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Framing the gods.

The public significance of religion from a cultural point of view.

R.Ruard Ganzevoort

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Abstract

Most researchers of religion agree that the public significance of religion is not best understood in terms of ongoing secularization. Even though organized religion has a less visible and powerful position, especially in the western world, there is also a resurgence of religion in the public domain. In many parts of the world religion does not decline but gains importance and changes in shape. Qualitative changes in the public significance of religion include the fact that other cultural agents and institutions (notably the media, music, cinema, and advertisement industries) have taken over the role of churches in offering frames of reference and meaning, including (quasi-)religious ones. This paper explores the public significance of religion from a cultural point of view by looking at three patterns of meaning offered in popular culture: ‘romantic love’, ‘thrillseeking’ and ‘more between heaven and earth’. In conclusion the nature and function of religious material in a non-religious media-setting are discussed.

Introduction: Framing the Gods

It is hard not to think of the media or – broader – the realm of popular culture when we want to assess the public significance of religion. It may not be the only sphere where religion plays a major role in contemporary societies, but certainly in this sphere religion emerges in a vibrant, eclectic, and often innovative way. Whereas our societies struggle with the place and role of religion and try to keep its more radical and dangerous forces at bay through different models of state-church separation, the cultural sphere remains loaded with religious themes and images. In this cultural sphere the public significance of religion is not contested as much as in the political or educational sphere.

It is unclear, however, how religion functions and is depicted in popular culture in general and in the media in particular. It is not necessarily the same kind of religion, let alone the same religious content or function as could be found in the religious traditions, even when sometimes traditional images or words are being used. Precisely this will prove to be an important challenge for contemporary theologians and other scholars in religion (Ganzevoort, 2006). How are we to understand and evaluate Madonna's performance in her 2006 *Confession* tour, in which she sings about secrets, truth, and the writing on the wall, while hanging on a large mirror-plated cross and wearing a crown of thorns? Surely these are religious forms, but what do they mean? Is there a religious intention in the artist? Is there a religious experience or perception in the audience? Is there a religious function? The questions abound and call us to reconsider the very concepts of 'religion' and 'religious', because it is not clear that our traditional concepts, well-suited perhaps for the study of traditional or institutionalized (and especially Christian) religion, are still meaningful when we try to understand religion in these non-religious spheres.¹

How should we distinguish between religious and non-religious contents and functions when such a distinction may not be that central or even possible anymore? How can we even begin to define the very concept of 'religion'? A clear definition from the start will blind us to new variations, modulations, and emanations, but a lack of definition easily results in dissolution of the whole study of religion. I will return to this issue of defining religion in our changing context near the end of this exploration, but my starting point will be to take religion as transcending patterns of meaning arising from and contributing to the relation with what is held to be sacred.

What we are looking for then, when we try to establish and understand the public significance or religion in contemporary popular culture, are the many forms of religious presence, their meanings and functions, and the ways in which audiences engage with these forms and appropriate them as material for their individual and collective stories of meaning. What we are looking for is how religion is 'framed', to use the expression coined by Ervin Goffman (1974) and among others applied by Van Ginneken (1998) in his study of global news coverage. Media do not simply portray or represent a reality existing elsewhere. In a way the media themselves create the world they purport to present. One important mechanism in this process is the effect of agenda-setting. The choice of topics and viewpoints that appear in the news media is to a large extent influenced by a limited number of people, especially government officials. In entertainment media we may expect a similar influence of network officials, marketing

¹ In retrospect, our explorations in the changing faces of contemporary religion and our conversations in comparative and post-colonial study of religion should make us wary to assume that our concepts were ever completely adequate; perhaps they too were more a "backwardly directed projection" than a historical past, as Hent De Vries (2008) points out in his enticing introduction to the audacious volume *Religion beyond a concept*.

executives, and trendsetting opinion leaders. What is 'hot' and what is not 'hot' is not so much the autonomous tidal wave of the audience's preferences, but rather the effect of a sophisticated orchestration of media attention aiming at commercial or political success.

The response to the 2008 anti-Islam movie *Fitna* by Dutch politician Geert Wilders is a case in point. Both Wilders (willingly) and his opponents (unwillingly) have hyped the release of the movie and were partially successful in doing that. They were able to mobilize extensive media attention at least in the Netherlands and the response in other parts of the world (especially in the Muslim world) is unthinkable without the media. Even when it is not one single party interested in this agenda setting, we should still be aware that media attention influences the factual developments as much as it reflects them, as the 2008 financial crisis showed: continuous exposure exacerbated the loss of trust that is one of the main causes of the crisis. This process of agenda setting has a major impact on the attention for religion. One could argue that in countries like the Netherlands religion seems obsolete to many mainly because of a lack of media attention, even though religious organizations are still among the most salient and powerful contributors to society, if only for the inspiration many members of society find through their membership of such organizations. As it has been quipped: God is not dead, he is just not on TV.

The second mechanism in this process is framing per se: we look at the world through the lens of the media. We see what reporters and networks want us to see. The choice of images and words to cover a particular event determines how the audience will perceive that event. This involves even more than the precise wording or imaging. It also refers to the frame in which a theme or subject is presented, the setting in which (for our topic) religion occurs. This frame defines the meanings and subconscious associations elicited in the audience and connected to the topic. The fact that, for example, Islam and violence regularly occur in the same headlines, probably has more impact on readers than the possibly nuanced contents of the articles. This should make us question how religion features in the media, or, as I would like to put it, the ways in which the Gods are framed in our contemporary media culture.

