



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 22

Issue 3 *Special Issue: 2018 International Conference
on Religion and Film, Toronto*

Article 1

12-14-2018

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Recommended Citation

Chiou, Grace (2018) "Solidarity Beyond Obligation: Three Billboards Outside of Ebbing, Missouri," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 3, Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol22/iss3/1>

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Solidarity Beyond Obligation: Three Billboards Outside of Ebbing, Missouri

Abstract

In his film, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri*, writer-director Martin McDonagh creates a compelling parable regarding suffering, justice and solidarity. This unfiltered and witty, dark comedy examines the interlaced connections between humans and non-human agents during periods of anguish. Frequently, the ensuing communication includes abusive or belittling language and violent physical attacks. These extraordinary assaults are then contrasted with small gestures of kindness. While the film has faced various critiques, this piece of cinema creates a dynamic narrative to consider the human experience of grief and experiencing grace from one's enemies. In doing so, *Three Billboards* paints an inclusive message of solidarity with its exaggerated characters and offers insight into audience expectations of heroes and villains.

In his film, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri*, writer-director Martin McDonagh creates a compelling parable regarding suffering, justice and solidarity. This unfiltered and witty, dark comedy examines the interlaced connections between humans and non-human agents during periods of anguish. Frequently, the ensuing communication includes abusive or belittling language and violent physical attacks. These extraordinary assaults are then contrasted with small gestures of kindness. While the film has faced various critiques, this piece of cinema creates a dynamic narrative to consider the human experience of grief and experiencing grace from one's enemies. In doing so, *Three Billboards* paints an inclusive message of solidarity with its exaggerated characters and offers insight into audience expectations of heroes and villains. This paper employs Bruno Latour's actor-network theory to analyze the film's representation of neighbors in a small Southern town and institutional solidarity. I also consider the film's intertextuality. McDonagh has borrowed from themes in Catholic author Flannery O'Connor's work including misfit characters and revelation and alludes to her short story, "A Good Man is Hard to Find." In addition, drawing on a catholic understanding of grace and mercy, this paper argues that the New Testament parable of the Good Samaritan has parallels with McDonagh's own parable on the good action of a bad man both thematically and in audience response. The film not only conveys the notion that solidarity involves seeing and engaging the pain of others and even suffering with them; the message goes further in challenging social expectations in the audience's own lived experience.

In *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-creation of the World*, Brent S. Plate articulates how both religion and film are worldmaking enterprises. He argues that both provide "a way to view the world in which humans live, and not just the world as project on-screen. There are seemingly two (and often more) worlds, but they continuously affect one another."¹ Cinema enables an avenue for gaining insight into the human condition as audiences read into the

represented action and consequences. Thus, cinematic worlds and life off-screen find many points of intersection, one speaking to the other about the present condition and navigating both being human and religious life. Similarly, parables are a method in the Bible of using story and worldmaking to reveal deeper meaning. These stories offer an opportunity for audiences to draw a parallel between the story framework and their own lived experience.

Parables often disrupt and challenge expectations to convict and provoke audiences to rethink their view of the world. In John Dominic Crossan's work, the New Testament scholar compares the effects of a parable to the idea of a glass shattering which allows for the Kingdom work of God to break through. He quotes D.J. Hawkin on the concept of parabolic challenges to readers in Mark's gospel: "Mark's task as a writer is to introduce his readership to a new scheme of things, in which ordinary values are reversed and reasonable judgments disqualified."² Similarly, Crossan's examination of Jesus' teaching in parables includes an in-depth section on the Good Samaritan narrative as a message that reverses presuppositions and breaks into human consciousness, challenging how one might think and live. He argues that the central component of the story lies in audience reception to the protagonist and the significance of calling the Samaritan "good." His analysis assists with my consideration of the film's structure and reception to McDonagh's film.

Three Billboards operates as an on-screen parable to reflect on *who* and *how* one might respond to the needs of others. As biblical narratives spoke to the culture of the time, the film particularly speaks to the contemporary off-screen world with allusions to police brutality, racial tensions, sexual assault, and domestic violence. Much of the audience resistance to the film is towards Officer Jason Dixon, a racist detective, who later in the film attempts to do honest policing. Since he has repeatedly resorted to violence, this contradictory action diverges from his expected

nature and humanizes him to some degree. This connects with the setup of the Good Samaritan. In *Parables* (1973), Crossan's systematic examination of Jesus' parables, articulates three attributes in parables: advent of God, reversal, and action. The second component creates a polar reversal regarding cultural logic such as "the first shall be last, and the last shall be first." Within the film, McDonagh flips the script on how one expects Dixon, a bad man, will engage with the world and challenges the reader to follow along with his subsequent interactions with Mildred Hayes.

This paper also engages actor-network theory (ANT) to highlight the film's core emphasis on relationships and the interactions between humans and non-humans which might contribute to alternative modes of being. Dixon's character shifts not only due to the actions and reactions of human characters but also due to the roles of non-living actants, including Mildred's billboards, the police file on Angela's death, a letter to Dixon, two fires, and a cup of juice. ANT attends to entanglements among humans and technologies in the material world and how their interactions enable and/or constrain meaningful action. I incorporate this methodology into analyzing *Three Billboards* for its focus on interconnectivity to highlight the mediated interactions via material objects, and uncertain outcomes. In particular, for me, ANT contrasts the human desire and effort to control with the posture of humility in recognizing the agency of others in the network.

The film suggests the interplay between humans and nonhumans can come together to disrupt existing patterns and instead may build bonds of communion. These challenges include a critique of institutional solidarity in favor of a more inclusive vision of solidarity. The narrative also emphasizes the power of mercy and suffering with others and how this unity can be more transformative than retributive justice. Moreover, the film confronts dominant expectations of heroes and justice when characters are framed as victims and villains and no one is reliably virtuous.

Actor-network theory was first proposed by Bruno Latour in the 1990s as a reaction to trends in the field of sociology. Latour recognized that many sociologists frequently limited agency “to a small number of powers--human powers.”³ Latour expanded that in addition to human agency, non-humans constitute a broader network of exchanges. In conjunction with human actions, objects act, effect and enable possibilities.⁴ In building his argument around networks, he used the example of how diseases have effects. It is the dynamic between the patient, disease, and technology (treatment) that together shape and construct what is possible. He conceived that non-human actants, humans, and concepts can have agency, influence outcomes and co-create outcomes. In her overview of ANT, media and religion scholar Lynn Schofield Clark summarizes that “Humans are involved in ‘local interactions’, but they are not the agents that create the networks and are, therefore, not solely responsible for what is possible.”⁵ ANT opens up possibilities, rather than designating and assigning conclusions.

