

A Theological Analysis of “The Matrix”

by Matthew Clendineng

“The Matrix” was one of the most significant movies of the 1990s because it blended avant-garde special effects with a rich mix of spiritual ideas which created a film into which the viewer could easily read his or her own religious beliefs. The special effects created a thing of beauty. The spirituality created a thing of wonder. The delicious mix of beauty and wonder inspired a generation to explore the question of what is reality, and, perhaps more importantly, can I know reality?

Theological Response to “The Matrix”

In the book *Reel Spirituality* Robert K. Johnston presented five theological approaches to viewing a Hollywood film (pp.41ff). Avoidance is the approach of boycotting of film in order to avoid being exposed to the unwholesome aspects sometimes contained therein. Caution is the approach of viewing selective films from a predefined ethical and religious stance so that the film cannot sway your morals. Dialogue is the approach by which the viewer asks the questions, what does the film have to say to me and what do I have to say to the film? Appropriation is the approach by which the viewer seeks to gain insight through the film and explore how that insight was created by preconceptions. Divine encounter is the approach by which the viewer is given a clearer picture of God because of the movie.

There are times when each of these approaches is appropriate. In fact, it is easily argued that there is a different best approach for every combination of movie and viewer. There are some movies that one Christian might be able to view and have a divine encounter with God, while another Christian may view that same movie and, in so viewing, sin.

I tend to watch movies largely from an appropriation viewpoint. I am most interested in how a movie creates insight into a new way of thinking. I can appreciate a horribly acted movie that strikes a new chord of storytelling much more than I can a beautifully acted movie that adds nothing new to my life. A good example of this is “Nightmare on Elm Street,” which is a movie with horrible acting but also with an incredible idea at its core.

“The Matrix” is not beautifully acted; Keanu Reeves is at his theatrical best when all he has to do is stand there, look moody, and say “whoa,” this is, after all, the kid from “Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure.” Thankfully “The Matrix” is not poorly acted either, it has respectable performances from Laurence Fishburne and Hugo Weaving.

I fell in love with “The Matrix” the first time I saw it. It explicitly asked all the questions I had always wondered and it tried to give some answers. What if this isn’t reality? Why do the rules of this reality have to apply? What is really out there? These are all very spiritual questions. However, spirituality does not equate directly to Christianity.

To be merely spiritual is not, necessarily, to be true. Buddhism and Hinduism are spiritual but I would not suggest that either of those religions is true; I would, however, suggest that there is

some truth in both Buddhism and Hinduism. In the same way I would never suggest that “The Matrix” is true, but I would suggest that there is truth in “The Matrix.” I cringe every time I hear a Christian speak of “The Matrix” in Christian terms. “The Matrix” is not a Christian movie; it is a spiritual movie. Because the central aspects of Christianity are spiritual, there are Christian-like ideas that can be gleaned from “The Matrix” but that is because those ideas are spiritual, not because they are Christian.

The movie which brought me closest to the divine encounter side of the spectrum was “Stealing Heaven,” a late 1980s movie about 12th century philosopher Abelard and his affair with Heloise. For some reason it spoke to me quite strongly about the importance of God, how evil creates evil, and how the fruits of our sins come back to punish us. I did not approach the movie from Johnston’s divine encounter, but when the movie was over I had moved closer to God.

On page 64 of *Reel Spirituality* Johnston begins to explore how movies do more than just provide insight into our lives and our culture. Johnston suggests that Christians must explore the relationship between film and theology. He gives six reasons why Christians should enter into a theological dialogue with film.

The first reason given is that God exists in all of human culture. God is in our art, our way of life and in our identity. We are created in the image of God and therefore we retain some of that image. When we reflect on this image, we begin to reflect on God. Johnston rightly argues that one does not have to be a Christian (or Jew) to be influenced and/or aware of God. He sights the gentile sailors who were very cautious of God before and after they threw Jonah off the boat. He also sights Melchizedek, Abimelech, Ruth and Cyrus. A non-Christian can have an awareness of God that is able to illuminate a Christian’s understanding of God. Thus, we should be willing to spend time with non-Christians.