But I am moving ahead of my story. The field I want to explore is the public significance of religion, or – more precisely – the ways in which religious forms appear in popular culture and particularly in non-religious media settings. To do so, I will take my starting point in the perspective of the deinstitutionalization of religion. From that perspective, I will look at how non-religious institutions take over religious functions, serving as sources and media of meaning, consolation, and community. The next step will be a discussion of the religious patterns we can find in popular culture, digging up as it were the religious material needed for a cultural exegesis. And finally, I will reflect on the meaning and function of religious forms in non-religious media:

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What happens when religious forms are framed in the setting of global news, entertainment, or commerce?

Deinstitutionalization or secularization?

It is probably fair to say that the dominant perspective from which religion has been studied in the past decades is that of secularization theory. José Casanova (1994) may be right that this is the only theory in modern social sciences that has acquired the status of a paradigm. The many differences between secularization theories notwithstanding, the central tenet is the idea that the world will become increasingly a-religious as a direct corollary of modernization. As the western world – or in fact: Europe – spearheaded these developments, it was expected that the rest of world would follow suit and show a similar kind of secularization. In retrospect, the almost paradigmatic status of the theory was at least partly due to a European bias, overlooking how religion and modernity amalgamated in the USA and how religion continues to flourish in many non-Atlantic societies, even when certain shapes of modernization and globalization can be witnessed. Grace Davie (2002) even calls Europe ‘the exceptional case’ and Philip Jenkins (2002) describes ‘the next Christendom’ as coming from the south, and infusing our western European world with charismatic influences and non-western cosmologies, a development we already witness in the growing number of migrant and Pentecostal churches (Ganzevoort 2007).

Most sociologists of religion by now agree that the theory of ongoing secularization does not do justice to the actual developments in the field of religion. Modernity has indeed brought about differentiation and rationalization, and that has resulted in a less visible and less powerful position of religion in some countries. In other instances, we see a resurgence of religion in the public domain, but that is not simply a ‘revanche de Dieu’ (Kepel, 2003). The Netherlands may be a case in point. For quite some time it counted as one of the more profoundly secularized countries in the world, but in the past few years we have witnessed religious extremism to the point of murder, a government with a strong faction of clearly religiously inspired politicians, new self-confidence on the part of the main churches, and fierce discussions on blasphemy, religion, and multiculturalism. Religion is back on the public agenda in ways unimagined by proponents of secularism. At the same time, recent Dutch surveys show that organized Christian religion is still in decline: two out of three consider themselves not to belong to a church, and of church members only 38% are frequent worshippers (Becker & de Hart, 2008). We can observe an ever-increasing kind of religious illiteracy, first of course among the youth, but spreading rapidly. Indications are that although the number of Muslims is growing in our country, many of them are secularizing in their own ways, mainly through privatization and detraditionalization and much less through apostasy (Phalet & ter Wal, 2004). In all these studies we do not see a clear transition from religion to spirituality (Heelas & Woodhead, 2005). Even when people are interested in spiritual

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matters, they usually devote only a limited share of their time and energy and rarely organize their lives around it. That means that Peter Berger's proposal to speak of 'desecularization' is also beyond the point, because we do not witness the development of a new sacred canopy (Berger et al., 1999). Revised secularization theories address these shortcomings and account for different trajectories in different contexts. Charles Taylor (2007) in this vein defends the thesis that we live in a secular age, by which he means not only that the state is no longer based on religious beliefs, or that religious institutions are in decline. The most important meaning of 'secular' for Taylor is that religious beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours have lost their self-evident 'truth' by becoming just one alternative among many. We have moved 'from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others' (13). Admittedly, his approach again is limited to an Atlantic perspective, but his focus on the cultural level makes his work important for our explorations.

Rather than speak of ongoing secularization or of desecularization – both of which can be corroborated by data yet fail to grasp the overall picture – I find it helpful to speak of the deinstitutionalization of religion (Streib, 2007), especially when we speak of the public significance of religion from a cultural point of view. Deinstitutionalization, together with institutionalization and reinstitutionalization, focuses on the collective dimension in which religion becomes organized and embedded in normative structures that are preserved in traditions and granted self-evident authority or value. This is a constantly changing dynamic process in which structures come and go and values and meanings move to the center or to the periphery. Religion, like other aspects of life, has been institutionalized in structures and organizations in various ways and in different times and contexts, while other times and situations show a decline of those structures. The starting point for this perspective is not the historical anomaly of a hegemonic churchly Christendom (Stoffels, 2003), a situation found only during a limited time in a few societies, nor in a modernist rejection of religion, but in the fluid religiosity that my colleague in sociology of religion Hijme Stoffels (2002) has dubbed 'wild devotion'. This is not to be read as a normative term as if 'wild' would be in any sense less developed or profound (the way the term 'savage' was used by colonizers and early anthropologists). Instead, it begs to interpret institutionalized religion as 'tamed', controlled to follow the calibrated pathways and incorporated into a religious community strong enough to become a societal force of any importance. If a normative approach were to be ventured, it should take into account that institutionalization is indispensable if we want to preserve a religious tradition for a future generation, and yet inevitably compromises the authenticity of religion as apparent in its 'wilder' forms (Ganzevoort, 2006).

