

Postsecular Scriptures: The Bible on Film in the 21st Century

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Abstract: *“Postsecular Scriptures” attempts to show what postsecular biblical film adaptation looks like by suggesting that three films (Last Days in the Desert, Tree of Life, and Calvary) that have been recognized as of religious interest are also postsecular adaptations of the Bible. Looking briefly at what we mean (and don’t mean) by “postsecular” and “adaptation” will help us to see how these are adaptations in a postsecular guise. More specifically we will argue that these films in their postsecular guise produce exemplary representations of doubt and near exhaustion of faith (pistis—trust) only to conclude with a recuperation of trust/faith that is shown in the films’ concluding trajectories. As such these are not just postsecular adaptations, but at their root, they are, we will argue, best understood as postsecular kerygma; they are postsecular proclamations of the kenotic logic of the gospel proclamation of Jesus the Crucified coupled with an insistence upon the hope of the resurrection. Each film also suggests that the way of grace, which we increasingly see is the way of trust, creates conditions in which no matter what the end (even in suffering, crucifixion, and death), the person comes to a good end. If these films are not just biblical adaptations but postsecular ones, then we will suggest we may need to refine and revise our conception of the postsecular.*

Key Words: Calvary, film adaptation, John Michael McDonagh, Last Days in the Desert, postsecular, religion and film, Rodrigo Garcia, Terrence Malick, Tree of Life

Introduction: The Bible and Literature

A film opens with a black screen; next, a slide reminiscent of a silent film with the text of Job 38:4, 7 in white, simple letters, and quickly there follows a flickering flame. The flame lingers then slowly disappears. This opening sequence alerts the viewer, from the epigraph on, that the film *Tree of Life* is intertextually linked to the Bible. Indeed, from the text of

Job to the appearance of the flame to the film’s conclusion with the same flame—an image of heat and light, presence, culture, and care—*Tree of Life* is drenched in biblical images, themes, discussions, and challenges. But while it begins with the Bible, should we think of such a film as an adaptation? If so, what kind of adaptation?

In this special issue of *STR* we are looking at questions surrounding the Bible and literature. Biblical characters, stories, and themes have been important in movies since the early passion plays shown as lantern stills in the late nineteenth century.¹ Just as in other visual arts, music, literature, and the stage, representations of Jesus have been central to the cinema.² But what does it mean to consider a film representation a “biblical adaptation”? Should we understand such films as adaptations if the Bible is a source of narrative, or a source of theology, or perhaps a source of social practices? Further complicating matters is how questions of historical moment and context affect our conception of adaptation. So how is the Bible being refigured in the current conversations about a postsecular age? If we are now indeed in such a postsecular age, with a commitment to a rejection of both dogmatic secularism and dogmatic religiosity of the earlier ages, then what happens when that age begins to adapt Scripture?

To answer these questions we will take as our inquiry launch point twenty-first-century film understood as a literary form and its engagement with the biblical text in the example of three different films. We will suggest that each adapts the biblical Passion story as a source for their narratives and philosophical intents but do so in ways that make the nature of their adaptation less than obvious. Against those who read these and other postsecular works as simply partial or weak assertions of faith, we will argue that these postsecular biblical adaptations present the gospel story of doubt and mistrust leading to confidence, conversion, and trust through the mechanism of suffering, which in turn produces hope and

¹ There is nothing new about filmmaker’s adapting texts for the purposes of films. Indeed, even in this increasingly visual age, a huge percentage of films are based upon existing texts, whether as adaptations of novels or as reproductions of existing screenplays. The religiosity of the filmmaker is not really the issue either: to adapt the Bible’s material as a source of literary interest, either for its narratives, its characters, or its ideas, is not to endorse them; nor is it to presume orthodoxy. Their significance to culture and their power as mythos alone make them valuable for engagement, critical or otherwise. Jesus, in particular, garners interest as a historical figure in part because of his unique personae and in part because of the innumerable extrabiblical representations of him.

² See for example Steven Vredenburg, “Bible and Cinema: An Introduction,” *Journal of Religion and Film* 18.2 (2014): <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol18/iss2/11>.

action, even as, critically, these films all also leave open the very real possibility that this hope may be misplaced.

We will begin with Rodrigo Garcia's *Last Days in the Desert*, which is a loose retelling of the Matthew narrative of Jesus's wandering and temptation in the desert. This film is on its surface the most literal adaptation we will engage because it has such a clear relationship to the form and content of the biblical original. *Last Days in the Desert* is also not only an adaptation of key events in the Gospels, but its interpolated addendums are important and seem designed to tease out the relationship between a father and a son and, by extension, between the Father and the Son of the gospel. We argue that though the film's presentation of the Passion is short, its representation of the Resurrection and its discussion of the Christocentric logic of suffering and resignation makes it a demonstrable adaptation of the *kerygma* of Christ in a postsecular guise. And, while we will see that *Last Days* relates most clearly on an indexical level (a term we will define in our discussion of adaptation) to its biblical source material, it seems to also be the most ambiguous and tentative in its theological and doctrinal conclusions.

In the case of Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life*, at least a superficial connection to a biblical textual foundation is obvious, since the first image of the film is an important quotation from the book of Job. This essay, however, will suggest that this Job reference is the foil for the gospel story that will be the central adaptive interest of the film—the story of nature and grace in the film's own terms. Unlike *Last Days*, Malick's film, although more amorphous in its relationship to its biblical sources, seems more resolute in its theological/doctrinal implications while still leaving enough openness and uncertainty to be considered postsecular in the terms presented in this essay.

Finally, we will take up John Michael McDonagh's *Calvary*, showing that though the film does not set out to be a direct adaptation of any of the Gospel or New Testament books, Father James's story is clearly a kind of doubter's *kerygma*, a proclamation in the most postsecularist of terms: revealing a Christ-following fool and then begging the audience to decide, like the New Testament writers, "What kind of man was this?" Through these readings, this essay suggests a certain kind of postsecular cinematic adaptation of the Christ story in which the degree of indexicality of the adaptation to the biblical text's narrative, setting, form, and style is independent of the degree to which each film might be considered an adaptation of the core theological contents of the Passion. Before turning to our analysis of the films, we should look briefly at how we are using "postsecular" and how we are conceiving "adaptation" such that we can call these films postsecular adaptations since the former is a newer critical

term and the latter a vexed category in the discourse.

Postsecularism and Film

In twenty-first-century film studies, postsecularism has increasingly come to be of interest as a critical framework, first in books like *Religion in Contemporary European Cinema: The Postsecular Constellation*, edited by Costica Bradatan and Camil Ungureanu, and also in *Immanent Frames: Postsecular Cinema between Malick and von Trier*, edited by John Caruana and Mark Cauchi.³ Caruana and Cauchi suggest in their introduction that 2011 is a significant year in the history of postsecular cinema, with *Tree of Life* and Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* both released that year and at two ends of what they see as a spectrum for contemporary religious cinema. They write, "*Tree of Life* and *Melancholia* are nevertheless united in the way they challenge the Enlightenment narrative that has dominated Western thought for the last four centuries. In particular, they powerfully exemplify what in recent philosophy and critical theory has come to be called the 'postsecular condition.'"⁴ They go on to describe this "condition" as the "loss of confidence in the supposed certainty of reason and the neutrality of secularism," which is shown in the "thoughtful meditation on faith in 'Tree of Life'" but is also demonstrated in the "non-triumphal atheism of 'Melancholia.'" Taken together such cinema "dissolves the strict boundaries ... between belief and unbelief" and lives in tension with many of the "dominant strands of film theory today" which divide the representational possibilities too neatly into "secular and religious," the very categories these films seek to interrogate according to Caruana and Cauchi.⁵

This discussion of dissolving boundaries between religious and secular began even earlier in literary studies, where recent debates have emerged centering around the religious status of postmodern works of art such as the fiction of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Toni Morrison, and Cormac McCarthy. Thus, John A. McClure, Amy Hungerford, and many others have separately argued against seeing these and other authors' works as secular fictions, this conversation of scholars suggesting instead that these and other works and authors are representative of a "postsecular"

³ Costica Bradatan and Camil Ungureanu, *Religion in Contemporary European Cinema: The Postsecular Constellation* (New York: Routledge, 2014); John Caruana and Mark Cauchi, eds., *Immanent Frames: Postsecular Cinema between Malick and Von Trier*, SUNY Series, Horizons of Cinema (Albany: State University of New York, 2019).