Communications scholar Nick Couldry also suggests that actor-network theory might push against the deterministic turn in media studies offering an opening to see how technology and media contribute to social change. He does however note the limitation of ANT including the need to recognize how power circulates.⁶ Clark writes that “a process of social change occurs within the network of humans, technologies and cultural practices. This change is nonlinear and is not predictable.”⁷ ANT considers the combined interactions of the network, decenters human agency and the focus on human control. Actor-network theory promotes an extended reflection of what might be overlooked in the project of worldmaking by only focusing on human action. For media studies, actor-network theory reframes how the media industry contributes to the social imaginary by co-constructing the network of action between the industry and everyday life.

In my paper, I draw on this framework that recognizes that media is an actant and apply it to illuminate how the relationship of agents, including the billboards and other non-humans, contribute to the in-story action and shape new possibilities and disrupt patterns of being, thinking and acting. ANT's central premise regarding the relational nature of networks underscores the underlying central focus in the film on relationships. The film highlights interpersonal and collective relationships—how they emerge, are contested and meaningfully engaged. Meaning in the film is constructed through interactions in the network rather than determined by a single actor or recipient. The material relationships between the characters and their environment signify the limits of human control and domination since it is the linkage of relationships that afford opportunities and unpredictable results. *Three Billboards* ends without a clear resolution, which reflects unpredictability in networks despite human intentions.

Film Overview

McDonagh initiates a story with what film analyst David Bordwell cites as one of life's most agonizing situations, when a parent loses their child. Nine months have passed since Angela Hayes has been brutally raped and killed. Mildred Hayes, played by Frances McDormand, is still grieving over her daughter's death and acting out of her pain that the killer has not been found. At the beginning of the film, Mildred passes by a set of three dilapidated billboards on the outskirts of town. She learns from Red Welby, a local advertising agent, that they have not been updated since 1986. Mildred sells her ex-husband's equipment to pay for new advertisements, in order to send a strong message to the local police department. She believes the police have not been diligent in pursuing the case. In bold, capital letters against a red backdrop, the billboards say in succession: "Raped while dying", "Still no arrests?", and "How come, Chief Willoughby?" The

billboards are posted over Easter weekend and are the first dominoes that begin a dynamic series of interactions.

The billboards catalyze much discussion, provoke anger and solidify allegiances among the town. The reactions and proclamations highlight the ideological issue of whose pain matters and related questions of social bonds and identity formation. Mildred battles with young and old townspeople, police chief Willoughby and then his less cogent counterpart, Officer Jason Dixon. Much of the film's conflict is driven by the attack and counter-attack between Mildred and Dixon. They are an extreme pair of opposites; she is sharp, witty and driven, while he is boyish and stunted.

Mildred's anger and disdain towards the police appears justified due to the lack of progress; Chief Willoughby, however, explains the case is challenging to solve without witnesses or a DNA match. Nevertheless, her rage escalates dangerously and in one scene she has an imaginary conversation about crucifying her enemies. Dixon is similarly frightening in his actions, using his position on the police force to inflict abuse. His character is a caricature of a respectable figure, a violent juvenile adult. McDonagh is known for creating savage and unforgiveable characters in his plays and films. Critics have called them caricatures or adult children without depth, ones that demonstrate casual homophobia and naturalized racism⁸ Similarly, this film continues in McDonagh's repertoire of confronting violence, brutality and mayhem with a cast of exaggerated characters. *Three Billboards* encapsulates the adage "violence begets violence" whereby a cycle of retribution reinforces and replicates conditions of rage and grief. The reactionary violence appears less thoughtful and deliberate. In contrast, mercy and forgiveness are posed as deliberate and active concepts that have the potential to disrupt reactive patterns and open new prospects. The film creatively juxtaposes and marries the tension between violence and kindness in telling this story of how we connect and relate to one another.

Actors in the network

The billboards, Mildred, and the police characters are now interlaced with Mildred's quest for the police to further investigate her daughter's rape and murder. Mildred's actions are a cry for help, motivated by her grief and desire for justice. But instead of seeing her sorrow, characters respond to her message with corresponding anger and frustration. The billboards are effective as a marketing tactic in generating interest across the small town despite the fact that Welby at first barely remembers their location. Thus, while Mildred has carefully planned a scheme to push the police towards resolving Angela's case, the audience sees her inability to control the message. Instead of spurring justice, the message polarizes the town and antagonizes the police department against her cause. Many of the townspeople begin to declare that they are on Chief Willoughby's "side," sympathetic to him because he is dying from pancreatic cancer. Applying actor-network theory, the linear action of Mildred sending a message for the police is shaped and transformed both by the institutional loyalties within the police department as well as by associations within the town.

Reflecting the theory's premise whereby outcomes in a network are unpredictable, the film depicts various interpretations to the billboards. The billboard message issues a challenging directive to the town to remember Angela's case has not been resolved. In particular, they pain Mildred's son, Robbie, as he is still mourning and chooses not to know the brutal details of his sister's death. Although Mildred has given him the police details of the crime scene, he has elected not to read it. His classmates and their parents eye Mildred wearily for her boldness in disrupting the town's equanimity. Yet the billboards are a mainstay for Mildred, a memorial to Angela and a place that offers her peace. She plants flowers by them and tends to the plantings in various scenes. They are so significant to her that she risks her own life to rescue them from fire. Ironically,

Willoughby later contributes to paying for the billboards to remain up, to torment Mildred. Thus, the town, the police, and Mildred are all interwoven, and the billboards move them towards certain alliances and reactions.

The billboards are the first non-human agents that have a significant role in the film. They loudly broadcast and spur action which is primarily antagonistic. Later in this paper, I will highlight the contributions of more mundane ephemera that influence the outcomes for Mildred's cause to find the killer. In these smaller gestures, McDonagh recognizes how small objects also play meaningful roles in the lives of the characters and how they engage each other.

Distinguishing between exclusive and inclusive solidarity

McDonagh begins a multi-pronged examination of solidarity in the film: its basis, its benefits and drawbacks, and its meaning. In her film analysis on female solidarity, Traci Roberts-Camp defines solidarity as “the union of sympathies” and a “fellowship of responsibilities” citing the connection between the French term *solidarité* to the English use of solidarity deriving from the concept of fraternity in the motto “*liberté, égalité, fraternité.*”⁹ Thus, solidarity has ties to the ideas of fraternity or fraternal order and shared responsibilities. Throughout the film, McDonagh alludes to different types of organizational associations including the brotherhood of police, priests, and gangs. The groups operate more as a closed system, with similar foundations and beliefs and have a clear group identity. These structures might provide emotional, social, physical and/or financial support. Mildred actively accuses them of being unified in their insularity rather than being outwardly focused. Relationships for the police or other collective groups are centered around protecting the institution from outside critique. These entities enable bad behaviors to perpetuate rather than be challenged and addressed. McDonagh creates a contrast between

solidarity built on narrowly defined connections and a more encompassing solidarity towards social outsiders.