For our topic this perspective of deinstitutionalization helps us interpret the steady decline of the churches' institutional power, the rather small-sized spiritual revolutions, and the increasing deviance that church

members permit themselves from the church teachings as examples of one and the same process. Moreover, it draws attention to the shapes of reinstitutionalization, in which other than traditional religious structures and organizations become the main agents for carrying, channeling, and calibrating religion. One of these is, paradoxically perhaps, the state. In recent years the Dutch parliament has become engaged in several discussions on how the freedom of religion should be interpreted in relation to national security, general welfare, and so on. The main question seems to be how we can accommodate religious differences and yet preserve the normative perspective that dominates our culture and society. For that reason the government has a keen interest in how Islamic or orthodox protestant groups deal with women and homosexuals, because it is feared that the principle of equal regard may be jeopardized on the basis of the freedom of religion. In effect, the state here determines normative benchmarks that religious groups have to accept. Another shape of reinstitutionalization, and one that is more central to my topic, is found in the realm of media and popular culture. Here of course the focus is not so much on legal structure, but more on content, experience, and culture. It is to that shape that we now turn.

Religion and popular culture

One of the major shifts in the past decades regards the fact that the public significance and visibility of religion no longer depend exclusively or primarily on churches and similar religious institutions. Other cultural agents and institutions have taken over the role of churches in offering frames of reference and meaning, including (quasi-)religious ones. My focus here will be on the various forms of mediated and commercial popular culture, like music, cinema, television, and advertisements. This sphere of popular culture has always existed alongside the more highbrow elitist culture and the realm of folk traditions, but in the past century its influence rocketed, thanks to technological and economic developments that brought television sets to the houses of billions, making it more wide-spread in many countries than refrigerators. The World Wide Web adds a new dimension to this global sphere of media culture by allowing interactive participation and open access to a wide variety of texts and images, making it a tremendous source of information for many. Many, but not all. There is still a major 'digital divide' worldwide. In developed countries 76.8 % of all inhabitants have a mobile phone subscription against 18.8 % in developing countries². In the G8 countries 50 % of all inhabitants use the internet compared to 3 % of all people in Africa. Even when technological access was available, most people in the world would not be able to freely use the Internet given the fact that the majority of its content is in English. These differences are fading away slowly but surely, and it is safe to say that globalized media culture will continue to be one of the most powerful spheres in contemporary societies. Kelton Cobb

² Statistics 2004, source www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk, retrieved 26.03.2008.

(2005) reminds us that until the invention of woodblock printing the only place where our ancestors would see visual imagery was in church, whereas our world today is inundated with images: advertisements, wrapping papers, printed T-shirts, bill boards, calendars, mobile phone displays, and so on. The same can be said for the ubiquitous popular music, filling our houses, shopping malls, elevators, and, thanks to Walkman, iPod and their rivals, most of our public space. Popular culture is in sum the air we breathe. We have moved from a society in which one would encounter expressions of popular culture on an irregular basis, to one in which it is virtually impossible not to encounter such expressions.

Despite (or because of?) its ubiquity, the term 'popular culture' is not necessarily clear. Both elements in the term are in need of reflection, because of their history and many possible meanings (Lynch, 2005). The word 'popular' refers primarily to the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow art as discussed by Walter Benjamin as early as 1936 (Benjamin, 1970). The main element in this distinction seems to be the uniqueness and aura of the highbrow piece of art vis-à-vis the reproducibility of popular art. This implies that popular art is also not the same as folk art, because the latter is supposed to be produced by ordinary people or by especially traditional subcultures. Popular art and popular culture on the contrary originate from the already globalized production and reproduction of art through the media. Meanwhile, the highbrow/lowbrow distinction has lost most of its meaning due to the commodification of high art in contemporary designer goods and merchandised reproductions of classic works of art. Since Mona Lisa can be found in many a household, she has lost much of her elitist aura, even to the point that it can only be a disenchantment to see the real painting as a visitor among the masses plodding on through the Louvre hallways. The term 'popular' in 'popular culture' thus focuses on the common life as opposed to elite art and on the mediated and global influences as opposed to local traditions. In terms of religion, it focuses on lived religion as the religious phenomena of ordinary life, *Alltag*, as opposed to formal religious traditions (Luther, 1992, Failing and Heimbrock, 1998). Like other forms of popular culture, there is a lively exchange between the formal traditions and popular religion.

The term 'culture' is equally ambiguous. Clearly we cannot speak of popular culture as one coherent field of symbolic meanings, structures, customs, and artifacts. Unlike other 'cultures', popular culture cannot be delineated or summarized with any kind of precision. By its very nature, popular culture is different for every sub-cultural group, even when we can identify certain global trends and influences. But when we focus on these larger phenomena, we soon find ourselves in an extremely complex field of contradicting meanings, mutually exclusive structures and ideas, and conflicting behaviors. One could argue that this is the case for every culture. It holds true at least for every modern culture, in comparison with traditional cultures still

present in smaller and relatively isolated groups that can be described in a more monolithic way. Modern cultures are inevitably multifaceted, complex, and hybrid, probably because they draw upon global as well as multiple local sources.

Insofar as this makes sense, the relationship between religion and culture is by definition much more complex than classic theories like Niebuhr's can accommodate. His model was based on a dichotomy of culture on the one hand and religion (or better: Christ) on the other. The only variable is how these two interact. Something like this may even be true for Tillich, although he saw religion and culture as part of each other. Newer theories, like Robert Schreier's (1997), focus on inculturation and acknowledge that religion is not separate from culture but deeply embedded in it. If we add to that the view that religion itself is a cultural system (Geertz, 1966), then the relationship is one of coalescing cultures. These cultures themselves differ from one context to another, so that in fact a general theory of the relationship is virtually impossible. There is no clear cultural system called religion that we can find in popular culture as a global system. What we do have is much more fluid and much more intriguing: in many expressions of popular culture we find religious images, themes, and issues (Lyden, 2003). Pop singer Alice named her 1999 album *God is my DJ*, the supernatural and religious thrive in contemporary blockbuster and arthouse cinema, Harry Potter's magic world and struggle against evil has attracted many millions, Islam has become a major topic in cartoons, news programmes, city planning debates, and tourist excursions; and department stores shamelessly tap into religion as a powerful market by selling Buddhist meditation sets. The last example underscores the commodification of religion in popular culture. Religious forms are taken up in a different context where the intentions are probably not religious. This is also the case when artists use religious imagery or themes in a non-religious frame, like Lars van Trier's movie *Dogville*. The clearly religious aspects in the movie serve in a narrative and visual frame that is probably better understood as political allegory or critique of ideology.