⁴ Caruana and Cauchi, "What Is Postsecular Cinema? An Introduction," 1.

⁵ Caruana and Cauchi, "What Is Postsecular Cinema? An Introduction," 1–2.

flourishing in late-modern culture.⁶ For McClure, in his book *Partial Faiths*, the “postsecular” is defined as a “mode of being and seeing that is at once critical of secular constructions of reality and of dogmatic religiosity.”⁷ In other words, McClure argues these works represent a kind of third way between religious dogmatism on the one hand and a Comteian, materialist secularism on the other.⁸ As one critic explains, “McClure’s work identifies a strand of contemporary fiction that attempts to portray a transcendent worldview without adhering to any specific sensibility.” In other words, these are “forms of faith” that are “dramatically partial and open-ended.”⁹ McClure describes this new ideological frame as alternately a “partial” or a “weak faith.” The postsecular marks a kind of believing that emerges from a confrontation with the possibility of nonbelief. McClure’s formulations are helpfully elucidated by Charles Taylor in his account of the secular in his magisterial *A Secular Age*.¹⁰ There Taylor shows that the secular is a state of believing that is cognizant of nonbelief

⁶ Of course, not everyone is thrilled about the turn to the postsecular. Tracy Fessenden, for one, has concerns about the leveling effect that such religious investigation can have when done by undertrained film and literature critics who simply find undifferentiated experiences of the holy or numinous wherever they look. For further explanation, see Tracy Fessenden, “The Problem with the Postsecular,” *American Literary History* 26.1 (Spring 2014): 154–67.

⁷ John A. McClure, *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007), ix.

⁸ McClure in coining the term “partial faith” is adopting Gianni Vattimo’s similar phrase “weak religion,” which is in contrast to “strong religion.” The straw man here is a psychological one: weak versus strong theology is not ultimately about the reasons for belief, nor the arguments, but about the psychological confidence with which one asserts and holds one’s beliefs. Gianni Vattimo, John D. Caputo, and Richard Rorty each variously discuss each variously discuss the postmodern theology that is believed, but only “partially” in McClure’s terms. They see this as a form of “weak” faith. Of course, it remains to be seen whether in fact this is not a prismatic view of faith that presupposes the certainty of the Enlightenment, which would have been unthinkable not only to a figure like Augustine but equally to a figure like Pascal or Kierkegaard. For all three of these, faith was not strong because it was complete but because it was trusted and acted upon. Each of these thinkers points to the possibility of maintaining a psychology of doubt and partialness as long as faith is defined by a set of actions rather than a psychological phenomenon (see, e.g., Augustine’s commendation in *City of God* to live like a Christian and see if you would become one, Pascal’s wager, and Kierkegaard’s obvious obsession with *pistis* as action). One can act and still doubt, and as such one can believe and doubt at the same time.

⁹ McClure, *Partial Faiths*, ix.

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

both outside and within it. This is not a condition of being from belief to unbelief but a form of believing from within the knowledge and awareness of other beliefs and even unbelief.

This essay’s deployment of the term “postsecular,” like McClure’s, proceeds from the conditions of optionality of belief (or unbelief) that Taylor suggests are characteristic of contemporary Western society. Unlike McClure’s work, however, the films discussed in this essay, which vary widely in terms of their makers’ religious commitments and, we can assume, artistic intentions, do not necessarily conclude that a weakened or “partial” faith is the only kind that can exist under these conditions but instead present the possibility of robust faith adapted into the vocabulary—and tempered by the ever-present skepticism—of a secular age.

Adaptation Problems

At the same time that postsecular is a polysemic term, “adaptation” is a rather vexed category in film and literature studies, regardless of the source material. Adaptation often refers to a relationship of indebtedness and origin: one cultural object emerging from the influence of another. Because cultures are the products of multiple and multiplying intersections and effects, it is often challenging to discern primary influence on a work, and as Foucault came to realize, it is easier to discern genealogies of knowledge than archaeologies. This difficulty of determining genealogies is especially true with the adaptation of scriptural myths, stories, and theologies: it is easier to see influence than to discern origins in many films. While the films discussed in this essay vary in the degrees to which they draw explicitly upon the biblical text as their source material, this essay argues that each film may be considered a biblical adaptation and, in particular, an adaptation of Christ’s passion. We argue that each film digests the biblical source’s core content independent of the film’s degree of indexicality to its source material on a formal, stylistic, or even narrative level.

Different understandings of biblical adaptation will lead to very different productions: in the most vernacular sense of the term, a biblical adaptation would be a film that retells a biblical story while retaining most of the story’s thematic and/or doctrinal contents. Such biblical adaptations, especially when explicit in their doctrinal intent, rarely breach the divide between religious subcultures and the secular mainstream, although rare exceptions have succeeded in this regard—prominent examples might include Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) or, perhaps to a lesser extent, Darren Aronofsky’s *Noah* (2014). These films present themselves plainly as adaptations in that they seek to transmit a story from one medium to another while keeping intact narrative content, character

details, and the main aesthetic force of the original, with varying degrees of success. In his chapter, “Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest,” Andre Bazin contends with “the aesthetic justification for the adaptation of novels to the screen.”¹¹ Bazin implies that critiques of adaptation are often misguidedly rooted in the sort of formal determinism associated with the New Critical modernism—the notion that “a novel is a unique synthesis whose molecular equilibrium is automatically affected with you tamper with its form.”¹² Form here refers to the medium of the content, in this case the novel versus the film. In contradistinction to the formal determinists with their fears of paraphrase and hence adaptation generally, Bazin suggests that form can be altered while preserving the style of the source material. He writes, “Form’ is at most a sign, a visible manifestation, of style, which is absolutely inseparable from the narrative content, of which it is, in a manner of speaking and according to Sartre’s use of the word, the metaphysics. Under these circumstances, faithfulness to a form, literary or otherwise, is illusory: what matters is the *equivalence in meaning of the forms*.”¹³ That phrase “equivalence in meaning of the forms” suggests that Bazin’s position is that different styles can convey the *same* meaning through different forms. As such, to use the language of structuralist linguistics, the signifiers may change, but the signified will remain the same. Bazin’s point then is “that it is perhaps not metaphysically impossible to make a cinematic work inspired by a literary one, with sufficient faithfulness to the spirit of the original and with an aesthetic intelligence that permits us to consider the film the equal of the book.” But he goes further, insisting that “adaptation is aesthetically justified, independent of its pedagogical and social value, because the adapted work to a certain extent exists apart from what is wrongly called its ‘style,’ in a confusion of this term with the word form.”¹⁴

In short, for Bazin, the style of a work is not its essence (or Form) and so a translation of sorts is possible so that one work’s meaning can be conveyed in another style. Bazin concludes his defense of the digest, arguing, following Sartre, “[b]ut one could also understand” the digest or

¹¹ Andre Bazin, “Adaptation, or the Cinema of Digest,” *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 58.

¹² Bazin, “Adaptation, or the Cinema of Digest,” 58. In literary studies, this is a rejection of Cleanth Brooks’s most famous chapter in *Well Wrought Urn*, “The Heresy of Paraphrase.” In contrast to Brooks, Bazin establishes the possibility of the digest as formal equivalent and rejects formal determinism and non-translation of the type that Brooks’ New Critical modernism praises.

¹³ Bazin, “Adaptation, or the Cinema of Digest,” 58–59.

