

Christianity, where art  
thou: examining  
religion, mythology,  
and mysticism in fil...



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“ What do you sell?” asks Delmar, leaning in to the one-eyed salesman. “ The word of God, which, let me tell you, there is damn good money in during these times of woe and want.” The Bible has been misused, misquoted, and misrepresented by history’s finest enemies. The Crusaders, for instance, would chant “ God Wills It” as they raped, pillaged, and plundered entire villages. It’s also been used as a source of wealth and fortune, as seen above with the Bible salesman. Abuse of the Bible and Christianity is not a new concept in our world, and the Christianity we see and know today is very different from Christianity 100 years ago, let alone from when it started. We have always mystified religion and become comfortable treating it more like mythology than theology - that is, treating it more like epics and legends of supernatural beings than the actual practice of believing in and worshipping a God.

The film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* shines a light on the comparisons between Christianity and mythology, specifically Homer’s epic *The Odyssey*. The Coen brothers’ film is riddled with evidence of both texts, some more obvious than others. We begin with our protagonist, Ulysses Everett McGill (George Clooney). While Odysseus is the protagonist of Homer’s Greek myth, his Latin name was none other than Ulysses. Not only do the two protagonists share names, but their spouses do as well - Odysseus has Penelope, and Everett has Penny. Everett is a quick-witted, clever man, but uses such devices to mask a strong sense of arrogance that serves as his downfall. He makes it very clear from the beginning that he’s a bit of a hypocrite when it comes to religion. He ridicules his two comrades for pursuing baptism, yet quotes the Bible when one of them shows signs of

negativity. The ridiculing is with good reason, though – the men are alone in an old cemetery and are suddenly overcome by a mass of men and women in all white, seeming somewhat hypnotized and heavily drawn to the water. When they arrive, they form two lines and take turns being baptized. Delmar runs to the front of the line, is dunked underwater by the preacher, and comes back to the men repeating what sounds like a check list one would spout off to prove they were a believer. “ Well that’s it, boys. I been redeemed. The preacher done washed away all my sins and transgressions. It’s the straight and narrow from here on out. And heaven everlasting’s my reward!”

This hypnotic eeriness is compared to the lotus-eaters of Odysseus’s story. In the Greek epic, Odysseus’s men are beached on an island and find the native people, the lotus-eaters, who offer them the flowery lotus fruit that entices them to the point of forgetting about their journey and wishing to stay on the island forever with the lotus-eaters. Similarly, once Pete and Delmar are baptized among the Christians, they wish to stay with them forever and to forget about their plan to find the treasure with Everett. This kind of commentary makes an interesting claim about the toxicity and mysticism of modern day Christianity and the harm that blind belief can conjure. If Delmar places concrete facts upon abstract solutions – such as claiming to be free of sin just because a man in white dunked him in a lake – he gives into the occultism of the moment. That doesn’t mean it’s the true form of the religion at hand, it’s simply the form of that religion he was, in that moment, choosing to take upon himself. Immediately after being baptized, the first person the three men run into is Tommy Johnson, a young

African-American man who sold his soul to the devil the night before. This stark contrast in spiritual experiences relates the two in their staged and overdramatic nature, both dealing with souls at their three possible stages – saved like Pete and Delmar’s, in limbo like Everett’s, or damned like Tommy’s. The runaways’ time with the Hogwallop family holds an exorbitant amount of religious references that prove useful in advancing the action as well as great examples of ironic, faith-related proclamations. Pete’s cousin, Washington Bartholomew Hogwallop, was given a middle name that matches the name of one of the twelve disciples. After he turns the three men in for bounty, Pete threatens to kill him and calls him Judas Iscariot Hogwallop, referring to the disciple known for betraying Jesus.

When all goes awry and the men are trying to escape from the law enforcement awaiting them below, Everett yells the name of Saint Christopher in a breathless exclamation. Saint Christopher serves as the patron saint of long journeys, perfectly suiting the three vagabonds. Before the three men are hanged, Pete proclaims “ God damn it. God forgive me!” The process of damning God then asking for his forgiveness provides a wonderful example of religious irony in the film. Everett’s usage of biblical references is sparse, but very present nonetheless. It seems like it begins as a sort of mockery of the other two men, poking fun at their naïve faith. When Pete grows pessimistic about the outlook of their journey, Everett tells him to “ consider the lilies of the field,” quoting Matthew 6: 28. He mocks the boys for their baptism and immediate salvation thereafter. It isn’t until they’re about to be hanged and the sheriff tells the boys to say their final prayers that we see Everett in a vulnerable, intimate moment with his God. He gets

on his knees and asks that God forgives his wrongdoings. He prays that God takes care of his Penny and girls if he can no longer do so. Soon after, the dam bursts and the three nearly drown, but find a coffin one of them was to be buried in and cling to it as a raft. Pete and Delmar claim the flood was a miracle, while Everett believes it was an obvious incident with coincidental timing, and that the dam was going to be blown that day no matter what had happened to them.

When Pete counters that Everett sure prayed a lot for there to be a scientific explanation, Everett counters that “ any human being will cast about in a moment of stress.” Everett sees the Christian God as a superhero, anxiously awaiting a call of distress so that he may swoop in and save the day, then disappear into the shadows until he is needed again. The music plays a large role in the link between the film and Christianity. The first song in the movie, Po’ Lazarus, is a story of a sheriff who asks his deputy to seek out Lazarus and bring him back to the sheriff, dead or alive. The sheriff resolves to retrieving Lazarus himself and shoots him, then brings him back to the commissary, leaving him on the floor to die. Lazarus is also the name of the man in the Bible who laid dead in a tomb for four days before Jesus was fetched by Mary and Martha and resurrected Lazarus. This reference alludes to some kind of resurrection or rebirth, so from the start of the movie, we’re expecting reformation from the characters, most likely in some religious form. Songs like “ Down to the River to Pray,” “ I’ll Fly Away,” and “ Angel Band” are all gospel-like in their verses and form, all alluding to heaven and the Lord in hopes of seeing both someday. The name Odysseus means “ a man who is in constant pain and sorrow,” and since Ulysses is the Latin form

of Odysseus, his name shares the same meaning (Toscano). This seems fitting considering the song that makes Everett and his two buddies, Delmar and Pete, a hit as the Soggy Bottom Boys is titled "Man of Constant Sorrow." Everett sings a verse of the song that says "there is one promise that is given//I'll meet you on God's golden shore." Later in the film, once Pete is placed back into slavery, he's praying at night and says "God, forgive me. I could not gaze upon that far shore." As the men pray what they believe to be their final prayers, the three grave diggers in front of them chant the words of an old spiritual, "Lonesome Valley" - "You got to go there by yourself//Oh, you got to ask the Lord's forgiveness//Nobody else can ask him for you." This mirrors Odysseus's descent into the underworld during his quest, and allows the viewer to create a parallel between the Christian God and the lord of the underworld, both of which give humans their ultimatum.

There is not a single character in the film with a well-rounded view of who the Christian God is and what he does for his children. Instead, God is either there for us in times of need, for us to make a profit from, or for us to throw all our sins upon so that we may be clean of all transgressions. Destructive distortion of the "word of God" is not a new concept, and this film provides wonderful examples of mistreating and manipulating both to get what the user wants. The Coen brothers find a way to tie mythology and Christianity to one another in a way that puts guilt on all modern "Christians," holding them accountable for their misuse of the traditional religion they claim to be a part of.

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