problem" is clearly not alienation from God since God is nowhere present in the story—or at least not a personal creator God. Conrad Ostwalt sees this omission of the divine and the rejection of the supernatural as agent for the apocalypse as symptomatic of "the contemporary apocalyptic imagination."¹ God will not bring about the apocalypse—something else will. But *The Matrix* need not be understood only as a "contemporary" adaptation of the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic view; there are other ancient mythological perspectives that also omit the "divine" entirely. It is here, I think, that Buddhism offers an illuminating mythological parallel.

The most fundamental problem according to Buddhism is our ignorance of existential reality. If we could perceive the true nature of reality and the path to enlightenment, condensed in *Sakyamuni* teaching of the three marks of existence (impermanence, no-self, and suffering) and the *Four Noble Truths*, then we could overcome our ignorant state and achieve the insight of a Buddha (the "awakened one"). This "problem of the mind" is reflected in the first two verses of the *Dhammapada*, an early collection of sayings attributed to the historical Buddha:

All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain follows him, as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the carriage.... If a man speaks or acts with pure thought, happiness follows him, like a shadow that never leaves him.²

This is further and perhaps best articulated in the fourth century C.E. Mahayana philosophical school known as Yogacara, which resonates strikingly with *The Matrix*.³ Yogacara, also known as the "Consciousness Only" school (Vijñavada), asserts that the objective world we perceive to be real is ultimately a product of our minds.⁴ As with the Western Idealist tradition, this is not necessarily an ontological assertion (the objective world does not exist), though many observers have drawn this conclusion.⁵ Rather, this is more accurately an epistemological insight.⁶ That is, Western and Buddhist "idealism" emphasizes that every "object" is significantly altered by our perception and understanding; we know it second-hand as idea and we cannot know it before it is so transformed. "What is real?" Morpheus asks as he introduces Neo to the Matrix. "How do you define real? If you're talking about your senses, that you feel, taste, smell, or see, then all you're talking about are electrical signals interpreted by your brain." This quote might just as well appear in the philosophical dialogues of Vasubandhu, a fourth century founder of Yogacara.

While there may be striking similarities between Yogacara and Western Idealist statements concerning the relationship between objective reality and our perception of it, a fundamental difference lies in the soteriological aim of such an insight. Western Idealists strive to discern an *à priori*, absolute moral sense (Kant) or an "Absolute Mind" (Hegel) through rational analysis. In contrast, Yogacarins emphasize the essential path and process toward discerning the world free of

delusion. This necessarily entails various meditative and visualization practices—hence, the name of the school ("practitioners of yoga"). Meditation techniques were developed to, in a sense, deconstruct one's conditioned way of seeing the world and help one awaken to the way the world truly is. The manner in which one is able to create and control images in the mind through various visualization practices only serves to reinforce the notion that everyday conscious perceptions, like dreams, are no less "created." The practitioner comes to realize the illusory nature of the self and the external constituents of reality (Dharmas). Ultimately, one transcends subject-object dualism and abides in pure consciousness, an ineffable state of transcendent bliss. This is the soteriological goal of a Yogacara practitioner. According to tradition, as one progresses along this path, one procures powers to manipulate the perceived "objective" world. A Buddha actually attains the power to create his/her own cosmic realm.⁷ Perhaps this is the destiny of Neo in future episodes. That is to say, since Neo now possesses the power to control and manipulate the matrix, perhaps he will create a new world for beings to experience.

The parallels between *The Matrix* and this Yogacara Buddhist analysis of the human problem should be apparent by now. In both cases, the issue is one of the mind. In *The Matrix*, Morpheus informs Neo that he is a slave: "...you (like everyone else) were born into bondage..... kept inside a prison that you cannot smell, taste, or touch. A prison for your mind." Moreover, humanity's state of ignorance is largely of its own making in both accounts. In Buddhism, we are

karmically conditioned, both individually and collectively, by our past choices and behavior. The life one is born into is determined by one's karma, and one's present "worldview" is conditioned by one's context and volitional choices. According to *The Matrix*, humanity is controlled by an artificial intelligence it created. Thus, humans bear significant responsibility for their enslaved state.

In *The Matrix*, the perceived reality is literally "programmed" into our minds. Neo, despite his clear Messianic qualities, seems more like a Buddha or bodhisattva who comes to reveal to humanity its state of ignorance and, presumably, the way out. Perhaps the sequels (two to be shot simultaneously in the fall of 2000) will reveal more about this soteriological path, but the integration of martial arts with its yogic emphasis on discipline and mind control are noteworthy. The very process of Neo's training is a techno-cyber version of meditation. New software is input yielding a complete transformation of mind just as meditative practices are intended to transform one's perception and experience of reality.