¹⁴ Bazin, “Adaptation, or the Cinema of Digest,” 62.

adaptation as having “been made more accessible through cinematic adaptation, not so much because of the oversimplification that such adaptation entails . . . but rather because of the mode of expression itself, as if the aesthetic fat, differently emulsified, were better tolerated by the consumer’s mind.”¹⁵ Bazin makes an argument for the aesthetic and artistic superiority of the digest, understood as both digested and condensed as well as transformed in style and form as the French terms *digere* and *resumer* each separately suggest. Of course, this does not guarantee that any adaptation will be superior to its original, but it does theorize a space in which the condensed cinematic form might convey an “equivalence in meaning” through a different style. For Bazin, neither form nor style constitute what he refers to as the “artistic soul,” and he insists “[t]he style is in the service of the narrative: it is a reflection of it, so to speak, the body but not the soul. And it is not impossible for the artistic soul to manifest itself through another incarnation.”¹⁶

In this vein, this essay argues that biblical adaptations discussed below, which we have termed postsecular scriptures, vary greatly in the degree to which they relate indexically¹⁷ to the biblical Passion narrative. Nevertheless, each can be conceived as faithful adaptations that may be uniquely

¹⁵ Bazin, “Adaptation, or the Cinema of Digest,” 62.

¹⁶ Bazin, “Adaptation, or the Cinema of Digest,” 58.

¹⁷ Bazin’s conception of the relationship between a cinematic adaptation and its source material seems linked to his ideas in another essay, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” trans. Hugh Gray, *Film Quarterly* 13.4 (1960): 4–9, on the artistic relationship between painting and photography. As much as Bazin has argued for the possibility of the aesthetic superiority of the adaptation to its source material, in this essay he argues for the possibility of equal or greater aesthetic value in photography as has traditionally been credited to painting. He suggests that the relationship toward realism in painting, which rose to prominence in the Renaissance, creates a problem even for painters not pursuing an expressly realist project: “painting was torn between two ambitions: one, primarily aesthetic, namely the expression of spiritual reality wherein the symbol transcended its model; the other, purely psychological, namely to duplicate the world outside” (p. 6). Photography, Bazin suggests, has an ontologically indexical relationship to its subject based on the objectivity of image-capturing process: “The photograph as such and the object in itself share a common being, after the fashion of a fingerprint” (p. 8). Therefore, it begins with the object as a given from which the artist is free to pursue the expression of the spiritual reality, unencumbered by the “obsession with realism” Bazin identifies in the artistic tradition of painting from the fifteenth century onward (p. 9). The point this essay wants to draw out

suiting to a postsecular resistance to religious dogmatism that may be perceived in biblical adaptations that are more scrupulous in their indexicality to their scriptural sources. Of the films discussed, the first, Rodrigo Garcia's *Last Days in the Desert*, has the most indexical relationship to the biblical Christ, yet it takes perhaps the most liberties in terms of its theological and thematic explorations. In contrast, Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life* is more oblique in its references to the Passion while still explicit in its biblical inspiration and perhaps strongest in its presentation of gospel themes. Lastly, John Michael McDonagh's *Calvary* relates the least indexically to any particular scriptural source text and, as a result, demonstrates how an adaptation can, in Bazin's words, serve as a digest of the biblical narrative with little indexical relation to that source.

Last Days in the Desert: The Postsecular Scripture, Literally

Rodrigo Garcia's *Last Days in the Desert* begins with a tempest over the desert rather than a temptation in a desert. But from that beginning we move to a clear equivalence in the narrative from Matthew 4 that is the source text for the heart of the story.¹⁸ The storm over the desert is a metonym for the storm within the main character's soul. From the film's opening images, it is easy to see *Last Days* as an attempt to adapt the Bible as the film indexically refashions the visual landscape of the ancient Near East, even as it was shot in the deserts of far east San Diego County, California. But it's not just that the *mise en scene* is biblical—the narrative, too, is a representation of a key story from Matthew's Gospel. *Last Days* depicts a loose retelling of Jesus's wandering in the desert from Matthew 4 complete with its own devil and temptations as well as interpolated dialogue and narrative.

The biblical passage describing Jesus's testing in the wilderness is short and well known: in Matthew's account Jesus is fasting in the desert, led there by the Spirit, with the purpose of being "tempted by the devil," who

in making this connection is that the acknowledgement of an indexical relationship between the photograph and its subject does not imply that the photograph exists solely to provide an index to that subject any more than an adaptation's indexical relationship to its source material (on the levels of form, style, or even narrative structure/contents) implies the degree to which that adaptation expresses the "spiritual reality" or "artistic soul" of the work itself.

¹⁸ This is a commonly adapted story to the big screen as is shown in David B. Howell, "Screening the Temptation: Interpretation and Indeterminacy in Cinematic Transformations of a Gospel Story," *Journal of Religion and Film* 11.2 (2016): <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol11/iss2/3>.

is later referred to as "Satan" in the passage.¹⁹ In Garcia's imagining, Ewan McGregor is cast as Jesus (called Yeshua in the story), the "holy man," while McGregor also plays the role of Satan in various scenes,²⁰ tempting Jesus to not trust (*pistis*) his Father, albeit through temptations that differ from the originals in Matthew's account. Garcia's Satan does not offer bread, but he does tempt Yeshua to question his Father's care for him. He never asks him to throw himself down from any height, but he repeatedly suggests that Yeshua's Father is indifferent not only to Yeshua's plight but also to the plight of all humans. Garcia's Satan in various ways suggests that humans are merely God's puppets, set about their lives for his entertainment.

Critical responses to the film were varied, and it is perhaps still too soon after the film's release to formulate a critical consensus. Nick Pinkerton, writing for *Film Comment*, disliked the film, quipping, "replacing the kitschy pieties of *Son of God* with art-house arthritis and a fretful stringy section doesn't go far toward revivifying the Greatest Story Ever Retold."²¹ This comment contrasts the film's aesthetic sensibilities against the 2014 film *Son of God*, which sought to rather straightforwardly adapt

¹⁹ There is a longstanding Christian tradition that reads this New Testament account as drawing upon or referencing the narrative of Job in the Hebrew Bible, a comparison made perhaps most notably by Milton's *Paradise Regained*. See Victoria Kahn, "Job's Complaint in *Paradise Regained*," *ELH* 76.3 (2009): 625–60. "Just as Job begins with a prologue in which God permits the trials of Job, moves to a central dialogue between Job and his comforters, and concludes with an epilogue in which everything is restored to Job, so *Paradise Regained* begins with a discussion between God and the angel Gabriel in which God permits Satan's temptations of Jesus, moves to a central dialogue between Jesus and Satan, and concludes with the angels singing and Jesus returning home from the wilderness" (p. 625). As we will see, Malick's *Tree of Life* also evokes the book of Job in its more oblique rendering of the Christ story, which also wrestles with the apparent silence of God in the face of suffering.

²⁰ Emmanuel "Chivo" Lubezki's cinematography renders the sparse badlands of the Anza-Barrego as a fitting site for the holy man's struggle with a demon (most often played by McGregor himself). Though it is a story of suffering, the film's photography is beautiful: stunningly so. And, of course, we have come to expect no less from Chivo. The film's visual lyricism does a great deal of work establishing the mood and mode of Garcia's narrative, contrasting the storm over the desert, an image of rain, with the arid landscape below the billowing clouds. This visual dualism will continue and be reproduced in key images of McGregor contra McGregor where the actor will be facing off against his own tempter as Yeshua and The Demon.

²¹ Nick Pinkerton, "Short Takes: Last Days in the Desert," *Film Comment* 52.3 (May/June 2016): 72–73. The actual quote reads, "... Greatest Story Every [sic] Retold."

the biblical Christ story into a blockbuster epic—the film was largely maligned by mainstream critics and only mildly praised by a few religious publications—with Pinkerton’s suggestion being that Garcia’s film is equally lacking in depth, only with a superficial guise of artistry. William Blizek, on the other hand, defends *Last Days* in the *Journal of Religion and Film* while aligning with others who see the film as using a mythic and religious story to engage with universal human themes.²²

Taking a similar approach in his review of the film for the *LA Times*, David Ansen suggests that we see the film in part as Freudian Father/Son narrative based on Garcia’s relationship with his recently deceased and famous father Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Thus, Ansen agrees with Blizek’s emphasis on the father/son relationship in the film but suggests that the film’s concern may be more with the immanent than the transcendent dimensions of this theme. Ansen interviews Garcia, whose comments offer some affirmation of this reading of the film. Garcia explains, “Both Yeshua and the boy are trying to find their destiny from under a powerful father,” adding that he is “not so blind I don’t see that” as central to his own story of finding his destiny with a powerful father. *Last Days*, as Ansen and Garcia make clear, is a story of a son trying to understand his father’s wishes, but it is also a story about a son trying to understand his father’s love. In this sense, then, Garcia’s own biographical reflections add another source to the adaptation equation, in turn diminishing the indexicality of the film’s relationship to its biblical predecessor. As we consider the narrative elements that Garcia’s screenplay introduces that are not present in the biblical source, we are confronted with the possibility that these additions are based on Garcia’s own biographical materials rather than extrapolations of the theological and narrative contents of the original.²³

²² William L. Blizek, “Last Days in the Desert,” *Journal of Religion and Film* 19.1 (2015): <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol19/iss1/20>. Blizek writes, “By making this story about the most famous son, he elevates the conflict between fathers and sons to an existential level—beyond the level of popular psychology. The conflict is not a problem to be solved, but a fundamental part of our being and this requires that we rethink fathers, faith, and destiny. By putting the conflict between father and son in the context of Jesus and his Father—the creator of the universe—Garcia has changed the game.”