The main question that still lies before us to be answered then is: what is the meaning, intention, and effect of religious material in non-religious popular culture and how is this exchanged between producers and consumers? In other words, what is the religious function of non-religious institutions working with religious forms? Lynch (2005) summarizes three main functions that may be relevant for religious forms in popular culture as well. First there is a social function in that religion provides people with an experience of community and mutual consolation, grounded in shared beliefs and values. Second, there is an existential or hermeneutic function, providing people with myths, rituals, and so on that help them live with a sense of identity, meaning, and purpose. And third, there is a transcendent function, providing them with a means to experience or encounter God, the numinous, or the transcendent. This third function taps into the aesthetic dimension of religion that is gaining

attention from practical theologians (Ballard & Couture, 2001). These functions can be found in popular culture, but cultural phenomena will differ in the degree to which they perform each one of these functions. Major events like concerts will be strong in their social function and perhaps also in a transcendent function, whilst internet based collections of religious images and texts will be more important in their hermeneutic function. Television shows portraying human misery and internet sites bringing together fellow-sufferers are an important source of consolation and building community. We should however not overlook the fact that these religious functions are often set and/or exploited in non-religious, commercial or political contexts. Although religious forms may perform these functions, the overarching goal of the provider may be simply to make money or to orchestrate religious energy in support of a political case. In other contexts, like education or hospital care, religion is seen as a field of needs that should be catered for, but the overarching aim is defined by the techno-economic rationality of the institution. One may ask whether these non-religious settings do not make for an inevitable perversion of religion. If answered affirmatively, the next question clearly has to be whether this is any different in the realm of traditional religion over the centuries. There have always been issues of power, money, and vested interests. Not every religious form of course is equally tainted, neither in traditional religion, nor in popular culture. We also find relatively 'authentic religion', unaffected by such powers, but even then those probably draw upon the religious material provided by these ecclesial, political, or commercial powers.

Patterns of religion in popular culture

The complex question thus remains: how does religion occur and function in popular culture? Obviously, I will not be able to exhaust that question in the confines of this paper, but I will try to trace some of the patterns of religion we find in popular culture and reflect on the meaning of these patterns. This is easier said than done, because the categories in which we try to organize and understand the patterns of religion in popular culture are often derived from traditional religion. Cobb (2005) for example devotes chapters to Images of God, Human Nature, Sin, Salvation, and Life Everlasting. And Wilhelm Gräb (2002) concludes his book on religion in a media society, named after Schleiermacher's catchphrase *Sinn fürs Unendliche*, sense for the infinite, with a major chapter on the theological doctrine of justification. Meaningful as these are in a reflection on religion in popular culture, they do not seem to be categories emerging from the material itself. That means we are at risk of misinterpreting the material and reading too much or too little or the wrong things into our analyses. We will have to look for the explicit and implicit forms of religion (Bailey, 1997) in their own right. This is the approach that Jörg Herrmann (2002) has taken in his study *Sinnmaschine Kino*, cinema as a producer of meaning. Vanhoozer et al. (2007) likewise try to understand the intrinsic meanings of the grocery store checkout line, Eminem, and fantasy

funerals. Following a similar approach, the patterns of religion that I will present here are heuristic at best, personal taste at worst. However any reader may judge it, it is intended as an invitation to truly start investigating religion in popular culture not as something derived from the religious tradition, but as a new field of religious meanings and expressions, using, subverting, and reinventing older traditions. The patterns I will discuss in this chapter are: Romantic love, Thrillseeking, and More between heaven and earth.³

Romantic love

The first pattern I see is that of romantic love stories. According to Jörg Herrmann's (2002) analysis of blockbuster movies from the nineties, this is probably the most important theme in contemporary cinema. His view is not completely supported by box office figures of (primarily Western) films.⁴ Among the fifty most lucrative movies, the only ones explicitly about romantic love are the *Shrek* movies, *Forrest Gump*, and top selling *Titanic*.⁵ In many other movies it may be secondary, but still plays an important role. We also encounter the theme in pop music, novels, sitcoms, opera, dating sites on the web and dating programs on television, and an ever increasing attention for Valentine's day, by now the top selling day for flowers. In popular culture, weddings have become major events for which people are willing to burden themselves with large loans. Many couples struggle to organize the perfect wedding, preferably on a tropical beach or in a medieval castle, and if possible topped off with a solemn yet undemanding wedding service in a serene and photogenic chapel. It seems then that Cupid has moved toward the center of the pantheon, as is testified by the regular appearance of his image on many items for home and garden decoration.

So what does this mean? On the whole, it seems that the romantic story is governed by the belief that true love conquers all. Strange couplings like in *Shrek*, finding the love of your life and celebrating it, the idea running through all this is that we are meant to find our soul partner and live happily ever after. Romantic love as depicted in this pattern is the experience of being unified. It means overcoming barriers and experiences of being divided. Moreover, romantic love involves ecstasy, losing oneself to find oneself, and discovering some kind of eternal bliss. This true love saves us from our social and legal confines and allows us to start a new and different life. In *Pretty Woman*, Herrmann (2002) analyzes, the prostitute is saved from the gutter and the lonely manager is saved from freezing to death in a world dominated by money. In *Titanic*, upper class girl Rose is saved from the deadly world of money, and Jack is saved from his lower deck prison. Their newfound life is so

³ Given space, I would also discuss themes like Back to our roots, Heroes in dark and dangerous times, Caring for the tragic, and Nature as truth and mystery.