As with any myth, this narrative is metaphorical and begs some kind of interpretation. How are WE "programmed," it seems to ask? What aspect of OUR reality is artificially constructed and enslaving us within a conceptual prison? Is technology liberating or imprisoning us? Is materialistic capitalism leading to true happiness or unrequited addiction? Do our cherished religious views bring us together or divide us? From a pedagogical perspective, these are fruitful questions for stimulating students to conduct their own interpretation of this modern myth

and its relevance to our social reality. In addition to the mesmerizing action scenes, it may well be that this implicit skepticism toward "institutional" control explains the popularity of this film for young adults.

Beyond these parallels to Buddhist and Christian worldviews, it is also important to note how this "myth" diverges from core values of these traditions. For example, in many respects *The Matrix* is a glorification of violence and patriarchal dominance. The one token female is, on the surface, notably androgynous or even masculine. And the graphic violence merited an "R" rating for the film. One might argue that the killings are not actual but analogous to killing the demons of one's mind or destroying the symbolic manifestations of hatred, greed and delusion (i.e., Sakyamuni's encounter with Mara beneath the Bodhi tree on the eve of his enlightenment). But the mesmerizing process of destruction, amplified by the technology of VFX or "bullet time" photography, transcends metaphorical license and clearly cultivates a more literal form of violence. It is here, as with all mythology, that we must pay due attention to the context of this myth and especially its commercial aims. The glorification of violence has clear commercial appeal to one of the primary target audiences of Hollywood producers—young teenage boys. So while on an abstract level, *The Matrix* indeed evokes many "religious" parallels to Christianity, Buddhism, and other mythological traditions, it also integrates arguably contradictory values of violence

and male dominance for commercial (or other) ends. Might we say it reifies some of the "social matrices" it allegedly purports to undermine?

This evident "disconnect" between the "religious" dimension of the sacred, on the one hand, and the "Hollywood" and cultural elements of the film, on the other, speaks directly to the contextual nature the mythologizing process. Myths are not the product of an individual author but a collective representation developed over time. Myths are always produced in "institutional" contexts. Thus, they are the by-product of a dialectical process that often yields internally conflictive elements.

Peter Berger and the Dialectic of Myth-Making

Sociologist Peter Berger asserts that the inherited worldview of any culture or society is a created one.⁸ Humans do not come into the world with a given relationship to it; we create our purpose and impose our own significance upon the world. This insight into the "constructed" nature of culture is, indeed, a fundamental insight of post-modernism. Berger proposed a three-step process by which we create (and re-create) our own socio-cultural reality. First, there is "externalization" or the initial outpouring of our conceptualizations onto the world. Berger cites language as an example of the first order here. I often use historical social structures based on race or inherited privilege to illustrate this point to my students. In the realm of religion, one might cite the different conceptualizations of the

"transcendent" in various contexts such as Yahweh, the Tao, Brahman, or kami.⁹ The second step involves the "objectivation" of this externalized reality. At this point, the externalized concept becomes objective reality. We experience it as though it has always been there and forget that we actually created it ourselves—e.g., "of course monarchy is the natural form of governance;" "isn't it obvious this racial class is inferior;" and so on. Finally, there is the "internalization" of this objectified reality. Berger writes that culture (including religion) "is a dialectic phenomenon in that it is a human product, and nothing but a human product, that yet continually acts back upon its producer."¹⁰ As I tell my students, this is the process by which each of us individually and as a society is "socialized" by a certain worldview. Education, ritual, and "family upbringing" all facilitate this internalization.

Significantly, Berger emphasizes that this process is not deterministic. We, as individuals and as a society, are in constant dialogue with our inherited "objectified" reality. And through an ongoing dialectical process, we may "externalize" new conceptualizations that, in turn, are objectified and internalized. The process is ongoing—and myth-making, I contend, is a significant dimension of this dialectical process. Myths often appropriate symbols or metaphors from different, sometimes conflicting, "objectified realities" and transform their meaning. The Biblical account of Noah and the flood borrowed significantly from the Babylonian tale of Utnapishtim within the Epic of Gilgamesh. At the same time,

the Biblical authors radically transformed the story by integrating the Hebrew god into the narrative. Similarly, the chronicles and interpretations of Jesus were influenced by the Messianic expectations of the time. But the Messiah that came was not the Messiah expected; thus, the gospel writers and Paul appropriated prophecy from Isaiah and the familiar metaphor of the sacrificial lamb to "externalize" another existential understanding of the Messiah. In this way, epic foundation myths often reflect Berger's dialectical process. They help transform the "objectified" reality and are vital instruments for "internalizing" a new (if only slightly) worldview.