²³ Of course, adding interpolated details to the life of Jesus is by no means noteworthy in fiction or film. There has been a cottage industry of extrabiblical literary texts depicting imagined scenes from Jesus’s life that have hardly slowed or abated in the season of our supposed secularization. Indeed, some of the most

Other critics see the film as less universal and mythic in orientation and instead as more clearly religious and Christian in import while reckoning with Garcia’s own comments seemingly to the contrary. For example, Czarina Ong pointedly titles her review of the film “*Last Days in the Desert* Director Rodrigo Garcia can’t get Jesus out of his head, even if he’s not religious,” explaining that “Garcia is admittedly not a religious man, and that is the reason why he never dreamt he would ever direct a film based on the life and trials of Jesus Christ.”²⁴ Ong’s title is based on Garcia’s own words. Garcia claims to have asked himself “what he was doing? A movie about Jesus?” but persisted in making the film “because” he “couldn’t get it out of” his “head.” In Ong’s view, Garcia, unlike Gibson and many other Jesus-filmmakers, didn’t set out to tell a Jesus story but ended up having his story of a father and son turn into THE story of the Father and the Son—even if the version he tells is quite a departure from the biblical telling. In Ong’s account, the mythic father/son story then becomes a story about religious significance, a reversal of Ansen’s assertion that the biblical father/son story ultimately serves to illuminate human relationships. For Ong, this film’s adaptation of Matthew 4 serves to explain Father/Son relationships of trust more fully in order to then explain more fully, by faithful analogy, the relationship of trust between the Son and his Father in Christianity.

Regardless of the emphasis one chooses, it is clear that while *Last Days* is a movie about Jesus, it is also a movie about relationships between fathers and sons. Indeed, some of the most fascinating moments in the story are when Yeshua speaks privately to the boy (played brilliantly by Tye Sheridan) or to the father (equally well cast as Cirian Hinds). These triangulated relationships reveal the unspoken plot and a tacit but critical theological theme, as Yeshua wrestles with the silence of his own Father—the film’s first line is “Father, where are you?” as Yeshua sits in the desert listening. The next words are “Father, speak to me,” and both cries

famous Jesus films have been loose or even heretical with details from the Gospels—one thinks of the likes of *The Last Temptation of Christ* or *The Life of Brian*. So what then makes *Last Days* noteworthy? We would suggest that what is fascinating about Garcia’s presentation of the temptation and crucifixion of Yeshua is its momentary (and possibly illusory) commitment to breaking the immanent frame eighty minutes into the film when Yeshua hovers miraculously above the rocks of the badlands at Fonts Point.

²⁴ Czarina Ong, “Last Days in the Desert’ Director Rodrigo Garcia Can’t Get Jesus Out of His head, Even If He’s Not Religious,” *Christian Today*, May 12, 2016, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/last-days-in-the-desert-director-rodrigo-garcia-cant-get-jesus-out-of-his-head-even-if-hes-not-religious/85863.htm>.

are met with the noise of the desert, the winds, and sands and dust-blown dry landscape. Is this an answer, or is this silence? Does his Father speak? Does he hear? Viewed from this perspective, it is not the time in the desert or the interpolation of extrabiblical material in the form of the family drama that make this a noteworthy example of postsecular biblical adaptation. Instead, it is the plausibility even for Yeshua, the son of God, to have misgivings and doubts about his Father. In Garcia's imagination, even Jesus is not immune to doubt and displays a faith in God that is "dramatically partial," as McClure describes it, in that he questions his Father's presence and care. Thus, the story as Garcia tells it is a story about doubt and faith, where the latter is understood in more than psychological terms as a question of action: the film asks if Yeshua will obey in action what he believes his Father is asking him to do (leading to the Passion), even if he has doubts—doubts which include not hearing from his Father or understanding his command. Indeed, the theological implications here resonate far more deeply with the Passion narrative—the "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" of Matthew 27—rather than the resolute resistance to temptation displayed in Matthew 4, the putative source text for this adaptation.

The film plays out the theological question of a seemingly silent God through Yeshua's interactions with the father and son he encounters in the desert. In one scene, while speaking to the boy as they walk to the river to collect water, Yeshua comes to realize that the boy thinks his father doesn't know him or his desires. In their conversation, he discovers the boy's plans for his life, his hopes to see Jerusalem and the ocean. In part due to the father's stoic and unaffectionate demeanor, it is easy to sympathize with the son's perspective at this stage, just as Yeshua seems to do. Later, however, when Yeshua speaks alone with the father, he sees the Father's love and provision for the son, even as he sees more clearly from his previous conversation with the boy the father's communicative infelicity. The Father tells Yeshua he doesn't know how to speak to the boy and asks for his help. We see in this relationship an image of Yeshua and his Father: a son who doesn't sense his Father's love and doesn't know if he is being heard, and the revelation of a Father who loves and is trying to communicate to his son in a way the son can hear. This provides a moment of insight for the holy man as he (and we) sees the implication that he, too, might have a caring father who is communicating in a way that he (and we) cannot hear. Garcia places Jesus in the context of a *secular* father and son relationship in order to help him understand the *sacred* relationship of trust required of him in the Passion.

While we have already seen prior critics' disagreements over whether

to give primacy to the film's exploration of secular father/son relationships or the theological relationship between Christ and the Heavenly Father in the Matthew 4 temptation narrative, this essay argues that both the materials adapted from the temptation account and the dynamics derived from Garcia's own father/son relationship ultimately contribute to the film's function as, more fundamentally, an adaptation of the biblical Passion narrative. While the request "Father speak to me" has been answered in the relationship of the father and son, this "answer" is hardly as demonstrative and clear as the challenges of the Demon. We see and hear him. We don't hear the Father, and we don't hear Yeshua hear him. Thus, the story becomes something of the "partial faith" or "weak faith" that we saw in McClure's rendering of the postsecular. And yet, Yeshua leaves the desert and decides to act upon what he has come to believe about his Father, against the temptations of the Demon, and it is from this point forward that the film most clearly connects the desert temptations to the theological questions central to the Passion. Before Yeshua leaves the desert, he is depicted walking with the Demon following. They face each other, and the Demon tells him that he will "come to" him "in the end" and that Yeshua can be rescued by the Demon if he wants at that moment. For those who know the story, we know that the tempter is offering the opportunity to relinquish the suffering of the cross.

The events of the Passion are no doubt foreshadowed in Matthew's temptation account, particularly in the second temptation (4:5–7) in which the tempter brings Christ to Jerusalem and impels him to throw himself down from the temple, suggesting that surely God will send his angels to save him. This foreshadows the scoffers at the crucifixion in Matthew 27 who suggest that if Jesus is truly the Son of God, then God should rescue him from his suffering and death on the cross (27:43). But in the final minutes of the movie Garcia explicitly depicts the central events of the Passion—the crucifixion, Yeshua's body dead on a slab, a tomb with a rock covered door. While he hangs on the cross, a hummingbird comes before Yeshua mirroring the earlier images of Yeshua and the Demon face to face. This symbolic hummingbird in the face of the holy man Christ on the cross seems to be the Demon coming to him,²⁵ offering relief and a way off the cross, but he remains and dies. After we leave the body entombed in the dark, we are returned to a cliff edge where we had, just ten minutes prior, seen Yeshua.

