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From Superman to Brahman: The Religious Shift of The Matrix Mythology

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Abstract

In this article, we argue two points: 1) that the religious images, symbols and allusions of *The Matrix* mythology shift decidedly from the West to the East; and 2) that the Western end of this shift is grounded not in the Christian religious tradition, but in Nietzschean humanism. This humanism explicit in the opening lines of the history of the *Matrix* myth, as found in *The Animatrix*, retains its dominance through *The Matrix* and into *Reloaded*, at which point the myth turns increasingly eastward and ends in the cyclical images of Vedic and Puranic creation and dissolution.

Introduction

Religious exegeses and interpretations of the *Matrix* trilogy are abundant and include perspectives from all of the major world religions. Entire books have been written interpreting the trilogy through the lens of individual traditions,[1] and several edited works contain interpretations from multiple perspectives.[2] This diversity reflects what Doty views as the primary characteristic of postmodern art, namely, that it is a "pastiche" in which "particular images from elsewhere or the past may be brought in apparently by arbitrary importation, not because they are significant in the plot by themselves."[3]

Because of this fact, some have suggested that religious pluralism may be the best lens through which to view *The Matrix* trilogy.[4] The simultaneous use of multiple allusions, images and symbols from multiple religious traditions supports this notion.[5] However, what we do not find in the voluminous analytical literature is a discussion of the religious shifts the trilogy makes. While there is a menagerie of religious symbols and images indicative of a pluralistic outlook at work throughout the trilogy, particular religious motifs and images do seem to take precedence at certain points and thus help to shape the contours of the myth.

The primary religious shift in the myth is essentially one from West to East, beginning not with Christianity, as many have supposed, but with a Nietzschean

humanism that uses the images and symbols of Christianity as a foil. From here, the myth shifts subtly eastward, ending with the cyclical images of Vedic and Puranic creation and dissolution.

The Perimeters of the *Matrix* Myth

To outline this shift requires us at the outset to define what is to be included in the *Matrix* myth proper. Cinematically, this myth includes not only the three major motion pictures which comprise the trilogy, but also a series of nine animated shorts, compiled under the title *The Animatrix*, and a video game entitled Enter the Matrix with over one hour of video footage shot simultaneously with *MII* and *MIII*. These additional elements are critical to an understanding of the storyline of the Matrix myth, for they provide essential information not found in the three primary films.[6] Thus, as *MI* makes abundantly clear, when we pick up the story in the first film, we are not at the beginning but already several hundred years into the plot.[7]

Because of this, any adequate interpretation of this myth, religious or otherwise, must do two things: 1) begin at the beginning, and 2) accurately track the storyline.[8] With this in mind let us begin with the historical material provided in *AM*.

Humanism and *The Matrix/Reloaded*

Mimicking the creation narrative of Genesis 1, the historical archive in *AM* entitled The Second Renaissance Part I states, "In the beginning there was man, and for a time it was good. . . . Then man made the machine in his own likeness . . . [and] the machine [was] endowed with the very spirit of man." Part II of the same archive continues the parody, stating, "And man said, 'Let there be light.' And he was blessed by light, heat, magnetism, gravity, and all the energies of the universe." This introduction establishes the platform from which the mythology moves, serving to ground the history of the Matrix decidedly in the West and providing a hermeneutical lens through which to begin to view the films. Such an explicitly Western humanism has particular significance for the use of Christian elements in the mythology, such as whether or not Neo is a Christ-figure.

But rather than positing Neo as a Christ-figure and then proceeding to exegete the films from a decidedly Christian perspective, as many interpreters have done,[9] let us begin by attempting to identify a "God" figure. Theologically speaking, Christians have understood God to be a perichoretic Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and have generally characterized God via the three "omnis"— omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. Further, God has also been viewed as the creator of this present world (however fallen and perverted it has become), and thus, we might say, as the ultimate creator of reality.

