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Scorsese and Religion

Abstract

This is a book review of Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston, eds., *Scorsese and Religion* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2019).

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Author Notes

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Barnett, Christopher B. and Clark J. Elliston, eds., *Scorsese and Religion*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2019.

Martin Scorsese is arguably the most iconic and prolific living American filmmaker. Like Hitchcock and Kubrick before him, his surname is immediately recognizable and is associated with his distinctive style as an auteur. A producer for emerging filmmakers, as well as an advocate for film preservation and restoration of world cinema,¹ Scorsese's cinematic oeuvre presently spans over five decades, and his passion for cinema—what he lovingly calls “the pictures”—has only deepened and expanded over time. His oft-quoted remark, “my whole life has been movies and religion,” could likely serve as the mantra for many authors and readers of the *Journal of Religion & Film*. Christopher Barnett and Clark Elliston's aptly and succinctly titled edited collection in Brill's “Studies in Religion and the Arts” series, *Scorsese and Religion*, is a reflection of this link or, better, this binding (*religare*) between the cinematic and the sacred. Barnett and Elliston have curated an exemplary group of contributors whose insights into Scorsese's films are as erudite as they are passionate, and students of religion and film history will benefit from such perspectives.

The volume's general conceit is that “Scorsese cannot be properly understood without considering the ways that his religious interests are expressed in his filmmaking” (6). However, though theologians themselves, Barnett and Elliston make clear that the latter descriptor in their title is intentionally “Religion” and not “Theology,” a choice which distinguishes this book from their earlier collection on Terrence Malick.² They explain that, in a negative sense, “it is clear that Scorsese does not explicitly ‘do’ theology in his films,” while, more positively, “Scorsese deals with religion as an aspect of human being writ large, as something that exceeds Christian doctrine and is of ‘cardinal’ (or ‘basic’) importance to all human cultures and relationships” (3–4). That is, even as Scorsese himself can be properly deemed a “Catholic” filmmaker—a topic taken up

explicitly in Part 1 of the volume—his films ought to be considered as more than merely cinematic depictions of a Catholic imagination or worldview, as they can evoke a wider variety of religious, theological, and philosophical insights. Even as I may disagree with the editors’ premise that Scorsese is not “doing” theology in his films—much of his cinema appears to me to be explicitly wrestling with theological questions and subjects, albeit not in a strictly “academic” or systematic sense—I certainly appreciate the more expansive, generative scope emphasized by the chosen term “religion” and reflected by the contributors’ varying scholarly backgrounds and expertise.

Scorsese and Religion shares an almost-identical structure with Barnett and Elliston’s *Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick*. The book is outlined in three parts: (1) a summary of Scorsese’s personal background as a “Catholic” filmmaker, (2) the broader religious influences and themes which characterize Scorsese’s filmography in general, and (3) religious “readings” of a handful of Scorsese’s more contemporary individual works—the most recent film considered is *Silence* (2016). In Part 1, “Scorsese and Catholicism,” Marc Raymond and Gueric DeBona, OSB, each offer a chapter looking at the life of Scorsese through a particular lens. Raymond describes Scorsese’s upbringing and experiences in New York from an auteurist perspective, while DeBona unpacks how Scorsese’s work display an “ecclesial imagination” which cinematically navigates the liminal transition of pre- and post-Vatican II Catholicism. These introductory chapters would serve well as inclusions in any teaching syllabus on Scorsese, as they offer both biographical insights of Scorsese’s life as well as scholarly analysis of his films. Part 2 offers a more thematic approach to Scorsese’s corpus, placing various films in dialogue with thinkers such as Dostoyevsky (Chapter 3) and Girard (Chapter 5), or addressing issues such as the depiction of violence (Chapter 4) and the on-screen portrayal of women (Chapter 6). In Part 3, the focus turns to individual films, with chapters examining *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), *Kundun* (1997),

Bringing Out the Dead (1999), *Shutter Island* (2010), *Hugo* (2011), *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013), and *Silence* (2016).

One limitation of the book is that its subject matter is simply too broad—as of this writing, Scorsese has directed 25 feature-length fictional films, 16 feature-length documentaries, and a variety of short films, television episodes, and mini-series, with at least one forthcoming film in pre-production.³ Such a breadth of cinematic output generates necessary limits for an edited collection: a truly comprehensive investigation of Scorsese’s corpus could produce several volumes. As such, the authors in *Scorsese and Religion* must be selective, and the book does not offer in-depth analysis for a number of Scorsese’s films, such as *The King of Comedy* (1983), *After Hours* (1985), *The Color of Money* (1986), *Cape Fear* (1991), *The Age of Innocence* (1993) or nearly any of his documentaries, perhaps due to a perceived lack of overtly “religious” content within these works. Likewise, *The Irishman* (2019) is only briefly mentioned in passing, as it was in post-production when the volume’s entries were written.

Nevertheless, *Scorsese and Religion* generally overcomes such limitations by offering detailed critical analysis of the included films. The thematic chapters in Part 2 provide a range of approaches one could adopt when exploring almost any auteur’s work, serving as a possible model for future, similar collections. Some key highlights include Barnett’s chapter observing the Dostoevskian elements within a number of Scorsese’s films, such as the observable link between *Taxi Driver* and *Notes from Underground*, as well as how Scorsese’s portion of the anthology film *New York Stories* (1989) is directly inspired by Dostoyevsky’s novella *The Gambler*. Through a critical feminist approach, M. Gail Hamner addresses “the woman question” raised by Scorsese’s mostly male-centric early cinema, ultimately concluding that the filmmaker is decidedly “not a feminist” (145). The lengthy and substantial chapter offers close readings of *Who’s That Knocking*

At My Door, *Mean Streets*, and *Raging Bull* through the lens of Roman Catholicism and white masculinity (117–136), before turning to a broad sweep of the female depictions in *Boxcar Bertha*, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, *Taxi Driver*, and *New York, New York* (136–145).