This is the key moment for the film's theological work. In the earlier scene Yeshua is floating in the air in broad daylight, his body is suspended above the cliff, and then he awakes from sleep in the predawn light. The

²⁵ According to Mesoamerican scholars, in Latin American iconography the hummingbird is a representation of the devil.

image is striking. It is the only moment in the film that breaks with the visual realism: even the Demon seems to follow the logic of mechanics and physics. While there are many possible ways to read the image of the floating body, which is notably ignored in much of the extant literature about the film, it is difficult to avoid the suggestion of this moment offering a prefiguration of the resurrection. As such, this moment becomes a central, if admittedly, subtle key to the postsecularity of the film. Yeshua wakes alone in the early predawn on the hillside by the father and son's tent after we see the image of his body's floating in daylight reminiscent of the Dali "Crucifixion (*Corpus Hypercubicus*)."²⁶ It is only as the film ends and we see contemporary hikers step out onto the cliff edge in the Borrego Badlands in Southern California that we realize the connection between this scene and the Crucifixion: it is a taste of the resurrection, but a resurrection only hinted at in a dream and hardly demonstrated in empirical form: a "partial" resurrection, not a dogmatic one.

But what do we make of the ordering of the scenes? Is Garcia's levitating Jesus a temptation for Yeshua, a prefiguration of the resurrected Christ for him and for us, a hope from the dreams of a haunted holy man seeking resolution in the desert? The film does not tell us. There is no dogmatic clarity, no assertion of the Resurrection: it is suggested, hinted, and left. We don't see Yeshua again after he is placed in the tomb. Instead, Garcia's Yeshua is like W. H. Auden's "Friday's Child," which ends with a kind of postsecular faith, exclaiming, "Now, did He [Jesus] really break the seal / And rise again? We dare not say."²⁶ Garcia leaves his viewer, like Auden leaves his reader, with the question that the Gospels proclaim and then answer: Did he break the seal and rise again? It seems reasonable to say Garcia does not give a final and definite answer, but the image of the levitating Christ suggests the dream, the hope, that he might have. The answer is partial: it is not exclaimed or declaimed; it is not asserted. It is hinted at, dared to be believed, and then taken away.

The film concludes with a storm over the desert reminiscent of the storm in the opening scene. Between these two storms we have seen the holy man cry out to his father, be tempted to despair by his own image, watch a father and a son wrestle over the direction of the son's life and vocation, and seek to aid a suffering mother. The resonances of the interpolated family plot with the biblical Passion narrative are also apparent, as they represent the holy man's own struggle with his father in the coming scene in the garden of Gethsemane and his attempt, like the boy he meets in the desert, to come to terms with his father's will for his life. As the movie ends there is still the storm. We might conclude that the doubt

²⁶ W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 509–10.

the film opens with—"Father where are you?"—remains present and is being asked again. This time it is the film and its audience that ask, and one wonders if the image of the hikers on the cliff, like the image of the Christ levitating, is not the dream from which we viewers will wake as we leave the dark of the theater. Like Yeshua, we will have to turn our faces toward our Jerusalem, Garcia seems to imply, and await the Father's instruction as we walk in the direction of the next step of the journey.

Tree of Life: Suffering, Silence, and Grace

As with *Last Days in the Desert*, Terrence Malick's *Tree of Life* deals extensively with themes of suffering and death and the relationships between fathers and sons. Also like *Last Days*, Malick's film makes no secret about its ties to biblical source material. At first glance one might be tempted to think of *Tree of Life* as an adaptation of the book of Job. The opening frame of the film is a quotation from Job 38:4, 7. It reads, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth ... When the morning stars sang together?"—suggesting that Job plays a significant part in the conceptual schema of the film. Further, like Job, the story of the film deals with the loss of children and with the place of God in human suffering. The repeated question of the film—"Where were you?"—is a restatement and transformation of God's question to Job in the well-known discussion between God and Job in chapter 38. In *Tree of Life*, Malick resignifies that question: rather than God's asking it of the human character, the people in the film repeatedly ask it of God. This is not an insignificant change; it redirects the story toward a trial of God rather than a trial of the man as in the book of Job. *Tree of Life*, like Job, deals with a blessed family that loses a child and the consequences of that loss on the belief, trust, and practice of the family's members in light of the loss.

And yet, as Alan Jacobs notes in his recent review of Malick's newest film *A Hidden Life*, from "from the *Tree of Life* on, his films have been concerned with overtly religious, indeed specifically Christian, themes."²⁷ So even though *Tree of Life* begins with a quotation from Job—there is also a pivotal scene at church where a minister gives an extended reflection on the book—it does not remain in the Hebrew Bible but moves from Job's questions to Christianity's answer. That is, like the Gospel writers, Malick works in the film to show the family members' making sense of the loss in light of the hope that somehow God is both sovereign and present despite the reality of pain and loss. But should we see this film as a biblical adaptation? And what about calling it a "postsecular adaptation," with the implication that term has a kind of recuperation of belief, on the

²⁷ Alan Jacobs, "Patience: Terrence Malick's *A Hidden Life*," *The Point*, March 5, 2020, <https://thepointmag.com/criticism/patience-a-hidden-life/>.

one hand, and a kind of weak faith or agnosticism, on the other? The film asks where God is and if his grace is real even when he seems silent. It answers with stunning, almost supernatural depictions of natural phenomena—images that gesture, even hope, that even when it doesn't seem like it, the way of suffering may indeed be the way of grace. *Tree of Life* is postsecular in its dogmatic assertion that the ways of God may at times be unclear, but it is emphatic that following and trust (*pistis*) in the “way of grace” will lead to a good end.

Given Rodrigo Garcia's open agnosticism, the suggestion that his work is postsecular is hardly controversial. But considering Malick's explicit affirmation of Christian faith and openness about the theological intents of the film, the question of whether *Tree of Life* should be considered postsecular may present greater complications. Jacobs is hardly the first critic to note Malick's religious orientation. Rather, many viewers and critics have read this film as deeply religious, which seems to suggest the opposite of the kind of “weak” religion presented by McClure and others as postsecular. For these viewers, Malick's work is seen as anything but fuzzy about the doctrinal and religious answers to its profound philosophical questions. Jacobs's view has represented the general consensus, but that does not mean it is without detractors.

Notable exceptions include Roger Ebert, whose review of the film expresses suspicion concerning the film's putative religiosity. Instead, he insists that

Terrence Malick's new film is a form of prayer. It created within me a spiritual awareness, and made me more alert to the awe of existence. I believe it stands free from conventional theologies, although at its end it has images that will evoke them for some people. It functions to pull us back from the distractions of the moment, and focus us on mystery and gratitude.²⁸

Key to seeing Malick as a species of a postsecular filmmaker is Ebert's phrase “stands free from conventional theologies.” Ebert wants to make *Tree of Life* open to “spirituality”—which he implies is itself open—without closing that off to a specific doctrinal or dogmatic tradition. According to Ebert, Malick is committed to representing “a dramatically partial and open-ended” faith in the stream of McClure. And Ebert is not alone in thinking that the film might be read without reference to doctrine, theological claims, or religion. Along similar interpretative lines, Shawn

²⁸ Roger Ebert, “The Blink of a Life, Enclosed by Time and Space: *Tree of Life* Movie Review,” June 1, 2011, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-tree-of-life-2011>.