In the *Matrix* mythology, these particular characteristics are found in a specific character, namely, the machines and, to be more specific, the sentient programs that represent the machines within the Matrix known as Agents.[10] Alone of all the characters, the agents, who are three in number, actually constitute a legitimate and undeniable trinity. Like the trinitarian conception of God in the Christian tradition, they share one purpose and one goal, and think, speak, and act in harmony. What one of the black-suited triad does, all can be said to do. And while they look alike, they are different, as is evidenced by their names.[11] In essence, they are an uncanny representation of the three-in-one concept of God of which so much is made in Christian theology. Contra Seay and Fontana,[12] there is no such clear-cut trinity on the side of the rebels. Trinity's name at best acts only as a decoy, and at worst is simply a manifestation of the pastiche phenomenon of which Doty speaks.[13]

Within the Matrix, the Agents seem to possess the same power typically ascribed to God. That they have the ability to possess anyone hardwired to the Matrix, and thus to be "everywhere, and nowhere," indicates omnipresence. Their ability to know everything that occurs within the Matrix, evidenced by their earpieces, indicates omniscience. And their almost infinite power, evidenced by their ability to change the Matrix at will (e.g., déjà vu), to seal Neo's mouth with

just a word, and even to order sentinel strikes outside the Matrix, signals omnipotence.

Further, the Agents are seemingly immortal, and thus, much like God who is said to be spirit,[14] they inhabit no corporeal body. Finally, to round out the analogy, the machines are the creators and masters of the reality in which humanity lives as slaves. This reality, we discover in *MII*, includes Zion itself.[15]

Interestingly, it is against these very Agents that Neo fights and ultimately triumphs. In light of this, the final scenes in *MI* take on new meaning. Neo's dive into Smith, which concludes the final fight in the hallway and results in Smith's destruction, signifies Neo's re-assumption of the role of "God" which humanity had lost (or abandoned) in its enslavement. A more complete exposition of this idea, and its consequences for an understanding of God, will have to be addressed elsewhere. Suffice it to say that here, two things confirm this reading: 1) Upon Smith's explosion, Neo emerges with a body perfected, evidenced by the absence of bullet-holes;[16] and 2) Neo's emergence is accompanied by power, evidenced by reality (i.e., the Matrix) bending around him.

The final scene of *MI*, in which Neo suddenly rockets into a blue sky unaided by mechanical device, epitomizes the latent humanism that permeates the film. This flight is not a parallel of the ascension of Christ, but rather a declaration

that Neo is indeed the long awaited superman, or in Nietzschean terms, the ubermensch.[17] Far from being a "Christ" or "Christ-figure," therefore, Neo serves more as an anti-Christ or anti-type.[18] In light of this, Morpheus looks less like a John the Baptist,[19] and more like a Nietzsche preparing for and proclaiming the coming of the ubermensch.

Christian images and symbols, therefore, serve in *MI* as both cover and foil against which the underlying humanism is played out. However, upon Neo's assumption of his rightful role of "God," these images and symbols are no longer required. Thus, the humanism implicit in *MI* becomes explicit in *MII*.

This is seen most forcefully in the infamous "temple scene." Here, a subterranean cavern, large enough to house the throbbing masses of Zion, is repeatedly referred to as "the temple." The angelic and otherworldly music that accompanies the viewer's introduction to it, along with the act of removing one's shoes before entering, indicates its holiness. Upon entering, the tardy worshipper is informed that Councilor Hamann is giving the "opening prayer." That a "prayer" is indeed being offered is confirmed by the Councilor himself, leaving no doubt as to what is being done. Yet, this "prayer" is directed not toward a supernatural or transcendent being or power, but to those present—humans one and all.[20] The holiness and primacy of humanity is once again affirmed in the orgiastic conclusion of the temple service.[21] Indeed, here the highest and most holy is worshipped, and

the full significance of Mouse's assertion is finally revealed—"our impulses" are "the very thing that makes us human."[22]

Yet, to assume that the films continue in this vein is to maintain too narrow an understanding of the trilogy. Having made explicit the fundamental humanism of *MI*, which was announced in *AM*, the mythology takes a decided turn toward the East.