The first example of group solidarity begins as the police force bands together in support of police chief Willoughby. Willoughby is first notified of the billboards by Officer Dixon. Willoughby's good-natured persona is reflected as he answers Dixon's call in front of his children. He says, "Dixon, you goddam asshole, I'm in the middle of my goddam Easter dinner... sorry kids." In the next scene, the police are allied against Red Welby, pressuring him to remove the billboards.

As Willoughby and Sergeant Curtis corner Red in his small office, the collective identity and authority of the police is represented. They intimidate him to disclose the person who paid for the billboards and Curtis warns him about "ramifications." The scene then cuts to Officer Dixon echoing the general police anger over the signs. He finds Welby in the street and threatens to punch him, though Willoughby intervenes and stops him. The police interactions with Welby point to their united sympathy for the chief and the reputation of the police force, over sympathy towards finding Angela's killer.

The union of sympathies also protects Dixon's position on the police force. Dixon's easily triggered violence is alluded to when he threatens Welby. He specifically represents the desire to dominate over the desire to serve. He is reputed to have assaulted a black man in custody and engages in extreme violence in the film. In one scene, Willoughby defends keeping hothead Dixon on the force to Mildred because he argues all law enforcement is bigoted in some fashion. Willoughby tells her, "Don't gimme that look. If you got rid of every cop with vaguely racist leanings then you'd have three cops left and all o' them are gonna hate the fags so what are ya gonna do, y'know?" Therefore, although Dixon is said to have committed police brutality, the other cops are hinted to be just as bigoted, recognizing the force is full of transgression like any

other human entity. The fellowship among the police department is attributed to a collective group identity that is less about the ability to serve others with integrity than their own desire to protect each another. Despite the moral obligation of their position, the actions of the force imply that solidarity is shared loyalty within the group rather than to those outside.

Mildred then directly assails the police force as a whole for not doing their jobs in a TV interview. She starts by announcing, “I mean, to me, it seems like the local police department is too busy goin’ round torturing black folks to be bothered doing anything about solving actual crime, so I kinda thought these here billboards might, y’know, concentrate their minds some.” Mildred is alluding specifically to Dixon’s reported actions. She continues that they are taking shortcuts instead of actively pursuing serious offenses by “eating Krispy Kremes and busting eight-year-olds for skateboarding in parking lots.” Mildred’s statement suggests the communal structure of the police force enables it to cover up police ineptitude and brutality.

Mildred continues to critique this form of fraternal group solidarity in a scene when the local priest comes to express the town’s displeasure over the billboards. He criticizes her lack of understanding regarding the town’s feelings. Since she stopped going to church, she lacks sympathy for the collective unity of the town and fails to see how the billboards have impacted it. Angry over his assessment, Mildred then goes into a tirade attacking him and the brotherhood of Catholic clergy members as all being culpable in sexual assault of children. She compares them to a gang which protects their collective interests over the vulnerable.

Many in the town express solidarity for Chief Willoughby against Mildred. In part he is a popular figure, but he is also battling cancer. They are siding with a popular authority figure over the town outsider and rebel-rouser. McDonagh thus critiques solidarity based on familiar social connections or social capital which enables injustice and fails to recognize the pain of outsiders.

Instead, he expands the notion of solidarity to a union of sympathy with our antagonists and enemies. McDonagh offers a multitude of reasons why solidarity beyond obligation can be beneficial. First, Mildred's attack on the police and the clergy shows that outsiders can offer accountability, bringing groups back to their principled roots. The film later demonstrates that the characters all have needs that can only be met by people from outside their established social circle. *Billboards* poses that expected allies cannot always see our pain, nor might they address it. Mildred and then Dixon are both treated as scapegoats who bear the violence of various aspects of the town's anger, raising the question of whether violence can be an effective solution towards social change. McDonagh uses his parable to consider the dynamic between retributive violence and mercy in order to bring social cohesion. Lastly the contrasts of good vs. bad, hero vs. villain are upturned as characters demonstrate both strengths and weaknesses, gentleness and violence. McDonagh sets up adversarial relationships between Mildred and Willoughby; Mildred and Dixon; Dixon and Red only to disrupt conflicts, shift allegiances and reverse expectations with moments of forgiveness and mercy. The concept of solidarity is elaborated through the film's arrangement of events that highlight alienation, individual points of pain, and movement towards one another.

Depicting Alienation and Interdependence

Solidarity is cinematically portrayed in the juxtaposition of scenes and intentional placement of characters. McDonagh repeats the *mise en scène* to create parallels between the characters and most effectively to demonstrate Dixon's personal growth. Through the story structure, McDonagh generates a visual narrative of isolation and difference. Mildred and Dixon are introduced as misfits in the town. Early on, both are rarely seen or talk with more than one

individual in a scene. In later scenes, characters are depicted together either working on a project or being unified in sentiment.

McDonagh introduces his main characters Mildred and Dixon as isolated figures in the town with their comparable drives down the same path. Mildred proceeds alone on an empty side route over rolling hills when she sees the aged billboards. She slowly pauses to consider their decayed facade. Mildred hatches her plan to use them towards resolving the case against her daughter's rapist and killer. Not long after, Officer Jason Dixon is patrolling at night along the same route and comes across the billboards as Mildred's new signage is being put up. He too is driving by himself and slowly passing at a similar pace. He stops to consider these billboards, but primarily because they are now a gleaming red against the darkness. In a comical way, Dixon pieces together the message backwards. The first billboard he sees catches his attention as it calls out the leader of his group, "How come Chief Willoughby." The second message regarding the lack of results is even more incendiary. The billboard sightings link Mildred and Dixon together in the ensuing action.

Chief Willoughby then attempts to persuade Mildred to stop her incendiary campaign. In a longer scene at Mildred's house, Willoughby reiterates the difficulties of solving a case without witnesses or DNA matches. Since Willoughby is characterized as a town hero and engenders sympathy because of his cancer, one might think that respected Chief Willoughby will find the killer. He dutifully re-examines Angela's file and expresses sympathy for Mildred's loss. But then he commits suicide. In a letter to his wife, he states his desire to avoid burdening her and their daughters as his body fails.

Midway through the film, McDonagh features a new storyline in which Dixon becomes the primary focus. Mildred and Dixon become combatants as he retaliates against the billboards,

angry that they are maligning his hero, Willoughby. Eventually Dixon becomes allied with Mildred's cause to find Angela's killer as he recognizes he needs to care about seeking justice on behalf of another. He grows in compassion towards Mildred, becoming more invested in the case as it becomes costlier to him. He pursues justice even after he is removed from the police force for being insubordinate to Willoughby's replacement. Notably this move indicates a break with the fraternity of the police force; everyone turns their back on him after that.