The Matrix can be seen as a modern, self-conscious example of this myth-making process as well. In an interview with *Time* magazine, Larry Wachowski stated their mythological intent directly:

We're interested in mythology, theology and, to a certain extent, higher-level mathematics. All are ways human beings try to answer bigger questions, as well as The Big Question. If you're going to do epic stories, you should concern yourself with those issues. People might not understand all the allusions in the movie, but they understand the important ideas. We wanted to make people think, engage their minds a bit.¹¹

Mixing metaphors from Christianity, Buddhism, Greek mythology, and even cyber technology, *The Matrix* as myth may be seen as an analysis of the contemporary existential condition. It appropriates the decidedly Christian messianic mythological framework but imports a form of Buddhist idealism to radically

transform the (Christian) existential understanding of the human condition. In this respect, it dialectically produces a new worldview through myth.

It is impossible to know what narratives will become the foundation myths of our culture. But epic films like *The Matrix* are the modern day equivalent of *The Iliad-Odyssey*, the epic of Gilgamesh, or various Biblical myths. Indeed, one might well argue that popular epic films like *The Matrix* and *Star Wars* carry more influence among young adults than the traditional religious myths of our culture (The Biblical illiteracy of most of my "Christian" undergraduates would certainly attest to this.) It remains to be seen how influential *The Matrix* will become; the sequels may determine its longevity. At this point, I find it a useful and resonating example of our inherent proclivity toward myth-making and world-building in the cinematic medium. Beyond the abstract and "important ideas" that the Wachowski brothers wanted to tackle, *The Matrix* also illustrates the culturally imbedded nature of myth with respect to issues of gender, violence, and entertainment.

¹ There are, of course, other perspectives within the Christian tradition. Justo Gonzalez identifies and traces three different theological strands from Christianity's early period. This "substitutionary" version, which emphasizes inherited sin and necessary expiation/forgiveness, traces to Tertullian, the Synoptic Gospels and Paul. It is clearly most evident within the Protestant tradition. A second strand, tracing from Origin and perhaps the Gospel of John, defines the fundamental human problem more in terms of ignorance (in the sense that we have lost the necessary vision to see God), rather than sin. According to Gonzalez, this perspective is more characteristic of the Eastern church and later liberal theology. See *Christian Thought Revisited* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), especially pp. 50-64.

² See "Armageddon at the Millennial Dawn." *Journal of Religion & Film*, Vol. 4, No. 1, April 2000

³ Max Muller, editor and translator. *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. 10. *The Dhammapada*, Part I (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1965), 3-4.

⁴ I do not mean to suggest that the Wachowski brothers intentionally borrowed from the Yogacara philosophical perspective. They have apparently been reluctant to reveal their sources, though they have acknowledged some Buddhist influence. See *Time* magazine, Vol. 153, No. 15 (April 19, 1999), 75.

⁵ For a coherent overview of Yogacara thought, see the appropriate chapter in Paul Williams, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*. London: Routledge (1989), 77-95.

⁶ For representative examples of this debate with respect to Yogacara Buddhism, see John Keenan's *The Meaning of Christ: A Mahayana Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 169 and 209, and Paul Griffiths' *On Being Mindless: Buddhist Meditation and the Mind-Body Problem* (La Salle, Ill. : Open Court, 1986), 83.

⁷ Conrad Ostwalt has interpreted this idealistic dimension as a "contemporary revisiting of Plato's famous allegory of the cave and of neo-Platonic dualism of real and ideal..." See "Armageddon at the Millennial Dawn." *Journal of Religion & Film*, Vol. 4, No. 1, April 2000.

⁸ The most famous example here is Amitabha (Japan: Amida), the central Buddha of the Pure Land tradition of Buddhism in East Asia. Amitabha, while a bodhisattva, vowed to create his own Pure Land upon achieving Buddhahood. All who invoke the name of Amitabha with a sincere heart can be reborn in that majestic realm where enlightenment is more easily attained.

⁹ Clearly, one could interpret the message of Jesus in similar terms though ignorance is not traditionally defined as the fundamental problem. See endnote four.

¹⁰ See, for example, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York, Anchor Books, 1967) and *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (with Thomas Luckmann. New York: Doubleday, 1966).

¹¹ It is perhaps worth noting that Berger claims not to presume that humans "created" God. In fact, he acknowledges that the various conceptualizations of the "sacred" may very well be authentic responses to something truly real in the same way, he notes, that mathematics, though created, clearly corresponds to a given reality. Working this out, however, is an issue for theologians. Interestingly, the Wachowski brothers have acknowledged their interest in higher-level mathematics.