Hindu Myths and *The Matrix* Revolutions

While Buddhist, Hindu, and Zen allusions appear throughout *MI*, and increasingly so in *MII*,[23] the turn eastward occurs most clearly in *MIII*.[24] In fact, this predominance of Eastern imagery may be one of the reasons, if not the primary reason, that *MIII* has not been as well received or as highly praised in the West as *MI*. This is made especially clear by the silence of interpreters and exegetes from western religious traditions with respect to this film.[25]

In *MIII*, two series of scenes serve to "book-end" the film, giving an indication as to how all that lies between should be viewed.[26] The first, which occurs within the first ten minutes of the film, introduces three important and very Eastern characters named Sati, Ramachandra, and Kamala. As Chhalliyil points out, these names are significant in Puranic mythology.[27] Sati is the Sanskrit word for "true" or "truth," and in Hindu myth is married to Shiva the destroyer.[28]

Ramachandra is the name of a human avatāra , or "descent," of Vishnu while Kamala is another name for Lakshmi, consort of Vishnu.[29] In the Puranas, Vishnu is essentially the "parent" of Brahma, who is the creator god.[30]

The clothes, names, and conversation, which includes the topic of karma[31], all confirm that Eastern traditions are being heavily drawn upon. Yet these images and allusions, which stand at the beginning of the movie, do not dissipate as the film progresses. In fact, the concluding scenes, which serve as the other half of the book-end, allude even more poignantly to the Vedic and Puranic traditions. With this in mind, a very brief overview of Hindu cosmology is in order.

Hindu cosmology states that the universe is in perpetual oscillation. At the end of a very specific period of time, the universe contracts back into a state of pure potentiality. This dissolution of everything into the infinite sea of being, known as Brahman, is called pralaya, and is represented in both Vedic and Puranic myth as night. This is followed by a subsequent expansion into actualized being, in which Brahman dreams the world and its particulars. Thus, the universe has neither beginning nor end.[32]

Brahma, the creator-god in Vedic mythology, serves for 100 divine years, then dissolves into Brahman and another is appointed to bring forth a new creation. This changing of the guard occurs when all contracts into the primal sleep at the

end of the 100 year cycle. When the universe once again expands, the new Brahma is the first to awaken, and begins to order the universe (thus fulfilling the role of creator).[33]

At the end of the trilogy stands the final titanic and apocalyptic battle between Neo and Smith, a struggle, interestingly, that takes place at night and during which much of the Matrix is destroyed. That this battle is to be understood in terms of Hindu cosmology is confirmed by the music playing during the aerial part of the battle. Don Davis, composer for the Matrix trilogy, states that for the music used in this scene, he asked the Wachowski brothers to "look for something in literature that represented some of the ideological themes that had influenced them when they were writing the Matrix. . . . They eventually came up with about six passages from . . . *The Upanishads*."[34] Thus, the choir is singing the following in Sanskrit during what is known as the "super-burly brawl":

> In him are woven the sky and the earth and all the regions of the air. And in him rests the mind and all the powers of life. Know him as 'The One' and leave aside all other words. He is the bridge of immortality.[35]

This battle, therefore, seems to represent the final cyclical dissolution of the universe known as pralaya.[36]

Yet, upon the defeat of Smith, the storm which raged during the battle ceases and the Matrix returns to calm with those who were subsumed by Smith lying asleep where they fell. During this sleep, i.e., the Night of Brahma, the Matrix

is reset, and it is Sati who first awakes, indicating that she is the next Brahma. This is apparently the reason for her ability to craft a beautiful sun-rise for Neo, and provides a reason for the Architect's appearance inside the Matrix.[37]

While the divine light that emanates from her in her first on-screen appearance indicates that there is something special about Sati, her true importance is revealed only in *ETM*. There we learn that Sati's parents sold the Oracle's image deletion code to the Merovingian in exchange for the safe passage of their daughter into the Matrix.[38] The Oracle agrees to this because, as she says, Sati will change the machine and human world forever.[39] Sati's compassion for Neo, and thus for humanity, precipitated by their meeting in the train station, seems to be the basis for the Oracle's hope. Yet, this could only come about if Sati possessed some power in the governance of the Matrix equal or similar to that of the present Architect. This alludes to Sati's ascent to creator of subsequent Matrix versions.