⁴ It is possible that Bollywood movies have a larger number of romantic stories, but most of these are not included in IMDB-statistics

⁵ www.imdb.com. Retrieved 29.03.2008.

profound that even death cannot end that. This is nothing less than metanoia, being born again, or rebirthing. It feeds the awareness that this life is not real unless we come to see it in the new light of love, and by consequence, real death is not the fact that our physical existence may terminate, but the state of being without love. This kind of reversing the meanings is of course very close to the gospels, even when both filmmakers and viewers don't perceive it as a religious dimension.

Some stories present the tragic version in which the lovers cannot be together, like *Brokeback Mountain*, or lose each other like in *Love Story*. This tragic version however underscores that it actually should be otherwise. True love bridges gaps between persons, even when they come from different backgrounds, even when their families or cultures clash. In some cases, it is spelled out that even death cannot come between lovers. The challenge then is to find true love and overcome all the barriers. Such a story is evidently a modern one. The idea that relationships should be based on romantic love emerged parallel to the individualization that was part of modernity. Structures of race, class, age, and gender are critiqued for barring true love. A hedonistic element is not alien to this story in the sense that this true love is primarily one of the senses, being overwhelmed by love rather than choosing to invest in a relationship that may be stable but relatively dispassionate. True love is passion. We can interpret this pattern as a religious one, but not in the sense that there is a divine power behind this experience of true love. In some stories (like *A life less ordinary*) this may be the case, but usually there is no mention of anything like it. Rather, love itself is almost divine. The experience of being loved unconditionally, traditionally interpreted as something only God could give, is now something that lovers have to give to each other, which places a new burden on their relationship. Romantic love unlike religion, Ulrich Beck (1990) notes, has no 'extra nos' and is therefore deinstitutionalized par excellence. This self-referentiality of love, however, makes it in the end subject to the same contingency from which it has to save the lovers.

In terms of the public significance of religion, we do well to acknowledge the fact that religious traditions, at least the Christian ones, have often been ambivalent of this kind of romantic, ecstatic love. On the one hand it was and is accepted in its more conventional shapes, facilitated by sentimental wedding ceremonies in beautiful churches. At times it was even venerated and spiritualized in its wilder shapes, like in bridal mysticism. In that case, however, the interhuman version of romantic love was actually rejected in favour of the relationship with God. This marks the more negative, or at least more restrictive approach in which romantic passion was seen as a risk factor rather than as an opportunity to experience something divine. Especially unconventional love is usually disapproved of, even though it is regularly heralded in biblical stories. This ambivalence has contributed to the image of the church as being repressive and out of tune with contemporary human relationships. Even though the first letter of John equates love with God, the

church by and large has distanced itself from such a view and propagated instead that love is the gift of God and should be structured, domesticated, that is, according to God's laws. The understanding of romantic love in popular culture therefore can be seen as a form of reclaiming the divine nature of love itself. Religion as proclaimed in popular culture is freed from the restrictive messages of traditional religion, freed also from the notions of law, guilt, and sin. What is left is a positive view of human desire for romantic love. When this desire is not realized, it is not because of our wrongdoings or sins, but because of tragic circumstances or a repressive social context. The personal experience of romantic love can be understood as popular religion that may be at odds with the religious tradition's perspective and regulations. Sometimes these two levels of religion can be negotiated and popular religion can be incorporated into traditions, at other times the two are that much different that accommodation seems impossible.

To grasp the full meaning of this pattern, we should also pay attention to the evangelical depiction of Christian faith in which faith itself is defined as a living and loving relationship with Jesus Christ. This depiction usually includes metaphors and images directly derived from the discourse of romantic love, sometimes through references to the Song of Songs. Jesus, the story goes, loves us so deeply and passionately that he has gone through every ordeal needed to make a relationship with us possible. Moreover, he stalks the people he loves until they surrender to his love. When they do, they find that he is their perfect soul mate, overwhelming them and fulfilling their every desire and saving them from the meaninglessness and loneliness they are in. For that reason, believers desire to be close to him, share their most intimate thoughts and make time for intimate conversations as one would do with a human lover. Again this love is one of the senses, not of cognitions.

The tension between affirming and rejecting stances toward romantic love is exemplified by recent debates in the Dutch Roman-Catholic church, where priests and bishops have become more restrictive in how weddings can be performed. By now only official hymns and texts can be used and non-participating or interdenominational couples are discouraged from having their marriage blessed in a formal church setting. Here we see the gap between institutionalized religion and popular religion widening to a degree where the church risks becoming alien to many. This is not necessarily because the church upholds moral or spiritual standards, but primarily because the fundamentally religious meanings of love are misunderstood and not taken seriously. Other churches see weddings as a wonderful opportunity to develop a (temporary maybe) relationship with people who want somehow to include the church symbolism in their celebration of love. These efforts to christen the religion of love may serve to embed the self-referential love in a larger, more fundamental, and less contingent divine presence. Whether that will be successful depends in part on how the changing perspectives on love and religion are acknowledged. What is at stake here then is the question of how

romantic love functions as a religious theme in popular culture versus traditional religion.