Loht's 2014 article suggests that we ought to understand the film in philosophical terms indebted to Heidegger, arguing for a reading that shows “that *Tree of Life* presents a bona fide philosophical argument regarding the conditions of human flourishing.” Loht argues against those who exclusively read “the film from a largely theological and Christian standpoint,” suggesting a complementary reading that focuses on Malick's interest in a Heideggerian mode of authenticity.²⁹

In the critical conversation, these articles that argue for readings of *Tree of Life* that downplay the religious dimension of the film each seem the exception that prove the rule, since nearly every review—and the sheer volume of articles in places like the *Journal of Religion and Film*—suggests that, far from being “free” from “conventional theologies,” the film is founded on them: the film, as one scholar suggests, *demand*s a theological reading.³⁰ For example, in his “Spirit(uality) in the Films of Terrence Malick,” Christopher Barnett insists that while Malick “has manifested a noticeable interest in religious ideas and themes” throughout his career, “it is *Tree of Life* that most clearly exhibits a desire to engage theological issues, particularly from within the traditions of Judaism and Christianity.”³¹ This analysis contrasts any vague and undefined spirituality, as Ebert has it, or simply nonreligious philosophy, as Loht suggests. Barnett argues that, to the contrary, “if one were to set about [reading] Malick's films dogmatically ... as illustrations of religious teachings on creation, fall, love and so forth ..., such an approach might yield some noteworthy points of connection.”³²

In addition to emphasizing the film's theological themes, critics have also suggested that its form might also be considered religious. For example, M. Gail Hamner explains that she is “interested in how the film's restless camera—moving almost unceasingly, and cutting non-linearly—itself suggests a divine force that stitches together the humans' disjointed

²⁹ Shawn Loht, “Film as Ethical Philosophy, and the Question of Philosophical Arguments in Film—A Reading of *The Tree of Life*,” *Film and Philosophy* 18 (2014): 165.

³⁰ Peter Leithart, *Shining Glory: Theological Reflections on Terrence Malick's Tree of Life* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), vii. See also Christopher B. Barnett and Clark J. Elliston, eds., *Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

³¹ Christopher B. Barnett, “Spirit(uality) in the Films of Terrence Malick,” *Journal of Religion and Film* 17.1 (2013): <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol17/iss1/33>.

³² Barnett, “Spirit(uality) in the Films of Terrence Malick,” 2.

and mournful restlessness, without unifying or homogenizing it.”³³ And Pat Brereton and Robert Furze argue in “Transcendence and The Tree of Life” that *Tree of Life* “promotes a transcendent experience, even an experience of the sublime or Holy, that exceeds aesthetic or intellectual analysis.”³⁴ For Barnett, Hamner, Brereton, and Furze, both the form and content of *Tree of Life* suggest something profoundly theological. The questions that remain are how that theology should be characterized and how it relates to the adaptation of the Bible.

We can begin to see this relationship if we look at some of the more conventional theological themes that have been evoked by the oft-discussed opening scene of the film. Here we can also begin to see how the film might be understood as not only a theologically rich narrative in its own rite but also an adaptation of the biblical Passion narrative, just as this essay has argued regarding *Last Days in the Desert*. Due to *Tree of Life*'s visual lyricism, it would be very challenging to write a synopsis of the film as a whole. It is formally composed of two main narrative threads, a cosmic depiction of creation *ex nihilo* from darkness to the evolution of humanity and a narrative of the O'Brien family (Mrs. O'Brien played by Jessica Chastain and Mr. O'Brien played by Brad Pitt). The O'Brien family story involves the loss of life in the death of RL (the middle brother) and the story of a fall from innocence, loss of faith, and return to faith of the eldest brother, Jack. The story—to the extent that there is one—centers on the history of this family even as that history begins with the loss of one of its members. The story is simultaneously a memory and a kind of theodicy, as we see from this opening scene.

The film's opening presents images of what we come to recognize as Mrs. O'Brien, the mother figure, as a young girl. A voiceover is heard saying,

The nuns taught us there were two ways through life—the way of nature and the way of grace. You have to choose which one you'll follow. Nature only wants to please itself. Get others to please it too. Likes to lord it over them. To have its own way. It finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it. And love is smiling through all things. Grace doesn't try to please itself. Ac-

³³ M. Gail Hamner, “Filming Reconciliation: Affect and Nostalgia in The Tree of Life,” *Journal of Religion and Film* 18.1 (2014): <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol18/iss1/43>.

³⁴ Pat Brereton and Robert Furze, “Transcendence and The Tree of Life: Beyond the Face of the Screen with Terrence Malick, Emmanuel Levinas, and Roland Barthes,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 8.3 (October 2014): 329–51.

cepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults and injuries. The nuns taught us that no one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end. I will be true to you. Whatever comes.

What “comes” next here in the sequence of the film is a telegram explaining the death of RL, the most grace-loving of the children of Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien. In the scene, it is the young RL whom we see backing away from the camera as Mrs. O'Brien proclaims that “no one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end.” This proclamation is problematized when we come to find out that RL, while away studying music, took his own life, just as Malick's own musically gifted brother had done at nineteen years of age. The rest of the film develops what it might mean to think that, despite this child's death by suicide, he has not come to a “bad end.” The film comes to suggest that it is better to follow the way of grace and die by suicide than follow the way of nature and lead a long and prosperous life as Jack, RL's older brother, does.

The way in which the film proceeds to make this case has as much to do with its aesthetic vision as with its narrative content. In her article “Filming Reconciliation,” Hamner writes about the cinematic technique of the film and the experience thereby produced when watching *Tree of Life*, suggesting the explicit theological goals of Malick in this form. She explains,

The cinematography ... repeats the opposition between the way of nature and the way of grace, but also reconciles it in the eternal life of God. Put differently, the film's formal, cinematographic restlessness reframes and reconciles the diegetic restlessness of its human characters. In arranging the film form in this way, I contend that Malick presents less a story about Christian faith than an affective presentation of Christian reconciliation.³⁵

Hamner's point seems to be that the disorienting force of the cinematic technique of the film serves a theological purpose, one she suggests here, and goes on to argue in the rest of the piece, is best understood as the generation of a “feeling” or “affective presentation.”³⁶ This feeling in turn is best understood as a “presentation of Christian reconciliation,” which is another way of saying theology becomes experience. Thus, for Hamner, it seems Malick is following contemporary postsecular literature and film in its concern with a theology of experience.³⁷ In some ways, Malick's

³⁵ Hamner, “Filming Reconciliation,” 2.

³⁶ Hamner, “Filming Reconciliation,” 2.

³⁷ Even Ebert, after suggesting that the film might be enjoyed and understood

cinematography may be the culmination of this view, since his work makes experience not only theological but also, if Hamner is right, doctrinal. Of course, there is nothing that surprising about this when we consider that Malick is a Protestant of the Liberal Protestant variety through his Episcopalian membership.

But if Hamner is right that Malick's "cinematography ... repeats the opposition between the way of nature and the way of grace" but also reconciles it in the eternal life of God above nature, then what does that cinematic form mean as not just a doctrine but also an adaptation of the Bible? In brief, the opening scene—the biblical quotation, the image of a flame, the voiceover discussing nature versus grace—seems to make clear that Malick does wish to engage theological concepts with a level of doctrinal specificity. These theological topoi will be present throughout the conclusion of the film, in which the lost son will reappear to be reunited with his family in some sort of spatial and temporal zone beyond our present one (possibly Malick's vision of heaven) and Mrs. O'Brien will relinquish ownership of her son, claiming repeatedly, "I give you my son." This image of a mother releasing her son into divine hands may conjure the image of Mary, the mother of Jesus, present at his crucifixion (John 19:25), but, even more overtly, it seems to echo Christian messianism's conception of the divine Father giving his Son. This connection between Mrs. O'Brien and God the Father is again supported by the film's opening scene, in which Mrs. O'Brien's voice initiates the film's narrative action, a voiceover sequence which precedes and leads directly into the extended cinematic interlude depicting the origins of the universe. Surely this evokes the particular biblical vision of a God who spoke all things into creation—the Word in the beginning. But even if it evokes the biblical story as we are suggesting and could thereby be a digest in the sense that Bazin uses the term, it is less clear how it might be indexical in Bazin's (or any other) sense.

without reference to its supernatural concerns, insists that the film was in some way religious. Ebert explains, "Many films diminish us. They cheapen us, murtherate our senses, hammer us with shabby thrills, diminish the value of life. Some few films evoke the wonderment of life's experience, and those I consider a form of prayer. Not prayer 'to' anyone or anything, but prayer 'about' everyone and everything. I believe prayer that makes requests is pointless. What will be, will be. But I value the kind of prayer when you stand at the edge of the sea, or beneath a tree, or smell a flower, or love someone, or do a good thing. Those prayers validate existence and snatch it away from meaningless routine" (Ebert, "The Blink of a Life, Enclosed by Time and Space: *Tree of Life* Movie Review"). Thus Ebert insists that *Tree of Life's* value inheres in its revelatory power, its natural supernaturalism.