The Credits Music of the Myth

This religious shift eastward is evidenced not only in the imagery and symbolism that permeates the myth, but also in the music that scores it. The music employed in this film, as in all films, assists the audience in discerning how a scene is to be received, and thus provides a key to its interpretation. Likewise, the music used during the credits usually offers a summary of the film. A quick purview of

the music used during the credits of the first two *Matrix* films reveals a very western

motif, including songs by Rage Against the Machine, Marilyn Manson, Rob

Zombie, P.O.D., and the Dave Matthews Band.[40] However, the credit-music of *MIII*

possesses a decidedly eastern feel.

Unlike *MI* and *MII*, which use several songs for the credits, *MIII* employs

only one, entitled "Navras." Here, in the music that sums up the final installment of

the Matrix myth (and the entire trilogy according to Chhalliyil[41]), the choir sings in

Sanskrit from the Upanishads:

> From illusion lead me to Truth,
>
> From darkness lead me to light,
>
> From death lead me to immortality.[42]

Thus, both the feel and the words of this song are influenced by and draw from

eastern sources. The trilogy, then, which begins so decidedly in the West, ends most

decidedly in the East.

Conclusion

While allusions to western humanism and Hinduism appear throughout the

trilogy, each becomes the dominant religious motif at different points in the

overarching myth. Because of this, a shift toward the East occurs in the religious

images employed as the story progresses. Having begun in a Nietzschean

humanism which both adopts and subverts the symbols of the Christian tradition, the Matrix myth ends explicitly in Vedic and Puranic mythologies. Whether or not this shift was intentional on the part of the Wachowskis is irrelevant; the cinematic presentation lends itself to this understanding. What this means for an understanding of the concept of God, and whether or not the viewer is being asked to spiritually follow Neo in a journey from humanism to Hinduism, will need to be addressed elsewhere. Here, however, we hope to have demonstrated that neither religious pluralism nor a single religious tradition is able to serve as an adequate hermeneutic for understanding the religious images of the *Matrix* myth; a myth which is itself dynamic.

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[1] See esp. Kristenea LaVelle, The Reality within *The Matrix* (Saxco Publications, 2002); Chris Seay and Greg Garrett, *The Gospel Reloaded: Exploring Christianity and Faith in The* Matrix (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 2003); and Pradheep Chhalliyil, *Journey to the Source: Decoding Matrix Trilogy* (Fairfield, IA: Sakhti Books, Inc., 2004). See also "*The Matrix*—A Cyberpunk Parable?"

[2] See Glenn Yeffeth, ed., *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy, and Religion in The Matrix* (Dallas, TX: Benbella Books, 2003); William Irwin, ed., *The Matrix and Philosophy: Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), and idem, ed., *More Matrix and Philosophy* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005). Articles addressing multiple religious hermeneutics include James Ford, "Buddhism, Christianity, and The Matrix: The Dialectic of Myth-Making in Contemporary Cinema," *Journal of Religion and Film* 4:2 (Oct. 2000); and Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachel Wagner, "Wake Up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in The Matrix," *Journal of Religion and Film* 5:2 (Oct. 2001).

[3] William Doty, "Introduction," in *Jacking in to The Matrix Franchise: Cultural Reception and Interpretation*, ed. Matthew Kapell and William Doty (New York: Continuum, 2004), 11. Because of this phenomenon, Zizek has called *The Matrix* "a cinematic inkblot text" that turns analysis of it into a "Where's Waldo?" or better "Where's Jesus?" Todd Hertz, "Exegeting The Matrix," ChristianityToday.com (Nov. 6, 2003), http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/012/23.63.html.