The second reason Christians should dialogue with film is that the Holy Spirit speaks to non-Christians. We have already asserted that God is able to speak through secular creations due to the fact that he is the creator of those who create. The Holy Spirit is able to speak to non-Christians through any means the Spirit chooses. The most likely means is through a non-Christian creation, since a non-Christian is less likely to be around Christian creations. To quote Johnston, “the potential for the sacred is present across our human endeavor.” (p. 69)

The third reason given is that God can use all things for the fulfillment of divine purpose. God is not limited to that which was created with the intention of being used for divine purpose - God can use anything. A non-film example of this idea occurred the last time I had communion. The bread was oyster crackers and the wine was grape juice in little (nice looking) Dixie cups. None of the items used for the sacrament were created specifically by Christians or for Christians, but they were all able to be used by God for a meaningful act of devotion. God is able to take our sin and use it to fulfill God’s will, how much more is God able take our art and use it to fulfill God’s will.

The fourth reason Christians should dialogue with film is that we can experience God through image. The Catholic and Orthodox churches have a long history of experiencing God through image. Icons have long been used to aid the worship of God. Protestants have long been opposed

to the use of icons as worship aids because of the fear of the icons become idols. There is a danger that anything we do can become an idol. I come from a Quaker background; I see the physical sacraments of communion and baptism, as many churches perform them, as being idolic. I also see the inability to accept physical communion and water baptism as being beautiful symbols of Christianity (as many in my own Quaker tradition are unable to do) as being idolic. It is up to each of us individually and corporately to guard our hearts against the complacency that turns beautifully moving worship aids into idols.

The fifth reason given is that theology has a narrative shape. Theology, at its core is a story of stories. It begins with God and nothing else; God creates, creation falls, God destroys, God raises up, God allows destruction, God brings ultimate salvation, God brings ultimate destruction; it ends with God and everything else. Being a story, theology is best told in whatever mediums best transfer stories. Film is a story telling medium and it is ridiculous not to try to see God in film since all stories are God's stories.

The sixth reason given is that, Johnston argues, theology has a dialogical nature. Johnston focuses on three different natures which carry on a dialogue. First there is an inherent relational dialogue between hearing God's story and telling our own story. Second there is a dialogue that must continually exist between the world, tradition and the bible. Finally, the source of theology can be defined as the dialogue between the Bible, church, experience, culture and tradition. It is through these dialogues that we develop and understand theology. Film and other artistic endeavors are inherently involved in these dialogues.

In Chapter 8 of *Reel Spirituality*, Johnston creates a grid on which we can specifically think about the sacramental and the critical aspects of a film. The sacramental axis runs from the purely human to the purely holy. The critical axis runs from the movie being self-contained to the movie partnering with external material to make its point. As the grid is drawn on page 153, "The Matrix" would fall into the bottom left quadrant, being heavily focused on the human side of the sacramental axis and leaning toward the self-contained side of the critical axis.

Many people will argue with my placing "The Matrix" on the self-contained side of the critical axis; however, I do feel that this is where the movie belongs. "The Matrix" does make many allusions to material that exists outside of film, but I would argue that it mixes outside influences to such an extent that it has become a new thing that rests on itself and not on its outside influences. The reason that so many people from so many different spiritual backgrounds are comfortable watching "The Matrix" is because the movie has taken common elements from many different backgrounds and mixed them together. These elements stop being the knowledge from outside that help explore the movie, and start becoming the beginnings of the internal structure of the movie.

On the sacramental axis "The Matrix" plays heavily to what Johnston calls Transcendence B. I do not classify "The Matrix" as being on the holy end of the axis because this movie does not function, as Johnston writes, as "a window through which God speaks." There is no God in this movie; it could, in fact, be argued that "The Matrix" takes place in an agnostic universe. How can God speak if he does not exist?

“The Matrix” provides transcendence by contemplating what it would mean if the world that is believed to exist was not reality. The idea that reality is less than real is an idea that crosses cultures. It is the basis for most spirituality, from the reincarnation of Hinduism to the Paradise of Islam to the heaven and hell of Christianity. “The Matrix” provides us with one answer to the question of reality.

On a more internal level I want to take a look at the two baptism metaphors that appear in this movie. The first is blatantly obvious and I am convinced that there was an intention to create a baptism-like scene. This is when Neo awakens outside the Matrix and is flushed down the system into the sewer. In this situation, the movie is relying upon outside knowledge and experience to help point out the idea that Neo has been reborn into something new.

Another interesting aspect of this scene is Neo’s slide into the sewer. The tube has a very vaginal shape and it is as if Neo is truly being reborn. Being the Christian I am, this immediately makes me think of John 3:5 where Nicodemus asks “How can a man be born when he is old?...Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!” and Jesus answers, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.”