Thrillseeking

A second pattern in popular culture with possible religious overtones and references is what I would call thrillseeking. Extreme sports like bungee jumping and survival trekking have become mainline pastimes. The Dutch television programme *Try before you die* features its hosts in extreme situations like joining a military boot camp in arctic Norway, Base jumping in Macau, having your hand bitten by a snake, taking a bath filled with mealworms, eating dogshit, being hit by a car, or playing in a porn movie. Similar and somewhat earlier examples can be found in NBC's *Fear Factor* (also a Dutch format), MTV's *Jackass* and in some of the stunts of UK's *Brainiac*. Apparently there is a market for the extreme and it is not limited to professional TV-programmes or to aberrant individuals on the fringe of society. It has in fact become socially quite acceptable. Many contributions to Youtube represent similar extreme moments that were already exploited in the painful experiences filmed accidentally and then submitted to *America's funniest home videos* and its international offspring. Outside of the media, vacationing is a case in point. Although journeys to Antarctica or into space are not yet ordinary, our regular holidays are way beyond what people two generations before us dared to imagine. Even our entertainment parks have evolved from relatively calm and child friendly playgrounds into exciting rollercoaster-worlds. This love of thrills is well understood by marketers who create slogans like 'live life to the max' or use the word 'extreme', preferably with a double or triple x to symbolize its extraordinariness.

Thrillseeking has a strong neurological aspect. The experience of extreme sensations and the accompanying fear and pain stir our biopsychological system in ways that are to a degree similar to traumatization. The overwhelming experience overrides our everyday functioning and destabilizes our physiological balance. The difference of course is that in traumatization the experience is not sought or initiated by the person but inflicted upon him or her, which adds dramatically to the experience of powerlessness. In thrills as discussed here, the person surrenders him or herself under controlled circumstances to ensure safety. This reduces the negative effects, while the sensation and the biopsychological processes are still activated. The experience may even lead to a kind of addiction, in which the body asks for recurring amounts of adrenaline. Equally important as the biopsychological probably is the social aspect. Thrillseeking is commonly shared with others either directly or mediated. Hence the popularity of Youtube contributions. Without an audience, the thrill isn't as interesting because part of the experience is the fact that one is observed, admired, or even taken for a fool. Whatever the evaluation by others, at least it proves that

one is not ordinary. In that sense, the thrill is not only an extraordinary moment, it also transforms the participant into an extraordinary person.

Obviously, this search for thrills tends to require ever more extreme experiences to satisfy the desires. The 'been there, done that' attitude of blasé young people who have seen it all demands providers of new experiences to search and cross the borders time and again. All this deepens the divide between the ordinary and the extraordinary, between the everyday world of work, school, and family, and the other world of holidays, dance events, and special occasions. It is not enough anymore to spend a Sunday afternoon with the in-laws; one should do something special. The warning 'Don't try this at home' serves not only to protect innocent viewers from dangerous experiments, it first of all emphasizes that these experiments and experiences are not a part of ordinary life but belong to the extraordinary.

This divide between ordinary time and experiences and extraordinary time and experiences is a traditionally religious structure. It is a central feature of religion to separate the secular from the profane and from the sacred. Certain times, places, people, words, gestures, and objects are set apart, distinguished from the ordinary. Friday afternoons, Saturdays, and Sunday morning are for Muslims, Jews, and Christians respectively sacred times as compared to other days of the week. The religious building differs from other places in its sacred meanings. The religious official can be identified by special garments which prove him or her different from ordinary people. It is by creating such differences that we can experience anything as beyond the ordinary and thereby transcend our routine life. This separation of the extraordinary from the ordinary thus makes it possible to experience the sacred at all.

Henning Luther (1992) has identified two modes in which religion relates to the everyday world, *Alltag*. The first he calls 'Unterbrechung' (interruption), the second 'Unterhaltung' (conservation).⁶ In the mode of conservation, the everyday world is sustained and protected by the meanings and structures religion provides. This is the social function of religion on which, for example, Durkheim focused. Religious customs, regulations, rites and myths help to prevent the social world from falling apart. This social function of conservation seems to be less effective in our societies due to the deinstitutionalization of religion. When religion is no longer granted the authority to play this conserving role, its effects wither away. The mode of interruption, by contrast, thrives in this *Erlebnisgesellschaft* (Schulze, 1992) or experience driven society we live in. Central to our society, Schulze maintains, is the search for happiness and self-actualization. In terms of religion then, it is especially the religious events and experiences that interest seekers. Traditional Sunday morning services, routinely sustaining everyday live, tend to be less

⁶ This distinction parallels Thomas Tweed's (2006) description of religion as dwelling and crossing, creating specific spaces through boundaries and crossing those boundaries.

attractive, especially when they are designed to be as accessible and low profile as possible. It may be the case that the everyday conservation mode of religion is catered for adequately in popular culture itself with all its implicit religious overtones and references so that a specific religious realm is less appealing. When people turn to religion, it is often because they seek or experience something like an interruption, something beyond the ordinary. Religious healing services (with their promise of miracles), religious events, and also traditional high liturgy (with a stronger performance of the sacrosanct) seem to appeal more. Probably this is because these religious modes are more firmly based in the distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary.