4 See esp. Gregory Bassham, "The Religion of *The Matrix* and the Problems of Pluralism," in *The Matrix and Philosophy*, 111-25, and Julien Fielding, "Reassessing The Matrix/Reloaded," *Journal of Religion and Film* 7:2 (Oct. 2003).

5 Danahay sees scene 12 in *MII*, in which Neo journeys through a bustling alley (which itself appears to be a kind of religious iconographic bazaar) and then fights Seraph in order to see the Oracle, as epitomizing the perspective of religious pluralism. Martin Danahay, "*The Matrix* Is the Prozac of the People," in *More Matrix and Philosophy*, 41.

6 For example, *AM* provides a history of the creation and rebellion of the machines, the genesis of the story so to speak, while *ETM* provides the reason for the Oracle's change in appearance that occurs in *MIII*.

7 Evidence for this appears throughout the movie. See esp. scenes 11 and 12. See also the subtle reference to this in Agent Smith's soliloquy during his interrogation of Morpheus in scene 27.

8 Unfortunately, most exegeses, scholarly or otherwise, fail to do one or the other. For a prime example of a dual failure, see Paul Fontana, "Finding God in The Matrix," in *Taking the Red Pill*, 159-84.

9 Stucky is particularly representative of this position, stating that the "Christ figure motif . . . forms the fundamental core of the three-part story." Mark Stucky, "He Is the One: The Matrix Trilogy's Postmodern Movie Messiah," *Journal of Religion and Film*, 9:2 (Oct. 2005), 1 and 5.

10 To be even more exact, it is the A.I.—Artificial Intelligence—as embodied in the machines. By using the word "machines" we are following the lead of the Wachowski's in AM.

11 The conversation between Morpheus and Agent Smith upon Morpheus' capture in *MI* is telling. The Agent reveals his name as "a Smith, Agent Smith" to which Morpheus replies, "You all look the same to me!" (scene 24).

12 Seay and Garrett, Gospel Reloaded, 102-4; Fontana, "Finding God," 173. See also Bruce Isaacs and Theodore Louis Trost, "Story, Product, Franchise: Images of Postmodern Cinema," in *Jacking in to The Matrix*, 66-67.

13 See note 3 above.

14 John 4:24.

15 See Neo's conversation with the Architect (scene 29). To add further support for understanding the Agents as a God-figure, the very first use of the word "God" in *MI* comes in the form of an expletive used by Trinity in connection with the Agents (scene 2). A similar occurrence can be found in MII during the exchange between Bane and Smith. As Smith begins to subsume him, Bane whispers, "Oh God!" to which Smith replies, "Smith will suffice" (scene 9). Further, in *ETM*, Smith, speaking to Niobe in the hallway, says, "I am the alpha of your omega, the beginning of your end," thus parodying God's repeated self-proclamation in the Christian Scriptures (see Rev. 1:8; 21:6; 22:13).

[16] Faller first pointed out to us the absence of bullet-holes. Stephen Faller, *Beyond the Matrix: Revolutions and Revelations* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 27.

[17] This image is solidified in *MII* when Link refers to Neo's ability to fly not with pious awe or reverence, but almost flippantly, as "doing his Superman thing" (scene 3). In the first film, this ability is captured only blurrily, but is treated openly and in explicit detail (i.e., by use of slow-motion) in the following films.

[18] Ben Witherington III also sees more contrasts than similarities between Christ and Neo, though he does not go so far as to call Neo an anti-christ. See "Neo-Orthodoxy: Tales of the Reluctant Messiah, Or 'Your Own Personal Jesus,'" in *More Matrix and Philosophy*, 165-74.

[19] See esp. Isaacs and Trost, "Story, Product, Franchise," 66; *Fontana*, "Finding God," 167; Seay and Garrett, *Gospel Reloaded*, 82; Stucky, "He Is the One," 10, "*The Matrix*—A Cyberpunk Parable?"