And yet, while we will agree that this film is much more clearly conventional in its theology than other postsecular films of the same period, we think that Ebert is probably right and, despite its clearer doctrine, *Tree of Life* is more like the "postsecular" than anything approximating dogmatic and didactic art. In other words, like *Last Days in the Desert*, Malick's film remains "dramatically partial and open-ended."³⁸ It begins with a flame and it ends with a bridge, but it is not didactic about whether that light will lead the pilgrim to cross. *Tree of Life* shows the transformation of a father by the death of his son in profound scenes of repentance, but it doesn't show us if the brother who stays at home crosses over the bridge that RL's death and grace make available as the film ends.

So the similarity between *Last Days in the Desert* and *Tree of Life* only begs the question of whether or not we ought to think of the latter film as both postsecular and an adaptation of the Bible. Malick's story is not only the story of RL and grace and his father's move from nature to grace but also a retelling of the Christian pilgrimage story in Jack. And as such we would argue that it is clearly the story of a renewed faith and trust (*pistis*) born from the sacrifice of a (good) son. While the film lyrically affirms the choice of grace over nature and calls Jack and its audience to embrace that "good end," it remains undogmatic and winsome, wooing rather than preaching. So while it is a proclamation of the *kerygma*, it is also a postsecular proclamation, a call not to certainty or out of the secular life but to trust and the goodness of the embodied, beautiful creation. Malick's answer in the end to the question "Where were you?" is shown in the stunning camera work that Calvin would well have recognized when he described God's presence as everywhere reflected in nature as in a mirror in Book 5 of his *Institutes*. Beauty as a sign and sacrament that screams "all around you if you have the eyes to see" seems to be Malick's filmic answer to the question "Where were you?" As such, *Tree of Life* is a recreation—a faithful digest, or "equivalence of meaning"—of the gospel story. It is a postsecular adaptation, even if it is much less indexical in its form than *Last Days in the Desert*. In it the way of grace is available, just below the surface of the vision, for those with the eyes to see.

Calvary: The Death of a Good Priest

John Michael McDonagh, like Garcia and Malick, produced the film *Calvary*, which centered on the relationship between a type of father and a kind of son in order to show the way of nature and the way grace, or at least posit its possibility. *Calvary* is the story of a "good priest" (a father and Father), who is murdered by a man (the son), who was abused by a

³⁸ McClure, *Partial Faiths*, ix.

bad priest. It is a priestly sexual abuse narrative from the opening scene, in which a man comes to confession and says that he “first tasted semen at seven years of age.” The man goes on to tell the priest that he is going to kill him because he is a good priest, and no one cares if you kill a bad priest. This startling beginning, evoking the familiar narratives of priestly abuse from the last two decades, may lead us to certain presumptions about where the story is going, but McDonagh has other plans. But how can the story of a son killing a father be an adaptation of the *urtext* of a son giving his life willingly to his father, the story of Jesus on the cross of Calvary? It is a testimony to McDonagh’s skill that he accomplishes no less of an alchemic reversal such that the seemingly least indexical film of the three we are considering here might just be the most complete digest of the biblical *kyrygma*.

We know that the vengeance killing is going to happen from the opening of the film. The good priest is thus a substitute for the fault of another man. As such, it is an analog to the story of Jesus, understood as the perfect sacrificial lamb or atoning sacrifice for the sins of another. To be sure, *Calvary* is a film that is not a clear adaptation of any specific passage of the Bible, nor is it an obvious retelling of a biblical story. Instead, it is a creative retelling of the basic story of the priestly sacrificial logic of Jesus where the priest and the lamb for sacrifice are the same character: Father James, the good priest and good father. In this sense, out of the films discussed in this essay, *Calvary* relates least indexically to any biblical source material but is perhaps the most directly analogical to the central theological concern of the biblical Passion under the framework of penal substitutionary atonement theory. And yet, the degree to which the film is comfortable with this logic is another question, again lending to its categorization as a postsecular adaptation.

As his brother Martin McDonagh had sine in *In Bruges* (and *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*), John Michael McDonagh addresses vengeance in *Calvary*. But whereas the retributive logic *In Bruges* fails—a guilty molesting priest is killed and with him a young boy is shot, followed by additional, snowballing killing—the logic of vengeance in *Calvary* does not. At its conclusion, *Calvary*, like *In Bruges*, has a young boy watch but this time the altar boy observes as an innocent man willingly gives his life as a substitute for a guilty man—and with him the violence ends. As such, *Calvary*, like the Gospels, tells a story of retribution, but also the end of retribution. The altar boy of *Calvary* becomes like something of a Gospel writer, as is shown in his mimetic work painting the beach scene. This altar boy is an observer seeing the grace on display, whereas the praying boy of *In Bruges* witnesses vengeance paid out upon a guilty man and suffers death alongside that guilty man. Martin McDonagh in *In Bruges* and

John Michael McDonagh in *Calvary* both address a father-and-son relationship, both address a priestly abuse situation, and both deal with vengeance and its effects. And yet, that is where the similarity stops. J. M. McDonagh goes on to retell a story of a “good end” like Garcia and Malick, even if that “end” is an untimely, in some sense an avoidable, and sacrificial death. This end is then the postsecular adaptation, and even proclamation, of the *kyrygma*, a digest of equivalence in meaning that forgoes much in the way of the indexical.

The critical conversation about *Calvary* has recognized the ways that the story engages with the substitutionary logic of Christian Scripture. Thus, Catherine Wheatley explains in her “There’s No Point in Killing a Bad Priest,” that the film “displays a serious thematic concern with notions of goodness, innocence, struggle and sacrifice inherited from the Judeo-Christian tradition.”³⁹ These notions include the substitutionary atonement of Judaism and then Christianity. But Wheatley also goes on to argue in her essay that the film addresses “a dialectic between faith and uncertainty, religion and institutions” in a way that she thinks, “treats its religious themes with a certain worldliness” which she contrasts to the postsecular mode of Malick that she calls a “more cosmological approach” with a “mythical” and “amorphous religiosity.”⁴⁰ So *Calvary* engages in a specific place (Ireland) with a group of very specific and specified characters in order to develop a logic that is as universal as anything in Christendom: the logic of the good man dying as the atoning substitute for the bad man.⁴¹

Of course, not everyone agrees about the centrality of penal substitutionary atonement logic to the film, and some see it instead as a kind of smoke-screened *apologia*. In his review of the film, Mark Lawson explains something quite dissimilar when he insists that in discussing the priestly scandals of the first decade of the twenty-first century, “*Calvary* gets to the heart of the matter by bypassing it—cleverly and thoughtfully addressing

³⁹ Catherine Wheatley, “‘There’s No Point in Killing a Bad Priest’: John Michael McDonagh’s *Calvary* and the Broken Middle,” in Caruana and Cauchi, *Immanent Frames*, 171.

⁴⁰ Wheatley, “There’s No Point in Killing a Bad Priest,” 172.

⁴¹ Substitutionary atonement is not a universal Christian belief. It is indeed an interesting choice for a film centered on Catholic Christians to foreground this logic. Luther was the Augustinian monk who helped bring about the Protestant Reformation through his emphasis on this logic within the Catholic church, and the Counter Reformation and contemporary Catholic church have oscillated between emphasis upon satisfaction, ransom, *Christus victor*, and penal substitutionary atonement theories as is outlined in numerous works on soteriology.

the worst men in the Church by showing one of the best.”⁴² For Lawson the film is a kind of cultural dodge and only seems to be about abuse when it is actually an indirect plea for the dignity of the priesthood by contrasting the good, voluntary, if reluctant, scapegoat, Father James, with the bad priests who abuse their role. In this way, we are presented with a similar critical question as was discussed regarding *Last Days in the Desert*: Are the film’s transcendent concerns a vehicle for its more immanent social/cultural commentary, or is the film’s primary project a theological one? This problem seems endemic to works that take the more open posture toward religious matters characterized here as a postsecular approach.