In Part 3, the aspects of religion are often the forefront of the analysis, such as in Kerry P.C. San Chirico's chapter examining how a "Catholic" filmmaker can tell a "Buddhist" story in *Kundun*, positing that "we can glean a particular kind of filmic inter-religious encounter and a living Christian theology of Buddhism" (185). Likewise, as Gerard Loughlin considers *Bringing Out the Dead* as a palimpsest which overlays new images onto Scorsese's older works (*Taxi Driver* in particular), he turns to both Dante's *Inferno* and Julian of Norwich's "shewings" to better understand the explicitly religious imagery of the film. In other chapters, the dimension of "religion" is more implicit or inferred. For instance, philosopher Stephen Mulhall rarely addresses the actual religious imagery in *Shutter Island* (of which there is plenty), instead bringing the film into philosophical dialogue with Scorsese's *The Aviator* and Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) in order to examine DiCaprio as an actor and cinema as an invention of modernity. In contrast, Clark Elliston points out that Scorsese's *Hugo* "contains neither shocking violence nor overt religious imagery" (248), making it an anomaly in Scorsese's filmography; Elliston argues that it is redemption through human relationship which is mainly on display in the adaptation of Brian Selznick's novel.⁴ Elliston, unfortunately, often conflates the book's narrative with the events in the film when the differences between the two are significant and worth noting. However, Elliston also (rightly, in my view) posits that *Hugo* "illuminates the transformative, and even redemptive, power of film" (248), that in a modern secularized world of mastery and technology, "films offer unique opportunities for meaning-discovery in the world" (265), a notion reminiscent of Gilles Deleuze's contention that "there is a Catholic quality to cinema," and, "restoring our belief in the

world—this is the power of modern cinema.”⁵ In this sense, the religion of *Hugo* is *cinema itself*, or film *as* religion.

Approaching the opposite end of the spectrum of modern secularity, D. Stephen Long argues that there is a certain nihilism on display in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, a loss of theological and metaphysical significance in modern American capitalist society. Long’s chapter struck me as being especially good, as it draws from the arenas of theology, philosophy, political theory, and film studies to address Scorsese’s darkly comic corporate crime epic. Finally, the excellent concluding chapter from Darren J.N. Middleton and Mark W. Dennis on *Silence* focuses on the film’s reception in both Anglophone and Japanese contexts. Middleton and Dennis include excerpts from personal email conversations with two of the film’s Jesuit consultants, James Martin, S.J., and David Collins, S.J., both of which offer lengthy personal insights into their own religiously-informed interpretations of what is arguably the apotheosis of Scorsese’s religious cinema. The Japanese reviews are also noteworthy, particularly a quote from Muneya Kato, a Japanese writer who “maintained a close teacher-student relationship with Shusaku Endo,” the author of *Silence*. Kato recounts that Endo himself was a fan of Scorsese and desired that the Italian-American director adapt the novel (299). Kato offers his own effusive praise of Scorsese’s film: “Although there has been a great deal of literary criticism on *Silence*, this film is superior to all of it. This is the first time that anyone has displayed this splendid level of accuracy in understanding the true meaning of *Silence* as a work. To be honest, I think that the film is incredibly powerful” (305).

In an op-ed published by *Harper’s* in its March 2021 issue, Scorsese decried the recent state of the film industry, how the art of cinema is “being systematically devalued, sidelined, demeaned, and reduced to its lowest common denominator, ‘content’.” Even as he lauded the

benefits of certain streaming services and curatorship, Scorsese also critiqued the reduction of cinema to an “algorithm” for making a profit, where any and all cinematic “content” has become “a business term for all moving images: a David Lean movie, a cat video, a Super Bowl commercial, a superhero sequel, a series episode.” He concludes, “Those of us who know the cinema and its history have to share our love and our knowledge with as many people as possible. ... They are among the greatest treasures of our culture, and they must be treated accordingly.”⁶ Though Scorsese was singing the praises of Federico Fellini and not his own films, nevertheless, we ought to include his films in the cultural repository of cinematic treasures. Following Scorsese’s exhortation, scholars of religion and film can (and should) share our love and our knowledge with as many people as possible. *Scorsese and Religion* plays a part in this evangelistic effort, offering to both scholarly and popular audiences a treasure trove of observations, critiques, and insights which are each imbued with a personal appreciation of Scorsese’s films. If there ever was a “Church of Cinema,” Scorsese would surely be a member of its ranks.

¹ See the World Cinema Project (WCP), a non-profit organization Scorsese founded in 2007 for the preservation and restoration of neglected world cinema (<http://www.film-foundation.org/world-cinema>) and the African Film Heritage Project (AFHP), a joint initiative begun in 2017 which aims to locate and preserve 50 classic African films.

² Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston, eds., *Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick*. (London/New York: Routledge, 2016).

³ Scorsese is currently working on a project, *Killers of the Flower Moon*, an adaptation of David Grann’s non-fiction book of the same name; the film stars Leonard DiCaprio, Robert De Niro, Jesse Plemons, and Lily Gladstone. See David Grann, *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI* (New York: Doubleday, 2017).

⁴ Brian Selznick, *The Invention of Hugo Cabret* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2007).

⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 171–172.

⁶ Martin Scorsese, “Il Maestro: Federico Fellini and the lost magic of cinema,” *Harper’s Magazine*, <https://harpers.org/archive/2021/03/il-maestro-federico-fellini-martin-scorsese/> (Accessed February 16, 2021).