[20] *MII*, scene 7.

[21] *MII*, scene 8 . Interestingly, on the DVD this scene is entitled "Celebrating Humanity."

[22] *MI*, scene 20.

[23] Faller states that MII feels more Hindu than Christian. Beyond the Matrix, 27.

[24] Though he views the entire trilogy through an exclusively Eastern lens, Pradheep Chhalliyil's critical insights into how deeply *MIII* in particular draws upon Eastern mythologies was indispensable in the recognition of a religious shift within the trilogy.

[25] Two notable exceptions are Faller, who states that after a hiatus of sorts in MII (see note 23 above) the Christian theme is again clear in *MIII* (*Beyond the Matrix,* 27), and Stucky, who tracks the "Christ-figure motif' through the entire trilogy ("He Is the One").

[26] See scenes 2–3 and 27–32.

[27] The Puranas are a series of dramatic mythological narratives about battles between good and evil, which explain principles laid out in the Upanishads. Chhalliyil, *Journey to the Source*, 26.

[28] Benjamin Walker, *Hindu World*, vol. 2 (London: George Allen and Unwin, LTD, 1968), 357-58. Cf.Chhalliyil, *Journey to the Source*, 143.

[29] Caterina Contio, "Purānas," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), 12:88. Interestingly, Ramachandra introduces himself as the "power plant systems *manager for recycling* operations" (MIII, scene 3, emphasis ours), which is reminiscent of Vishnu's oversight of the process of "recycling" the universe.

[30] Brahma is said to originate from the lotus in Vishnu's navel. Cornelia Dimmitt and J.A.B. van Buitenen, *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Purānas* (Philadelphia: Temple

University Press, 1978), 30-31. Brahma, however, does not arise from a union of Vishnu and Lakshmi, as Chhalliyil seems to suggest. *Journey to the Source*, 144. For more on Brahma, see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty's, "Brahmā," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 2.

[31] That sentient programs can speak of karma may be explained by the fact that the law of karma does not take effect until a soul has reached self-consciousness. Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 64.

[32] For more on this, see Smith, *Religions of Man* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965), 80-85; and Alf Hiltebeitel, "Hinduism," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 6.

[33] In the Puranas, there are in fact several periods of dissolution during the reign of a single Brahma. "At the end of a day of Brahmā, the universe is consumed by fire and its dissolution occurs. Brahmā then sleeps for a night of equal duration, at the end of which he creates anew. Three hundred sixty such days and nights constitute a year of Brahmā and one hundred such years equal his entire life." W. Randolph Kloetzli, "Cosmology: Hindu and Jain Cosmologies," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 4:110. See also Chhalliyil, *Journey to the Source*, 144.

[34] Chhalliyil, *Journey to the Source*, 27.

[35] Ibid.

[36] This interpretation is supported by the Oracle's prophesy in *MIII* that the war, and thus the present order of things, would end that night (scene 7).

[37] The Architect had himself overseen six creations and dissolutions of the Matrix, with this, the seventh, marking the end of his reign as Brahma. The first version had been, of course, both perfect and a complete failure. The resultant versions had produced an imbalanced equation that required a Neo to correct. See also Chhalliyil, *Journey to the Source*, 137.

[38] This is the reason given for the Oracle's change of appearance between *MII* and *MIII*, and why the Merovingian tells Neo to inform the Oracle that "her time is almost up" (see *MII*, scene 17).

[39] See the conversation between Ghost and the Oracle in *ETM*.

[40] Songs include: "Wake Up!" and "Calm Like a Bomb" (Rage Against the Machine); "Rock Is Dead" (Marilyn Manson); "Reload" (Rob Zombie); "Sleeping Awake" (P.O.D.); and "When the World Ends" (Dave Matthews Band).

[41] *Journey to the Source*, 30-32.

[42] Ibid., 32.