At the film's ending, Mildred and Dixon join forces and have camaraderie. Instead of creating a flow in which the story trajectory continues to focus on Mildred, McDonagh constructs a first section primarily about Mildred, then follows with a portion mainly on Dixon and then brings them together at the end. Mildred and Dixon are rarely in the same scene together, each operating mostly in their own realms or counteracting one another without direct interactions. This disrupts traditional formats of building a hero's story. According to script analyst, John August, the hero is the character one roots for, the character one wants to see win. Instead, *Three Billboards* does not follow traditional story writing with its format although it is designed for the audience to empathize with Mildred. The first portion of the film is centered on her grief and confrontations with the police but in the second half she is a secondary focus and instead, Dixon picks up her quest. Similar to a relay race, one character picks up the baton and then relies on the next teammate to run the race. At one point, Mildred puts her trust in Dixon to work on Angela's case. McDonagh creates a story of solidarity where Mildred and her cause might be central, but Dixon is an equal and necessary counterpart to the story. It is their relationship which contributes to the ending. While at the beginning of the film, the characters are seen individually in their cars, in the end they are in one car together on a similar mission. They do come to see each other as on the same side. The sense of togetherness is related to solidarity based on "the union of sympathies" and a

“fellowship of responsibilities” tied to Angela’s death. Despite initially taking on adversarial roles, McDonagh brings these two misfits together in commonality, on a road trip to visit a suspected rapist. The ending is ambiguous as to their ultimate actions, but Dixon has brought his shotgun with him.

Dixon in progress

Actor-network theory also assists in considering Dixon’s character arc as he is influenced by a myriad of actants, living and non-living. Dixon is a man-child, lounging around the office with earbuds in. His loud music frequently creates a barrier to his awareness of events around him. His desk is littered with comics and tchotchkes and at one point he cannot find his police badge.

In different encounters, Dixon is labeled and seen as a bad apple by the town. His mother demeans him, Mildred questions his position, black members scorn him. He is caught in a negative cycle of defensiveness, anger and violence. He is despised by the town and only Willoughby and his mother are on reasonable terms with him.

These negative interactions may contribute to his dramatic actions. Dixon frequently acts without thinking carefully about the consequences as evidenced by his intense reaction upon hearing of Willoughby’s death. When Dixon hears the news, he is so shaken that Sergeant Curtis holds him up as they both weep against one another. Curtis asks Dixon if he can stand and whether he might faint again. Then the scene cuts to Dixon as he charges to Red’s office and violently assaults him. The beating is filmed in real-time, as the camera follows Dixon with every step he takes across the street, up the office stairs, and with every blow to Red. The scene continues as Dixon throws Red out of the advertising office’s two-story window, then as Dixon goes down the stairs and assaults Red’s body further.

Dixon is fired by the new Chief Abercrombie for this outrageous assault. At night Dixon returns to the police department when it is empty to pick up a letter. Willoughby has left Dixon a parting gift, having written a letter for Dixon to read following his suicide. In his message, Willoughby reframes who Dixon is and who he can be, giving him an alternative identity, which enacts new possibilities in his life. The film points to the power of life-affirming words that disrupt ingrained patterns.

Willoughby articulates his belief in Dixon as a good man and the view that Dixon has the possibility to be a good detective. Whereas the town has marked Dixon as a bad cop and correspondingly a bad man, Willoughby writes, “I think you have the makings of a good cop because deep down you’re a decent man.” He gives him the advice to love, to be calm and to think, in order to become a good detective. In the letter, Willoughby alludes to Dixon’s anger over his family life and that he knows Dixon’s pitfalls. Following the premise of actor-network theory, where objects circulate in life and have certain causal properties, Chief Willoughby’s letter to Dixon drafts a new story for Dixon to see himself in. In this instance, the letter has an effect beyond Willoughby’s human powers to motivate Dixon while he is alive.

Willoughby loves Dixon even though he has thus far been a cruel and ineffective cop. He asserts that Dixon can be a successful detective if he learns to love, “Because through love comes calm, and through calm comes thought.” He continues that good detectives do not need a gun, and that “hate doesn’t solve anything.” As Dixon is reading intently, Mildred has fire bombed the police station believing it to be empty and flames are rapidly surrounding him. She mistakenly thinks Dixon or one of the police had set fire to the billboards. When Dixon finally notices the fire, he begins to chant Willoughby’s words “calm, calm” to himself as he tries to escape. Seeing Angela’s case file on his desk as he looks for a way out, Dixon takes the time to save it from the

flames before he jumps out the window. In this action he demonstrates concern not for his immediate interests, but for someone outside his immediate circle. Thus, the letter and the fire are part of the web of actants that shift Dixon's perspective and opens an opportunity for him to act in a positive manner. Instead of being oblivious to his surroundings or immediately reacting, Dixon follows Willoughby's advice to act differently. During this moment, the flames act as Dixon's punishment and/or purification for being unjust.

This scene bears unpacking further. McDonagh compellingly brings together two affective points of tension in considering what conditions might be generative and meaningfully impact a person's life. Although McDonagh has been informed by Flannery O'Connor's narrative focus on violence as generative for revelation, he also engages the human need and desire for love and support. In this he recognizes the uncertainty and risk attached with relationships over the ability to control outcomes. McDonagh's premise follows the logic of actor-network theory, whereby outcomes are nonlinear and unpredictable. Both violence and kindness act on Dixon and create unintended consequences, disrupting any intended purposes from Willoughby and Mildred. In the interplay, Dixon makes one promising action, saving Angela's file. Thus, the film creatively remixes these ideas and shows Dixon and consequently Meredith positively changed in this confluence of violence and kindness. Mildred is in shock when Dixon emerges from the fire. She now realizes she could have killed him.

Willoughby's message and calling for Dixon resemble the Christian message of grace. Willoughby loves Dixon in his imperfect and undeserving state. Before Dixon has enacted any redemptive actions or demonstrated repentance for his accused sins, Willoughby proclaims he is "good." In addition, Willoughby offers Dixon a new identity and story to live into. His message is similar to many Old and New Testament stories whereby characters are given new identities

especially in the case where the individual has failed in some manner. Moses was called by God to be a leader when he had murdered someone in anger. Peter, who had denied Christ three times, is called the “rock upon which the church will be built.” In addition, Dixon receives more messages of mercy in later interactions. These gifts of affirmation and grace begin to break the continued action/reaction violence between him and Mildred. In the New Testament, James 2:13 states that “mercy triumphs over justice.” This ideal is part of the disruption that transforms Dixon. When Dixon’s intellectual and policing capacities had been questioned by the town, he had lived into that identity as both a negligent and uncouth cop. He had consistently used dominating tactics or violence in his responses. However, when Willoughby, and later Red Welby and Mildred affirm and place value in him, he is less reactive and more thoughtful and deliberate.