More between heaven and earth

The third pattern may seem more overtly religious. It is the plethora of expressions of the belief that there is more to human life than meets the eye. Whereas the modern world was characterized by disenchantment, there seems to be a resurgence of the magic, occult, and spiritual (Heimbrock and Streib, 1994). I am referring here to the intermediate sphere between the earthly rationally explainable and the absolute transcendence of the divine. This intermediate sphere is populated by angels, demons, ghosts, and forces that derive their existence and power from the Gods and exert their influence in our reality. One of the most prominent and traditional features of this pattern may be the appearance of angels in movies (Jaspers & Rother, 2003), but there are also more implicit examples. From 'the force' in *Star wars* to the aliens in *War of the worlds* and including the whole genre of horror, zombie, and many adventure movies including the *Indiana Jones* series, there is a recurring symbolization of this intermediate sphere that affects our life. This is not only the case in cinema. Crystal-gazers, palm-readers, and other fortunetellers have made their way from a fairground attraction to a respected consultant for those uncertain how to navigate their life. Psychics offer their services on television and in private practice to communicate with the dead and to trace missing persons. The world of alternative medicine in part assumes this intermediate sphere that cannot be proven or disproven by traditional scientific measures. Usually the ideas behind alternative medicine do not contain a traditional notion of a God or Gods but something more concrete and yet more nebulous like cosmos or nature. Among younger people there is a fascination for the occult that taps into the same intermediate sphere (Streib, 1996). And then of course in our days of globalization the non-western religious world is merging with the western, bringing a cosmology with it that is much more populated with entities, forces, and spirits (Ganzevoort 2007). Problems in health or relationships are treated as not just that, but as symptoms of a spiritual problem that needs to be addressed.

Christian versions of this pattern include angels, saints, demons, and the Holy Spirit. It is especially in its more charismatic currents that this intermediate sphere is acknowledged and negotiated. There is an abundance of

spiritual warfare literature swallowed by believers who are convinced that their life circumstances are influenced by good and evil entities, that their and other's eternal fate depends on how they engage in this battle and that they are called to reclaim this world and the people in it for Christ. In this spiritual war, adversities and miseries are not seen as contingencies, but as deliberate inflictions carrying spiritual meaning. Coping with such adversities therefore implies spiritual strategies and a search for faith healing. Even when there are hardly any medically confirmed physical healings, for the believers the performance of faith healing is a means of positioning oneself in the spiritual warfare and the relationship with God (van Saane, 2008). Testimonies of healing serve to prove the reality of God's existence and intervention in this world, usually through gifted preachers and attributed to the Holy Spirit.

All these examples question the rationalistic version of modernity in which only the empirically verifiable would count as true. Over against this reductionist tendency, it is claimed that some things may not be open for empirical measurement but still are true and real. Sometimes a quasi-empirical approach is ventured in which the experience of the religious believer and/or some alternative science is propagated as evidence, competing with the rationality of modern science. Obviously this debate on the limitations of contemporary scientific approaches in religious matters needs to be taken beyond easy stereotyping (Wentzel van Huyssteen, 1999). More central to our discussion here is the theological question what it means to speak of divine intervention, spiritual realities, and so on vis-à-vis the empiricist nature of most of our knowledge. If one denies the plausibility of divine intervention in this empirical reality, the meaningfulness of a religious perspective seems to be downgraded to the level of illusion or imagination. If on the other hand one claims the reality of this intervention, the question is how to negotiate the scientific view of truth and reality. This seems to be the ultimate dilemma for theological reflection on the relation between God and reality in which it seems that either God or reality is at risk of being marginalized.

Interestingly, in this third pattern of popular culture we do not find this tension between faith and rationalistic modernity. The possibility of spiritual intervention in our world is assumed and not refuted, which relates more to the cosmology of non-western culture and of the culture in which the Bible was written than to the dominant reasoning in contemporary western society. Sometimes the latter is in fact interpreted as an illusionary world, a virtual reality. Bram van de Beek (2004) interprets the world of faith, liturgy and Spirit as the actual reality (the indicative or 'as is') and the empirical world as imagination (the conjunctive or 'as if'). Similarly, in *The Matrix*, reality as it is experienced turns out to be a virtually created world, used to keep humans prisoner. In *Existenz*, there is even a range of levels of reality in which every level is the virtual reality of a computer game on a deeper level, so that in the end it is not clear whether there is an absolute level of reality. In this perspective, one should not be surprised to learn that external forces from

another 'world' or 'level of reality' enter into ours and define what happens to us. The taken for granted rationality of our modern western thinking is challenged in favour of one that leaves room for forces and influences that we cannot comprehend from within the limits of a this-worldly empiricism.

Religious forms in non-religious media

In all brevity, the examples I have elaborated here may suffice to start addressing the question of the public significance of religion from a cultural point of view. My point is that given the deinstitutionalization of religion, religious forms reemerge in the public domain in different locales and cultural guises. This transformation however has important ramifications that need to be teased out and debated if we want to further our understanding of the public significance of religion. The first one of them involves the discussion of the notion of religion per se, because it is not self-evident that my examples are really religious.

In the opening pages I described religion as a transcending pattern of meaning arising from and contributing to the relation with what is held to be sacred. With this approach, I try to avoid both the Scylla of an overly substantive definition that rests on traditional forms of religion and easily excludes newer forms and the Charybdis of functional definitions that easily include everything and lose their defintory power. I want to highlight some aspects of this definition that are pertinent to the topic of this chapter. The term transcending pattern of meaning should not be mistaken for transcendence. As my examples may make clear, it is more about the processes of transcending the boundaries of our human existence than about some Being or Space or Reality beyond our life world. To speak of religion implies at least that we move beyond our existence in some form of yearning or openness for what may overwhelm us (Ford, 1999). When that condition is not met, I would hesitate to speak of religion, even when material from religious traditions is used. This process of transcending, however, is not enough to speak of religion. I would claim that it should be embedded in and contribute to a relation with what is held to be sacred. Again, one should note that this does not necessarily refer to the Divine. People and groups may hold many different things and beings to be sacred, but not everything would count as such. To hold a thing or being as sacred implies at least that it functions as a centre of meaning and that the person or group structures his, her, its life accordingly. In this approach, romantic love can become sacred for a person (or in a society), but it need not be so for all. This, obviously, is not a complete theory of religion, but only a starting point from which we can try to address the changing religious forms.

