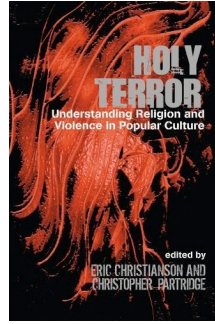


Holy Terror: Understanding Religion and Violence in Popular Culture, edited by Eric Christianson and Christopher Partridge

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The anthology *Holy Terror: Understanding Religion and Violence in Popular Culture* is a book of halves.

A little more than half of these essays are devoted to film. In turn, a little more than half of the essays on film are focused on Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. To say that it is not half bad is not, while rather colloquial, an altogether unfair assessment, for while there are a number of excellent essays on display here, a little less than half of them are problematic at best, which seriously undermines the overall quality and utility of the book. There is something distinctly half-finished about this brief collection, particularly in that it lacks any real introduction or discussion from its editors, Eric Christianson and Christopher Partridge. In the final analysis, one is left with the impression of a series of loosely related conference papers (the book has its origins in an annual meeting of the Centre for Religion and Popular Culture) thrown together with little thought to overall coherence or scope, especially given the broad if implicit claims made by the title. For, as is still the case in far too many works in the academic study of religion, *Holy Terrors* remains firmly focused on Europe and North America, despite the fact that religion, violence, and popular culture intersect in incredibly varied ways all over the globe. Given this, it is perhaps natural that here "religion" is practically equivalent with Christianity, though there are a few scattered references to Islam and Judaism. Even within the narrow scope of this slim volume (even with notes, a detailed bibliography/filmography, and an index, it comes in at well under 200 pages), this cultural and religious myopia can become claustrophobic and raise doubts about the book as a whole, especially when the introduction refers to as problematic and nineteenth-century a thing as "Eastern philosophy" (3).

Christianson and Partridge provide the barest sketch of an introduction, beginning with the assertion that "'Religion and violence' together are simultaneously sensible and incongruent" (1). Disregarding a lengthy outline of the chapters, the editors provide little more than a page of context and

discussion for the volume as a whole. That the volume lacks coherence and theoretical depth is something the editors themselves seem to acknowledge:

in this collection of essays one will not find contestation over definitions of violence (the implicit definition of physical and / or psychological force to inflict injury underwrites these essays), and religion is defined throughout with contextual specificity. The authors of these essays are, however, interested in dissecting the multitude of contexts in popular culture in which religion and violence confront, or combine with, one another. That process cogently lays bare a range of themes and questions.... These questions are all in some way about negotiation and contestation: over the multiple meaning of "religion and violence"; over public reflection on, and even protest against, their unholy alliance; over the public and private spaces where that reflection takes place. (1-2)

It is worth noting that the editors here reveal a certain normative bias, in that they assume that violence in the name of religion is in some way "unholy," despite the fact that many of those who perpetuate such acts would doubtless disagree; indeed, some would also contest the label of violence itself. That ideas of holiness or purity so often play a role in sanctioning violence in the name of religion is a point that needs to be made in any genuinely critical study of the matter.

The volume is broken down into four sections, the first of which, "In the Discourse of Terrorism," begins with Jolyon Mitchell's "Seeing Beyond Fear of Terrorism on the Web." In this essay, Mitchell provides a detailed description and analysis of the website *We're Not Afraid*, which surfaced after the July 2005 bombings in London and became a forum for users to post pictures and other images augmented with the phrase "We're not afraid," a gesture that Mitchell reads as defiance and "the visual expression of non-violent resistance" (10). These modified images, which he breaks down into broad categories like "images of defiance" and "images to counter fear," are "used to defy, to console, to encourage, to explain and to exhort" (12). He also provides an interesting discussion as to how users re-appropriate and adapt images and figures from popular culture and from everyday life in London, including the iconic Underground logo. Though the essay succeeds more as description than analysis, Mitchell does ask, "to what extent can this posting of images, and words, be described as the formation of a new online

community of defiance?” (11). The answer he gives is ambiguous, pointing to complex and thorny questions about digital media and community with which scholars in the field still struggle: “The We’re Not Afraid site celebrates the individual’s creativity, sense of humour and right to express themselves, through creating a transitory virtual network” (18). His suggestion that this kind of action makes the contributors to the site into photojournalists is rather more difficult, in that most casual Web users have no feel for or knowledge of the ethics and discipline of serious journalism, contested as these may always be.