The next series of events in the film bring Dixon to a confrontation with himself and his offenses. Dixon is stretched again in a tense situation faced with one of the victims of his violence and brutality. As Dixon is in the hospital receiving treatment from the fire burns, he is placed in the same room as Red, whom he had brutally attacked and thrown out of a building. Not recognizing his new, heavily-bandaged roommate, Red speaks kindly to his former assailant. Dixon starts to cry and apologize to Red. Confused, Red continues to console Dixon saying, “Hey man, don’t cry. You’ll be okay.” Once Red realizes the bandaged man is Dixon, he turns away. After a brief squabble between them, the viewer sees Red pouring a glass of juice by his bed, walking over to Dixon and taking the time to place a straw in the glass to enable Dixon to drink. Red then sits on his bed and cries. In this scene, Dixon receives his second moment of mercy. While he is helpless and vulnerable, covered in bandages in the hospital bed, Red offers him a gesture of forgiveness. Red resolves to come to the aid of his attacker when he has every right not to be kind to Dixon and is in the position to react in revenge. His action is startling in the context

of the film because, thus far, all of the other characters have enacted retribution when given the chance. Red sees his enemy's pain and chooses to move towards him and act kindly. McDonagh redefines solidarity and love in a simple gesture—giving your enemy a straw. This type of goodness, both unassuming and unremarkable, involves kinship with another person who has suffered. This action does not create good feelings or a sense of happiness but instead is an act rooted in common humanity. Indeed, Red does not appear celebratory in his virtuous action, instead he feels pain.

The hospital scene illustrates a vision of forgiveness posed by *Washington Post* writer and editor, Elizabeth Bruenig. In her article on the loss of forgiveness in American culture, Bruenig elaborates on the self-giving nature involved in forgiveness that might break cycles of provocation and retribution:

Forgiveness means having the technical right to exact some penalty but electing not to pursue it. This breaks the cycle of retribution with unearned, undeserved mercy. The face of forgiveness is bruised because it bears its own injuries with grace. So doing permits the cycle of retribution to go no further. It is a hard thing, but necessary, if huge numbers of strangers are going to live peacefully together.¹⁰

Red demonstrates the hard example of bearing his own pain when Dixon deserves retribution and chooses to serve Dixon instead. In contrast, Dixon has used his position on the police force to enact punishment wherever he had seen fit. He had chosen to dominate and produce violence which reproduced conditions for social violence and exclusion.

While for most of the film, Dixon acts beyond the boundaries of social acceptability, McDonagh reinforces Dixon's humanity in the hospital scene with a POV shot. With this camera position the audience sees Red through Dixon's eyes, which are half-obscured through the bandages on his head. By placing the audience in Dixon's viewpoint, the audience gains a sense of being Dixon and Dixon as a sentient being. McDonagh also reinforces the human connection

between Red and Dixon as their injuries involve a parallel visual effect. Red rolls off the roof of the building onto the street and Dixon rolls out of the fire onto the street. Both have bodies that experience pain and need healing, and they are both more than bodies but human beings. In addition, Dixon and Red have been injured in a war for retributive justice. They are victims; Dixon is Mildred's and Red is Dixon's.

The glass of juice is not only a signal of mercy, it teaches Dixon that being a good man may be costly to oneself and involve sacrifice and risk even towards "the enemy." Up to this point, Dixon had continually challenged and put barriers in Mildred's way. Dixon's pursuit of Angela's killer begins only after he himself has been hurt. In the next scene, the lesson from Red becomes actionable. Dixon is nursing his wounds in a bar looking terrible with his burns and bandages. As he overhears a stranger at a bar boasting about violence against a young woman, Dixon suspects he might be Angela's rapist. He begins to investigate by observing that the stranger has Idaho license plates and takes down the number. He then willingly starts a fight, knowing he will get hurt, in order to scratch the suspect for a skin sample.

When he suffers after starting the bar fight, Dixon is actively choosing to identify with Mildred's pain and choosing to join in her suffering. This suffering does not undo the violence Dixon has previously caused, but he is now bearing some of Mildred's burden. For the first time in the film, he is doing positive police work and making an active contribution towards the case. His actions also give Mildred an opportunity to have confidence that the police are trying. Although Dixon is not punished for every act of violence he has committed, the film offers a form of justice when Dixon's character, who represents injustice with his alleged brutality, is punished in the fire. When Mildred later admits she committed the arson, Dixon accepts her confession and his consequent suffering with equanimity.

Before considering the film's conclusion, the next sections consider the texts which provide insight into the narrative tension regarding how conditions of solidarity are fostered. McDonagh's work integrates both violence and kindness in considering how individuals are meaningfully impacted. This essay connects the film with two stories that consider the nature of grace. McDonagh explicitly alludes to Flannery O'Connor's short stories, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. In addition, the film has connections to the Good Samaritan parable. Scholars have identified both works as designed to challenge dominant ideologies and assumptions of the readers and audience.¹¹

Violence and Revelation: Connections to Flannery O'Connor

Flannery O'Connor is a pertinent author in this discussion of judgements, violence and solidarity. The film specifically visually references her stories but also, her work engages in narratives which have been called "grotesque." In *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor reflects on her own work and notes it has been labeled grotesque by Northerners. She contests the label and argues her writing is rooted in reality and her Southern experience of life. The cinematic connection between on-screen and off-screen reality is also part of the impetus for *Three Billboards*, as McDonagh had seen billboards while traveling calling out the police for their brutality.¹² McDonagh specifically relates to the ending of O'Connor's short story, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," where a Misfit criminal and a self-justified and virtuous Grandmother, find a bond. His two misfits, Mildred and Dixon, become companions as Dixon begins to empathize with Mildred's suffering. They have a genuine moment of kinship and unity.

At the beginning of *Three Billboards*, the film suggests that "A Good Man is Hard to Find" would play a role in the film's construction. As Mildred meets Red to purchase the billboards,

Red is sitting at his desk and appears to be reading O'Connor's book of short stories. Some of the primary themes of O'Connor's story are included in *Billboards*: misfit characters, the theme of social niceties and their violation, and physical violence as a potential opening for grace and self-revelation. O'Connor's message was not limited to the story itself but also in service of the reader. Douglas Novich Leonard writes that "O'Connor employed grotesqueness and violence in her stories to illustrate the workings of grace on her characters, but more profoundly she was attempting to simulate the workings of grace in the sensibility of the reader, that rare reader who would go deeper."¹³

O'Connor was very focused on the biblical concept of grace; her stories repeatedly articulate that "good works"—like kindness—can be irrelevant. In her writing, gentility and platitudes are often hampered by its outward appearance and fools the character into thinking they are "good" and virtuous; consequently, they are able to manipulate how others, including God, work in their life. In conjunction, Mildred's character appears to stand on the side of virtue, fighting against police brutality and seeking justice for her daughter.