As an adaptation of Scripture, *Calvary* is the hardest to recognize. In terms of indexicality, at most the film is the smoke to some other texts’ fire: *Calvary* is not set in a biblical time, it doesn’t retell a biblical story, and it makes no claim to be a recreation of anything within the Bible. And yet, while it does not imitate characters or stories from the Bible, I would argue that it nevertheless does retell in a kind of parabolic form central components of the gospel narrative. Father James’s story can be quite easily seen as an imperfect analogue of Jesus’s. He is a middle-aged man who serves his undeserving and ungrateful flock despite their bad treatment of him. He doubts his calling and even starts to run away from his cross before turning his face (back) toward his Jerusalem and marching toward his Golgotha. He is betrayed and ultimately killed by one of his own flock, a man whom he both loves and cares for. And finally, his life and death are presented as examples of a kind of trust in what is to come, a trust that none of the other characters in the film seems to possess. Father James’s life, though it ends in a violent death, seems a far superior life than the living deaths of the flock he tends. Thus, John Michael McDonagh’s work is not unlike the writers of the Gospel, especially John, who set out to show a somewhat skeptical audience that the man who seems to have lost in the story is actually the winner, whom we would do well to emulate. McDonagh’s adaptation, indeed his coda image, might be Matt 10:39: “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (ESV). And thus while *Calvary* is indexical and evocative in its title, it is a digest of the heart of the gospel message.

Conclusion

If these biblical adaptations do espouse the sort of partial or “weak” religion with which John McClure associates the postsecular in *Partial Faiths*, either in their sometimes-tenuous connections to their biblical

⁴² Mark Lawson, Critic At Large, *New Statesman*, March, 28, 2014, p. 53.

sources or in their resistance to dogmatic explications of their theological conclusions, then they certainly cannot be accused of doing so in order to broaden their appeal to a secular mainstream box office. Indeed, all three films were distributed via limited theatrical release after their festival debuts, and of the three, *Tree of Life* was by far the highest grossing at \$61.7 million—compare this to Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ*’s \$611 million, Aronofsky’s *Noah*’s \$359.2 million, or even Ridley Scott’s critically panned *Exodus: Gods and Kings*’s \$282.2 million. It could be argued that by eschewing clear marketing categories such as the blockbuster epic, the hyper socially conscious “Oscar bait” stereotype, or even the smaller but often still lucrative market share of the faith-based film industry, these films run the risk of alienating both religious and secular audiences. But it is these films’ deliberate acceptance of this risk that makes them compelling examples of the theological and artistic potential of postsecular cinema. Therefore, against those who read these postsecular works as partial or weak assertions of faith (*pistis*), we have argued here that these postsecular biblical adaptations present the gospel story of doubt and mistrust leading to confidence, conversion, and trust through the mechanism of suffering. This suffering in turn produces hope and action, even as, critically, these films all also leave open the very real possibility that this hope may be misplaced. It is this last element that so closely aligns these works with the postsecular conception of “weak faith” even as it also aligns with the tradition Christian conception of faith, at least before the Enlightenment transformed belief into a category that was opposed to knowledge and value as a category in opposition to fact. Furthermore, we have argued against assertions that postsecular works depict faith and religion merely in a way that is uncertain, shrouded in doubt, and at times mystical, and in doing so, avoids engagement with the substantive stream of influence from sacred texts or engagement with traditional theological discourses. Instead, we submit that, while there may be ambivalence (as McClure suggests) on the part of postsecularists to affirming dogmas and practices of orthodox faiths, there is no squeamishness about adopting, adapting, and playing with the sacred texts that inform such faiths.⁴³

⁴³ Of course the scope of this present essay has been limited to the Hebrew Bible and the New and Old Testaments and the ways that filmmakers have engaged the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, adapting them to enable a deep interpretation of the Bible as seen and shown through the literary forms of cinema. Still what we are suggesting McClure gets absolutely right about the “partial” quality of the faiths on display in the films I am here analyzing in this essay is the way that they each deal with the significant angst, dread, and suffering caused by

Doubt is not the antithesis of belief, but there is a peculiarity to the doubt represented in these films. *The Last Days in the Desert* begins with the question “Father, where are you?”; *Tree of Life* begins with the echo of “Where were you?” from a critical passage in Job; and *Cahvary*, while it does not begin with a question about God’s absence or presence, does begin with a confession of sexual abuse acidic enough to cause any believer doubt about God’s care for his church, if not the entire Christian faith. Each film has central characters who wonder about their obedience and even in some cases wander from obedience to their religion because of their doubt.

And even though each story ends with characters who are in states of fidelity, all three still show that fidelity as conditioned and informed by their doubt and ambivalence. So if they have faith, that faith is certainly “partial,” if partial means not absolute or without doubt but conditioned by the possibility of being rejected. But so what? Is this a unique form of trust and faith? I would suggest that postsecular faith, belief that is practiced in the presence of doubts and unknowns, is the only kind we ever get as humans, at least if we are defining it in terms that are psychological (belief as psychological certainty). Postsecular faiths, like postsecular adaptations, are the only kinds of faiths we humans get to have after the Enlightenment.⁴⁴

doubt. The faiths that are on display in all three films are faiths of practice, affect, and conviction that are uneasy, lacking complete conviction, questioning, and in some respects contested.

⁴⁴ It might be reasonably asked, “So then why call these postsecular adaptations at all?” and I’d answer that I want to mark the ways that what has changed is the assumption of religious homogeneity and belief. In short, as James K. A. Smith shows in his excellent analysis of Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* in Smith’s *How (Not) to Be Secular*, the condition in which religion is engaged is what Taylor means by “Secular” (Smith calls this concept “secular₃” to differentiate it from other types of “secular” which he calls “secular₁” and “secular₂”). Secular₃ is the condition described by Taylor as a condition of optionality, where it is assumed not that secularization of religious decline is true, but that “religious belief, or belief in God, is understood to be one option amongst many” and is “thus contestable” (James K. A. Smith, *How [Not] to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014], 21). Taylor describes this as the movement from “a society where belief in God is unchallenged, and indeed unproblematic,” (what Smith calls “secular₁”) into a society “in which it [religious adherence and belief in God] is understood to be one option among others” (Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3). The “secular” then that I am claiming we are “post” is secular₂, the assumptions

As such, the conditions of these films are rather like the conditions of the Gospels and Epistles: they are made for people who probably don’t believe, or at least believe without any doubt, with the assumption that it is possible that they might believe more than they do. These films then are produced as the New Testament was, within a plausibility construct where believing was one option among others. The alternative to this is Christendom, where the conditions of belief are such that to believe is to just be encultured. Taylor and Smith show that it’s not just the nonbeliever who has a different experience of religious adherence in the secular, but the believer too. In a secular age, believers believe, but they do so aware that they don’t have to, that others don’t, and that it is optional not to.

This essay has also argued that these films are not only postsecular explorations of faith and doubt but also distinctly postsecular adaptations, in one way or another, of the biblical Passion narrative and its central theological contents. It can be concluded, then, that these films view this tension between doubt and faith, unbelief and belief, as a central theological component of Christ’s life and death. Under the conditions described by Taylor as secular, in which unbelief is not only an option but more often the default option, or immanent frame for contemporary culture, it is not surprising that the apparent silence and inaction of God the Father in the face of his suffering Son, as well as the possibility of faith in spite of this uncertainty, might be the “artistic soul,” to return to Bazin’s terminology, that these postsecular biblical adaptations seek to “manifest . . . through another incarnation.”

Through biblical adaptation of stories of what Bazin calls “equivalence in meaning,” these three films show what it is like to live in age of belief conditioned by doubt and doubt conditioned by belief. As we have suggested, with the notable exception of the dark night of the Enlightenment, trusting and acting in spite of doubt and uncertainty has been what it means to believe in every age, and so these postsecular adaptations have brought us back to the biblical story as it was always meant to be told: “but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31 ESV).

of the secularization hypothesis and what Taylor calls the “subtraction” narratives of the Enlightenment. Instead of highlighting the erasure of religious practice and belief in contemporary times, these are postsecular biblical adaptations in this sense: they are films that adapt the Bible for a context that see beliefs in the Bible’s truth as one option amongst many.