Emma England’s “Violent Superwomen: Super Heroes or Super Villains? Judith, Wonder Woman and Lynndie England” is rather more unusual, and altogether more problematic. While this essay might yield a scattering of insights, it remains a thought experiment, and a silly one at that. England begins with an assertion that makes clear that she will be drawing bold, at times completely unjustified, connections between disparate periods of history and across different media and genres of representation: “The biblical heroine Judith of Bethulia is a female superhero” (25). By comparing Judith with the comic book heroine Wonder Woman and Lynndie England, “arguably the most famous protagonist to come out the 2004 Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal” (25), she hopes “to remove the possible ‘comfort-zone’ associated with discussing the fictional as against the ‘real’” (25). In doing so uncritically, she also removes any possibility of the sort of rigorous, critical analysis that real-world events like those that took place inside Abu Ghraib require. Her inclusion of Lynndie England is based on the slightest of arguments and turns on entirely incidental similarities between photographs of Lynndie England in Iraq and a crucial panel taken from an iconic Wonder Woman comic. In a serious academic work, it should go without saying that a snapshot and a carefully executed illustration are not the same thing, and cannot be compared blithely. Perhaps the worst thing about this essay is England’s throwaway suggestion that Lynndie England was in Iraq to “save her home” (38), which ignores the reality of the war on terror and represents a wholehearted embrace of American military and political rhetoric. That Lynndie England may have believed this would be more to the point; however, the author ignores the political aspects of the abuse scandal to make the peculiar argument that this is enough to make Lynndie England a superhero, something the author admits she has difficulty accepting. Given that this conclusion is reliant on a rampant parallelism that insists on concrete connections between things—decades-old comic book heroes, millennia-old

legendary figures, and contemporary real-life war criminals—that cannot be compared directly with one another, she can take comfort that there is nothing really at stake in this essay.

The first of the essays in the “In Cinema” section, Jo Carruthers’ “Biblical Epic and the American State: The Traitor and Sanctified Violence in *Esther and the King* (1960)” is a marked improvement, tackling the intersection of politics, rhetoric, violence, and religion in a far more subtle and convincing manner. By examining the film in the light of the Cold War, a time when “God’s laws” were “implicitly synonymous with American political policy” (43), Carruthers makes a genuine contribution towards understanding violence by showing how rooted this connection is in the political sphere: “By subsuming American values within religious discourse, and vice versa, such biblical epics assert American political positions to their home audience through a highly authoritative framework which inherently sanctifies those politics” (45). This subsuming of politics into the gloss of Hollywood film has serious consequences: “By making *Esther* into primarily a romantic tale, the narrative of violence and lack of mercy is removed from any explicit doctrinal context and becomes more insidious precisely because it is a stealth narrative, not necessarily apparent enough to provoke thoughtful reflection” (48). Violence, Carruthers thus suggests, is *layered*.

Gerry Carlin and Mark Jones take us into the dark heart of the 1960s with “Cease to Exist: Manson Family Movies and Mysticism.” Aside from illuminating the various connections between Charles Manson’s syncretic religious doctrine, violence, and film, Carlin and Jones make a compelling argument that Manson was far from an inexplicable anomaly in the larger social fabric of the Sixties counterculture. He was, in fact, perfectly in tune with the religious tenor of his times. The relationship between Manson, his crimes, his religious claims, and the mass media is another unpickable knot of influence and counter-influence: “Though some elements of Mansonian lore come from esoteric sources, much is lifted from popular—and even trash—culture, and from the mass media, and the new messiah would strive to promulgate his message using these communicative forms” (56). Manson was indeed a popular figure in the media after the killings that made him infamous, especially in exploitation cinema, which portrayed him through various thinly veiled doppelgangers in such grindhouse gems as *Children Shouldn’t Play with Dead Things* or *Wrong Way*, both from 1972. Further entangling this knot, the way the media understood and reported the Manson Family crimes was informed by films like *Rosemary’s Baby* (directed by Roman Polanski, lover

of the Family's most famous victim, Sharon Tate). Here we can find a further hint towards understanding the frequent collisions of religion, violence, and popular culture: these things happen because the conditions that permit them often lie very close to the surface of everyday life.