In O'Connor's famed story, a grandmother clings to her sense of being virtuous and morally upright in the midst of meeting a dangerous criminal, the Misfit. She tries to stall him and persuade him not to kill her. Although his posse has killed her family, the Grandmother and the Misfit begin a conversation on faith. The Grandmother sees the humanity in the doubting criminal and declares, "Why you're one of my babies!" She then reaches out to the Misfit. In this tense situation, O'Connor uses the potential of violence and not kindness, to awaken the Grandmother to reality and a confrontation of her own nature, of others, and of God. O'Connor has explained that "... violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will work."¹⁴ In

visually referring to “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” McDonagh may be highlighting a similar narrative of violence, and how violence played a role in growing Dixon’s character and also shaping Mildred.

In her essay on the story, O’Connor articulates that “the old lady is a hypocritical old soul; her wits are no match for the Misfit’s nor is her capacity for grace equal to his.”¹⁵ *Three Billboards* creatively considers Mildred’s character and the viewing audience’s allegiance with her challenge to the police and systems of power. The film confronts the audience with her character’s progression as she enacts violence. This is especially thought-provoking in relation to Dixon’s portrayal as a grotesque figure, violent and dishonorable. Mildred may have the witty intelligence, but Dixon displays an ability to forgive his abuse at her hands in a way that Mildred was understandably unable to do towards her daughter’s killer or when she thought the police had set the billboards on fire.

As the name of their town foreshadows, their anger and resentment towards one another has “ebbed” as they confide in one another in the final scene. Looking a little hesitant, Mildred confesses to Dixon that she set the police department on fire. Dixon, showing a spark of intelligence, jokingly says, “Well who the hell else would it have been?” Mildred laughs genuinely and looks surprised he has figured it out. As Dixon had demonstrated throughout the film to be hyper-reactive, her reaction may be relief at his good-natured response.

For once Dixon seems intellectually on a par with Mildred, both having deduced that Mildred was at fault and having a joking attitude with his sharp retort. O’Connor also writes that in her story, the grandmother comprehends she “is responsible for the man before her and joined to him by ties of mystery which have their roots deep in the mystery she has been prattling about so far.”¹⁶ McDonagh may be pointing to how intelligent and prideful individuals like Mildred

make judgments that isolate those they view as inferior and that they need to value their humanity. In devaluing others and being prideful and self-reliant on her own abilities, Mildred represents a cadre that may push individuals such as Dixon into their violent reactive positions. Ironically, she accuses the police force of violence and then is responsible for a large part of the cycle of violence that ensues after her billboards are erected. Both Dixon and Mildred learn how to share in one another's pain through confronting the results of their violence.

Despite this moment of connection between Mildred and Dixon, in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" the story ends where the Misfit character shoots and kills the Grandmother. Once the murder has been committed, the Misfit remarks to his lackey, "she would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." O'Connor highlights the role of the shooter in bringing the Grandmother to have an epiphany regarding her own hypocrisy. In *Billboards*, both Mildred and Dixon are given pause after the fire at the police department to confront their violent tendencies.

But then the pair are off to Idaho to find the disturbing stranger from Idaho in a potential scenario of vigilante justice. Mildred says, "Dixon, you sure about this?" Dixon then asks, "about killing this guy? [pause] Not really, you?" Mildred concludes the film by saying, "Not really. I guess we can decide along the way." The Misfit's statements about the consistent need for a shooter demonstrates a human tendency to need others to bring us to our senses, repeatedly. Outsiders can often force one to re-examine habitual patterns of behavior or to shed light on needed areas of growth.

McDonagh emphasizes the need for solidarity in which there can be a form of accountability to interrupt the cyclic patterns of harm and abuse. While McDonagh recognizes the potential for violence to be disruptive, he also integrates the importance of grace as a door for

personal change. One character, notably the representational fool of the story, quotes a bookmark highlighting that “anger begets greater anger.”¹⁷ Anger in the film triggers more violence rather than the desire for solidarity. Whereas the desired story outcome for Mildred and Dixon might end with a sense of growth and a successful ending where justice is found, McDonagh instead concludes the film with an open interpretation. The characters may be on a path towards the same kind of violence; alternatively, they may just end up on a road trip together.

The Good Samaritan Parable and Audience Response

Three Billboards also has several similarities to the parable of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke and especially speaks to criticism that emerged. New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan’s examination of the Good Samaritan pinpoints the radical nature of the parable. Many teachings on the Good Samaritan interpret the parable as a lesson on all-encompassing care for those in need, even strangers. Instead, Crossan’s analysis of the parable in Luke 10:30-37 focuses on the distinctive Jewish context in which the audience would negatively react to the confluence of “good” as an adjective for a “Samaritan” person. He simplifies the crux of the narrative as “the priest and Levite/*saw*/passed by on the other side but the Samaritan/*saw*/had compassion.”¹⁸ Crossan articulates that the Good Samaritan parable is a polar reversal that violates social expectations of listeners at the time of Luke’s writing and in contemporary terms would have been politically incorrect and completely unthinkable.

The Good Samaritan parable tells the story of a man who is suffering, having been beaten on the side of the road. Despite seeing him, neither a priest nor a Levite come to the man’s aid, although they might be viewed as having this moral obligation. The third character might be anticipated to be the hero, and an ordinary Jew. Yet upsetting audience expectations, it is a

Samaritan, a repellant figure despised by the Jewish people, who steps forward to care for the suffering man in an exceedingly generous manner. The parable details how the objectionable Samaritan caringly bandages the beaten man and pays two days wages for his care. Crossan remarks that the story expands the particulars regarding the Samaritan's care in order to validate and verify his goodness.