The second point for further discussion regards the fact that religious forms in popular culture often come in the shape of non-religious symbolization of formerly religious themes. My interpretation of romantic love for example as a religious form, may seem like an overinterpretation to the

non-religious lover or observer. I would contend that these new forms at least offer a meaning structure analogous to religious traditions, and that for many they qualify as religious in the sense of the definition used here. They are – at least for some – a transcending pattern of meaning, and romantic love seems sacred to many. To go one step further, in the symbolization we often find implicit or explicit references to religious traditions. Herrmann (2002) for example highlights the taglines of *Titanic*: ‘Collide with destiny’ and ‘Nothing on earth could come between them’. Many pop songs contain references to prayer, angels, and so on. In that sense, the central meaning structures we encounter in popular culture should be scrutinized for their religious overtones and references.

Third, the fact that we find meaning structures with religious references or analogies does not imply that the forms encountered have the same meanings as their parallels in religious traditions. We should expect subtle or overt changes of meaning, sometimes amplifying the traditional meanings, sometimes contradicting them. In the religious traditions romantic love could be interpreted as gift from God, but in contemporary popular culture it is self-referential, even when it is experienced as divine. This may be interpreted as deterioration; it may also be read as a critical response to religious modes of dependency that run against individual responsibility. Modern romantic love does not defer responsibility to God, but assigns it to the lovers themselves. More important however than how these old and new forms should be evaluated is the fact that the meanings are not necessarily identical, so that we first have to develop an in depth understanding of the religious forms inside and outside the religious traditions.

Fourth, in the different spheres, religious forms are introduced and circulated with quite different intentions. Producers of advertisements may incorporate religious forms to symbolize a particular desire or experience that they want to associate with the product at hand. This may be seen as a vulgarization of religious forms from the perspective of the religious tradition or as a profound way of articulating such desires and experiences. But whichever interpretation we would venture, it is quite likely that the producers will have a much more pragmatic approach to the matter. Likewise, artists like Madonna or Von Trier may use religious forms to express or symbolize non-religious perspectives. Traditional critical criteria then of truth, virtue, and beauty (the platonic notions of *verum, bonum, pulchrum*) crumble under the weight of commercial or ideological success and religion itself becomes commodified. What is more, the non-functional or gratuitous dimension of religion dissolves when religion is being used this way. As discussed earlier, the same risks can be observed in the religious traditions, where religion has often served to further political or economic aims and thus came to be conflated with power, oppression, and a similar kind of perversion. Religion is always at least in part shaped by non-religious intentions, so we should probably investigate this dimension more seriously.

Fifth, if we look at how participants and audiences perceive and process religious forms in non-religious spheres, we should be aware that the meanings they can attribute to these forms depend on their own backgrounds and on the non-religious framing in which the religious forms are presented. Many people, even those with a religious upbringing, have only limited knowledge of religious traditions, including their own. They draw upon religious elements from popular culture more than from the official traditions (Clark, 2003). They do not have a well-developed frame of reference from which they are able to recognize, interpret, and evaluate the meaning of religious forms in connection to the tradition it emerged from. That implies that their assessment of the religious forms will most often not be as dense and informed as possible. Film audience research shows that the religious interpretations offered by viewers, if present at all, are immanent, subjective, and focused on authenticity, autonomy, and 'small transcendence' (Gräb & Herrmann, 2006). Because of that, their interpretation will be even more defined by the kind of framing that is offered, one that is usually defined by liberal market politics or their radical fundamentalist opponents. Whilst the symbolization of divine presence in angels, for example, may function in a church service to facilitate the experience of an encounter with God, in a home decoration catalogue they will most probably not be able to do so, even when a quintessential reference to the divine is maintained. Religious forms in non-religious settings then aren't the same as in religious settings, because they are framed and perceived differently.

Conclusion: Framing the Gods

I am nearing the end of my explorations. Let me conclude by saying that the public significance of religion from a cultural point of view lies in the potential of religious forms to be reconfigured in new ways beyond their original context in religious traditions. In this reconfiguration they lose much of their previous content, meaning, and function, but they may gain new vitality and critically engage with the tradition from which they originated. To assess that, however, we need to learn to recognize and interpret these new configurations in their own right. This effort steers theology into the relatively new waters of cultural and media studies, but the empirical theological perspective cannot be missed if we want to understand the truly religious dimension.

One way of articulating this theological perspective is by asking how the Gods are framed in different configurations of popular culture and of religious traditions. Bergesen and Greeley (2000) have taken this question literally in studying *God in the movies*, analyzing how Gods and God-like figures function in quite diverse popular movies. They conclude that the God of the movies is framed as much more positive and life-affirming than the God of the Christian tradition, who is framed in more ambivalent terms. Other have hinted at this question in the study of religion and radical fundamentalist groups, like Mark Juergensmeyer (2003) in his book *Terror in the mind of God*. His book may be read as a portrayal of how God is framed as being exclusivist

and violent by both radical believers and news media covering religiously inspired violence. Even though the latter may in fact advocate a modern tolerant version of religion, the fact that many headlines tie the word violence to words like religious, God, or particularly Islam, creates a frame in which God becomes violent.

The questions surrounding the public significance of religion ultimately relate to how the Gods are framed, what meanings evolve from this framing, how these meanings are perceived by audiences, and how that affects the ways in which people can or cannot live together in salutary ways. These are theological questions par excellence and we should not hesitate to bring our theological expertise to the task of unraveling these complex issues and maybe contribute to more constructive framing of the Gods.

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