"The End is ... a Blockbuster: The Use and Abuse of the Apocalypse in Contemporary Film," by the reliably excellent John Walliss, explores films from the final decade of the twentieth century, a time which "witnessed an outpouring of millennial fears and expectations quite unprecedented in the modern world" (63). Building on Conrad Ostwalt's work on the "descralization of the apocalypse," Walliss shows how most films from this time present the apocalypse as something triggered by human hands or by the natural world. The world ends not for supernatural or divine reasons, then, but for mundane, this-worldly reasons. This secularisation of the apocalypse also shows itself in the way that these films re-imagine the traditional structure of the apocalyptic narrative in that they show only the (potential) destruction of the old world, not the building of a new one. Instead, the narrative changes to one in which human beings are called upon to stop the coming of the end times and restore the world as closely as possible to the state it was in before it was threatened: "without exception contemporary apocalyptic films are characterized by a valorization of the everyday wherein, in an almost Durkheimian way, the contemporary social order (understood typically as male and north-American) is reaffirmed and celebrated" (65). From Walliss' intriguing perspective, these apocalyptic narratives demonstrate not only the secularisation of the end-times but also a thoroughgoing rationalisation. The larger ramifications of this shift are intriguing; in valorising the status quo as an ideal to fight for, these films are profoundly conservative in addition to being rather unimaginative in comparison to their Jewish and Christian forebears.

The intriguing third section, "A Case Study: The Violence of *The Passion of the Christ*," kicks off with Steven Allen's "Counterfactual Suffering: Authenticity and Artistry in *The Passion of the Christ*," which examines the film's various sources of legitimisation and as well as the reasons behind its perceived authenticity. This is a valuable study of the ways in which viewers receive and understand a film that hinges on implicit and explicit claims of historical and theological fidelity:

the cinematic text establishes an exchange with our collective reservoir of imagery of the Passion: a strategy that promotes

a respectful borrowing from the paintings of grand masters to aggrandise the movie, but which relies on cinematic sleight of hand to juxtapose a different set of representational strategies. In summation, it depends on comparative artifice to convey a sense of authenticity. (83)

Thus *The Passion's* sense of authenticity derives largely from its complex relationship to other visual representations of the Passion narrative: "the film still relies on a counterfactual quality for its evocation of suffering. And here I am using factual not in a sense of accuracy or realism in the abstract sense, but as a comparative term: the counterfactual arises from the divergence from our collective reservoir of imagery of the last days of Jesus' life" (87). As with the other standout essays in this collection, Allen's analysis provides the careful reader with methodological reflections that have a resonance and a use value far outside the boundaries of the essay, particularly in its relation to reception history: "How one judges authenticity is evidently multifaceted, but a unifying factor is the comparative process: a strategy of counterpointing the film with what is already known or believed" (84).

"Controlling Passions: The Regulation, Censorship and Classification of the Violence in *The Passion of the Christ* within Britain," by Shaun Kimber, is something rather less. Though it is informative in the blandest sense for anyone who might be curious about the minutia of the film's rating in its various versions, both at the cinema and in the home theatre, it offers little analysis and less insight. It is also a remarkably poor piece of writing, its main points couched overwhelmingly in the passive, as if even the author was unsure of his points or their ultimate value. It does, however, make a crucial point: "the film created a state of affairs where groups traditionally concerned with the negative impact of film violence upon audiences actively promoted the exhibition and consumption of *The Passion of the Christ*, a film which contained extended scenes of strong violence" (94).

Oluoyinka Esan's "*The Passion* as Media Spectacle" fares somewhat better in noting that the film, which was in many ways a singular piece of work, was also a perfectly explicable part of larger cinema culture: "This film thus exemplifies some organizing principles of contemporary times. It demonstrates the need to rely on strategies that deliver greater proportions of the 'the spectacular' before the attention of audiences can be secured" (103). At the same time, it was also atypical, in that the spectacular nature of the film served to highlight rather than obscure its political and ideological content.