This level of detail would be necessary as Samaritans were so reviled by the Jews that they were often slandered as dogs. Crossan unpacks how counter-intuitive employing a Samaritan as the hero of the story would be. He writes that the “whole thrust of the story demands that one say what cannot be said, what is a contradiction of terms: Good + Samaritan.”¹⁹ He continues building the idea that these terms would be a complete reversal of cultural norms by adding these words would be “the contradictory, the impossible, the unspeakable.”²⁰

This story challenges the choice to narrow allegiances by focusing not on the action but the doer. The parable reverses the ontology of the characters wherein the priest and Levite, respected authorities, become bad, and the “bad” Samaritan becomes good. This reversal exemplifies “the reversal caused by the advent of the Kingdom in and through the challenge to utter the unutterable...”²¹ For Crossan, this is a method of placing the hearer's world under judgment: “the metaphorical point [of the story] is that *just so* does the Kingdom of God break abruptly into human consciousness and demand the overturn of prior values, closed options, set judgements and established conclusions.”²² Similar to *Three Billboards*, this parable is a story of reaching towards others in their pain and recognizing that the despised enemy can do good. *Three Billboards*, “A Good Man is Hard to Find” and the Good Samaritan parable have similar parallels whereby the narratives upset boundaries of vice and virtue by including characters who are self-justifying and self-protective alongside a morally or religiously reprehensible misfit.

The likely response of the Jewish religious authorities to the story of the Good Samaritan is analogous to some actual audience responses to *Three Billboards*. A character who is seen as an imbecile and violently dangerous, should not be able or allowed to do good. Alyssa Rosenberg of the *Washington Post* titled her review, “Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri didn’t need its racist cop.” Her critique reveals the desire to erase Dixon from the film. Primarily she finds the story message and Dixon’s moral awakening inconsistent writing: “Of course, Dixon is in the movie. And his redemption doesn’t merely defang his previous venomous bigotry; it softens Mildred’s character development.”²³ Similarly, for the implied audience to the Good Samaritan story, the religious figure would presumably be offended that the hero of the story would be a non-Jew and a member of a rejected and despised group. Within the passage in Luke, the listener identifies “the one who had mercy”²⁴ without explicitly naming him as “the Samaritan,” suggesting a possible desire to efface this identity. Both parables, the Good Samaritan and *Three Billboards*, may incite a reasonable angry response towards an unbearable enemy. However, they reveal the boundaries that get drawn against characters that have been branded as “the enemy.”

The film has been critiqued for what has been called a redemption of a racist cop and a connected misunderstanding of the American South. In the *Daily Beast*, Ira Madison III introduced his article with the headline, “Tone-Deaf ‘Three Billboards’ Tries Absolving White People of Racism. And Oscars Season Loves It.” Gene Demby from NPR tweeted, “When i say “whiteness” in this context, i mean: this racism is waved off by the police chief, who is painted as a good dude who happens to be dying, and the racist cop who we see beat everyone is given an interiority not extended to any of the black characters.”²⁵ There is no defense for Dixon’s accused torture of a black man in custody, an event that is hinted to have occurred before the events of the film. However, my analysis points to the overall meaning and necessity of Dixon in the film. I

argue that Dixon's despised actions do not warrant an erasure of his existence. Instead his story points to the possibility of experiencing grace through others, even those we may despise or find objectionable. What the film does accurately portray is one basis of why people marginalize others and use them as pawns, neglecting their humanity. The *National Catholic Reporter* review calls the film "a parable of American anger" that includes scapegoating and a spiral of violence.²⁶ In the film, as individuals become too focused on their own inner turmoil, grief and rage, other people become consequently marginalized.

In addition to scaffolding the film as a story about both Mildred and Dixon and their journey together, values rooted in the ideal of love, mercy and compassion, work in the characters to quell some of the violence. McDonagh pinpoints the ability to identify and see individuals as valuable regardless of abilities or past actions. While Dixon is in general a disreputable character, Willoughby appreciates Dixon regardless, willing to keep him on the police force and taking the time to write him a final goodbye message, stating that deep down he is a good man. Willoughby's belief in the flawed cop is questioned by both Sergeant Curtis and Mildred, but Dixon does demonstrate the possibility for change.

Reaction to the film exposes the general consensus that desires justice and the yearning to punish undeserving transgressors. While the film is not easy for all audiences in terms of violence and language, the message of solidarity and unity in the human condition that individuals are both sinners and saints is the parable's reversal of tribal thinking. No individual can meet the standard of perfection but the recognition of goodness in every person can encourage growth and new directions. McDonagh refines the concept of solidarity as a union of sympathy wherein the human experience involves pain and suffering but whereby individuals can share in those burdens, moving towards one another out of compassion and value for the human person.

Three Billboards thus speaks to social conditions and the nature of scapegoating in the desire for social cohesion and a semblance of solidarity. René Girard's work on retributive violence addresses what he sees as the universal desire to scapegoat and the solution in Christianity wherein Christ becomes the scapegoating sacrifice. Girard notes that in escalating cycles of violence, social groups turn against an individual or minority group to create a resolution and "clear the air."²⁷ In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, he opines that the sacrifice of Jesus in Christianity is the answer to the limitless violence that humans engage in via the sacrificial impulse. He states, "all of this had to happen, since humanity has no wish to give up sacrifice by common agreement, simultaneously and unanimously."²⁸ McDonagh engages this endless human desire to scapegoat throughout the arc of *Three Billboards*. First Mildred bears the town's anger over her billboard disruption. Then Dixon endures Mildred and the town's anger over racial injustice. Finally, the Idaho stranger becomes the solution to Mildred and Dixon's desire to resolve Angela's case. Girard illuminates the irony in such situations by quoting Andre Glucksmann: "You shall not judge, O man, for when you judge another you are doing the very same thing."²⁹ Underlying Mildred and Dixon's motivations and actions is the cycle of making judgments and categorizations that divide them. The townspeople and Mildred and Dixon scapegoat others due to their emotional state and desire to blame someone for their pain. It is when Mildred and Dixon engage in meaningful dialogue and build a relationship that they can then identify with each other's pain. Mildred begins to understand how Dixon's mother belittles him, and Dixon feels compassion for Mildred as a grieving mother. The retributive violence in the film thus offers both an insight into the realistic actions of the cinematic characters to enact violence but also into lived experience in the contemporary social world involving judgements, scapegoating and physical abuse.

McDonagh has made limited remarks on the film but he does state that one of his driving questions behind the film is the question of heroes and heroic action. For him, there are never fully good characters. This explanation demonstrates McDonagh's desire to connect with all individuals in their darkness and pain. In McDonagh's body of work he has long been concerned with individuals in their transgression and when they might find grace. *Three Billboards* engendered tremendous antipathy in depicting a story of mercy and forgiveness towards the despised. However, the film is perhaps more a commentary on humility whereby individuals recognize the limitation of their ability to do good to ascend to perfection, and the dependence on both human others and minutiae in life. The billboards, Willoughby's letter, Red's glass of juice, and Mildred's Molotov cocktails *act* in the network of the film which reinforces Latour's notion that in a network of human and non-human actors, these mutually influence and have the ability to impact and transform the network of relationships. Moreover, the role of the most insignificant objects carries the most positive effect, having the power to transform Dixon's ability to see himself and others in a new light.