The second baptism scene is when Morpheus is rescued from the agents. The sprinkler system comes on and drenches Morpheus and the agents in the room. This scene does not go back to the rebirthing like the earlier baptism scene does; rather this scene speaks to the tradition of ceremonial cleansing. When John the Baptist was baptizing Jews in the Jordan River it was not a symbol of them being born again of the Spirit, rather it was a ceremonial cleansing that meant they were once again clean in the sight of God. Morpheus managed to withstand the agents and did not succumb to their evil. This baptism was a ceremonial cleansing that meant Morpheus was once again ready to take over his command.

Implications for Christian Ministry

“The Matrix” has amazing applications in the ministry setting I am currently in. Fairfield, Iowa is home to the Maharishi University of Management. This university was founded by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in the mid 1970s. The Maharishi started a small cult in California that stemmed from Hindu teachings. The main practices they took up and added to their Hindi roots were the practices Transcendental Meditation, Yogic flying, and Vedic sciences.

When an individual from the meditating community watches “The Matrix” they are able to identify with it in much the same way that most Christians who watch the movie are able to identify. The meditator and the Christian, through “The Matrix,” are able to reflect on various experiences, ideas and spiritual beliefs that exist within their frame of reference. This creates a starting point from which the two sides can begin a conversation.

The difficulty is that there is such a mish-mash of spirituality in “The Matrix” that the aspects that appeal to me and which I find edifying are not the same aspects as those that appeal to the meditator. As I wrote earlier, I find the different portrayals of baptism in “The Matrix,” as ceremonial cleansing and as rebirth, to be fascinating. These portrayals do not have the same meaning to someone from the meditating community.

The meditator's focus is on the scene where the child is bending the spoon and tells Neo that the secret is to realize there is no spoon. That is truth for them. Their desire is to transcend reality through meditation, coherence, and energy flow. My desire is to transcend reality through faith in Jesus Christ. "The Matrix" is an excellent starting point because it brings us together, but it brings us together for completely different reasons and it is difficult to find the common elements.

The scene that the Christian and the meditator need to focus on is the scene at the end when Neo is shot and then dies. Why is Neo resurrected? The Christian will make one of two arguments. If Neo is a Christ figure then he is resurrected because as "the One" death had no right to him and Neo is now free to bring salvation. If Neo is not a Christ figure then a Christian will argue that Neo is resurrected because he finally had faith and faith set him free from the rules of the matrix. The meditator, on the other hand, will argue that Neo did not die because he was finally able to realize that it was just his mind that thought he was dead; just as "there is no spoon," there is no death. Transcendence is what saved Neo.

I would argue that either Christian view of Neo's resurrection is not that far away from the meditator's view of Neo's resurrection. It is merely nuance. Nuance has the potential to be overcome far more easily than lack of understanding. Nuance gives a starting point where each individual is firmly planted and from which they can merely lean one way or the other to begin to understand the other's point.

There is Christian truth in "The Matrix." The tricky part is that there is also non-Christian "truth." When using "The Matrix" to attempt to identify with or share Christianity with a non-Christian, it is extremely important to remember that much of the truth you see in "The Matrix" is brought there by you. We tend to overlook the aspects of the movie that do not fit into our view of spirituality. Most Christians either overlook or ignore the alternative ways the movie can be taken.

We must be very careful if we intend to use "The Matrix" as an evangelistic tool. There is probably more Buddhist truth, in "The Matrix" than there is Christian truth. If we attempt to use "The Matrix" as our evangelism tool, the analogies quickly break down and it is easy to cause confusion and do more harm than good. "The Matrix" is best used as a starting point from which a Christian can begin a conversation with a Hindu or a Buddhist or an Animist or any of a number of religions. But it is very dangerous to use the movie as anything other than a jumping off point.

For a mature Christian, "The Matrix" can provide a way of reflecting on who and what God is, and what reality is, but as with all creation, care must be taken. It is easy to abuse "The Matrix" and start to believe that it has more truth in it than it does. Just as it is easy to turn a picture of Christ into an idol, it is easy to turn a movie into the basis for our theology. This is not a reason to reject all movies any more than it is a good reason to reject all images; rather it is a reminder that we must all be individually and corporately aware of the effects of and importance we place on movies.