The final essay in the expansive cinema section, “Protest as Reaction, Reaction as Text: The (Con)Textual Logics of *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *The Passion of the Christ*,” by Leighton Grist, expands the scope of the analysis with a detailed and very instructive comparison with Martin Scorsese’s 1988 film. The two films share more than the chronological coincidence of being two successive Jesus films that courted controversy, a sequence that continues more or less unbroken back to 1898’s *The Passion Play of Oberammergau*. The films provided two flashpoints for the emerging culture wars, in that the audience for *The Passion* was drawn in large part from the same individuals and groups who protested against *The Last Temptation*. Grist’s astute analysis turns on the fact that both films, and their respective public reception, were marked by violence: “Switching perspective, one might propose that the violence contextually implicit to and threatened but largely repressed during the protests against *The Last Temptation* can be regarded to return textually in *The Passion* in the form of its explicit and untrammelled representation” (117). The period between 1983 (when an earlier attempt to film *Last Temptation* was shut down out of fears of controversy) and 2004 saw the rise to prominence of the religious right in American culture, which is reflected in their changing role, from fringe protestors to drivers of a mainstream cultural phenomenon, one marked, Grist suggests, with the taint of fascism.

The brief final section, “In Sport” begins with Rina Arya’s “The Religious Significance of Violence in Football,” one of the collection’s weakest moments. Arya’s conclusion—“in the cultural climate of the ‘death of God’ the sacred can be experienced in the collective expressions in football which transport the crowd from the state of ordinariness, which in theological terms is described as the profane, to an experience of the sacred” (123)—takes far too many things for granted, including the idea of the death of God and the meaning of the word sacred. Arya also relies heavily and uncritically on classic works like Emile Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy*, and René Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred*, taking the truth of long-contested conclusions for granted. However, the primary failing of this essay is that it treats the conjunction of sport and religion as if it were a wholly new topic. There is a growing body of solid scholarly work on sport and religion that Arya simply ignores; Danièle Hervieu-Léger, in fact, made a very similar argument—though she came to a very different conclusion about whether sport constitutes religion—almost twenty years ago in *La Religion pour Mémoire* (available in English since 2000 as *Religion as a Chain of Memory*). The argument Arya presents is also internally incon-

sistent, in that she insists that we are living in a “post-Christian” age but also notes that one of the reasons football is so enduringly popular is that it is rooted in Christian ideas and symbols which must retain a good deal of the their power and meaning to have this effect.

Hugh S. Pyper closes the volume on a fascinating note with “Cultivated Outrage: World Wrestling Entertainment and the Religious Excess of Violence.” Not only does he take seriously the world of professional wrestling, which very few scholars since Roland Barthes have managed to do, but he also manages to push forward our understanding of religion and violence. The WWE and other professional wrestling franchises fuse the world of fact, including religion, and fiction in intriguing ways:

There is a strange dynamic here as the WWE seeks to boost its ratings by buying into what it conceives of as popular stereotypes. The “real world” provides the narrative framework for the wrestling event. At the same time, politicians use the same rhetorical tropes to influence public opinion in the real world, mythologizing it in terms of the confrontation between heroic representatives of good and evil. (141)

Pyper provides a fascinating case study of the various American wars in the Persian Gulf, telling the reader of WWE’s activation and eventual vanquishing of a team of stereotyped French wrestlers named “La Résistance” during the period when the French government actively opposed the American invasion of Iraq in 2004. Pyper gets further mileage from his deft set-up when he turns the analysis around with the case of Chris Benoit, a wrestling star who murdered his family before killing himself in 2007. In the literally outrageous world of WWE, the lines that connect pop-culture violence and real-world suffering are hopelessly tangled and any distinction between them is perilously thin.

As we come to the end, we are left with the question we began with: does this book help us to understand the persistence of religion and violence in popular culture? It does, yet it does not. Anyone venturing into the murky and complex world of religion, violence, and popular culture for the first time will encounter a fragmentary collection of topics, methodologies, and vocabularies, and does so with little or no guidance from the editors. While the four essays on *The Passion of the Christ* would provide the uninitiated with a fair if unstated introduction to some of the most important questions

raised in this field of study, such a reader might be hard-pressed to apply these lessons to the scattershot remainder of the collection. The volume finds itself in a double bind in terms of its potential audience: those with a thorough familiarity with the discourses about religion, popular culture, and violence will find a good deal of interest here; however, those same readers will also likely be frustrated both by the lack of scope and by the serious theoretical and methodological—not to mention simply logical—missteps to which the less sophisticated contributions are so prone. When facing a topic as complex and important as the causes and representations of violence, not half bad is not good enough.

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