Solidarity in Pain and Need

The film does not bring a successful ending for Mildred in that Angela's killer is not found. While Chief Abercrombie praises Dixon for his actions to try to match DNA, he states that the bar stranger is not a match with Angela's killer. Both Dixon and Mildred are saddened by this outcome. When Dixon calls Mildred to let her know this news, she acknowledges that she is "thankful for a day of hoping." To be given a day of hoping seems to then shift something in Mildred's character and her tone is humble and less strident in the last scene. She admits her wrongdoing to Dixon.

Dixon and Mildred have to confront themselves and their capacity for violence, to acknowledge their limits and learn to value one another. Both are struggling with their loss of a loved one and with the persistent desire for justice. They are also victims of violence by people close to them. Mildred was abused by her ex-husband and Dixon faced emotional trauma from his mother. As they recognize their positions as both victims and victimizers, their alliance points to conditions for solidarity. The film rejects clear divisions of “good guys” versus “bad guys.” *Three Billboards* concludes that solidarity should not be blind allegiance among singular groups and structures such as the police, priesthood, or a town. Instead, bonds of solidarity are wider and can be built along a sense of mutual responsibility and interdependence: a solidarity beyond obligation.

The actors in the film’s network are not only connected via their humanity and actions, they are also interdependent in their affective and material needs. Mildred is depending upon the police to find Angela’s killer. Later her billboards are rescued because Chief Willoughby has paid for them to stay up. Dixon eventually works on her behalf, offering her a sense of hope. Dixon needs Willoughby to believe in him, first to maintain employment and later even after he is fired, to courageously pursue justice for Mildred. The film visually conveys that Dixon has learned from his mentor when Dixon and Mildred have a conversation about the Idaho stranger. Early in the film, when Chief Willoughby tries to persuade Mildred into removing the billboards, they sit on a swing set in her yard. In this later scene, Dixon sits in the same swing in the same position talking to Mildred. The viewer sees Dixon in Willoughby’s place symbolizing that Dixon is learning his mentor’s ability to connect with others. Solidarity can be enabled by acts of generosity, mercy and forgiveness.

While the film certainly offers a critique of organized religion and solidarity that affords collusion and enables violence, McDonagh points to the universal human experiences of pain, grief, and weakness. His characters are all flawed and broken, contributors to patterns of violence against both close relations and strangers. Yet violence does not offer a clear solution for resolving experiences of pain and anger. Shame and exclusion did not change Dixon's character but reinforced bad habits. McDonagh highlights the small and ineffable gifts as symbols of mercy to a fallen man. Dixon then attempts to do what town hero Willoughby desired by working to solve Angela's case and being empathetic to Mildred's pain. Mercy has the ability to triumph over justice in that mercy has the potential to enable justice. Whereas Mildred's call for justice with the billboards ignites anger and begins a pattern of violence, mercy for Dixon disrupts the cycle and enables a different pathway. This reflects the biblical framework wherein forgiveness is offered to the ungodly thus enabling new life. Caught in their cycles of anger, both Dixon and Mildred are reliant upon mercy from others. Acts of mercy enable new identities and expand their viewpoints, effecting personal transformation.³⁰

¹ Brent Plate, *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-creation of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 15.

² Quoted in John Dominic Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenges of the Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers 1973), 78.

³ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 138.

⁴ *Ibid*, 138.

⁵ Lynn Schofield Clark, "Considering Religion and Mediatisation through a Case Study of J+K's Big Day (the J K Wedding Entrance Dance): A Response to Stig Hjarvard." *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 12, no. 2 (2011): 170. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14755610.2011.579717>.

⁶ Nick Couldry, "Actor Network Theory: Do They Connect and on What Terms?" in *Connectivity, Networks and Flows: Conceptualizing Contemporary Communications*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2008. http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/52481/1/Libfile_repository_Content_Couldry%2C%20N_Couldry_Actor_network_theory_2008_Couldry_Actor_network_theory_2008.pdf.

⁷ Clark, "Considering Religion and Mediatisation," 171.

⁸ Lillian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan, "Introduction," in *The Theatre of Martin McDonagh: A World of Savage Stories*, ed. Lillian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2006), 7.

⁹ Traci Roberts-Camps, "Female Solidarity in the Films of María Novaro: Aquí Sólo Encontramos Amigas," *Chasqui: Revista de Literatura Latinoamericana* 41, no. 2 (2012): 53.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Bruenig, "We Are No Longer Capable of Forgiving Our Enemies." *Washington Post*, June 1, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/we-are-no-longer-capable-of-forgiving-our-enemies/2018/06/01/1d20eb50-65b4-11e8-a69c-b944de66d9e7_story.html?utm_term=.631eff28de45.

¹¹ Douglas Novich Leonard, "Experiencing Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man is Hard to Find.'" *Interpretations*. 14. 2 (Spring 1983):48. JSTOR. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23241513>.

¹² Martin McDonagh, "Playback: Martin McDonagh on 'Three Billboards' and an Attraction to Dark Humor." Interview by Kristopher Tapley. *Variety*, January 11, 2018, <https://variety.com/2018/film/podcasts/playback-podcast-martin-mcdonagh-three-billboards-outside-ebbing-missouri-1202661188/>.

¹³ Leonard, "Experiencing Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man is Hard to Find,'" 48.

¹⁴ Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Strous and Giroux, 1969. Reprint, New York: Farrar, Strous and Giroux, 2015) 112.

¹⁵ Ibid, 111.

¹⁶ Ibid, 111-112.

¹⁷ This is the young girlfriend of Mildred's ex-husband, Penelope.

¹⁸ Crossan, *In Parables*, 63.

¹⁹ Ibid, 64.

²⁰ Ibid, 64.

²¹ Ibid, 66.

²² Ibid, 65.

²³ Alyssa Rosenberg, "Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri' Didn't Need Its Racist Cop," *Washington Post*, November 28, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/act-four/wp/2017/11/28/three-billboards-outside-ebbing-missouri-didnt-need-its-racist-cop/?utm_term=.6bd65f789f51.

²⁴ Luke 10:37

²⁵ @GeeDee215, Twitter post December 3, 2017.

²⁶ Erik Lenhart, "Three Billboards' Is an American Parable of Anger," *National Catholic Reporter*, December 13, 2017, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/ncr-today/three-billboards-american-parable-anger>.

²⁷ Mark Heim, "The End of Scapegoating." *The Institute of Faith and Learning at Baylor University*: (2016). <https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/264317.pdf>.

²⁸ René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1987), 440.

²⁹ quoted in Girard *Things Hidden*, 441.

³⁰ I would like to thank the reviewers of the *Journal of Religion and Film* for their feedback on this article as well as Jonathan Chandra and Levi Nelson for their insights.

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