

Thesis
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Religion and Film in American Culture:
The Birth of a Nation

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Dedicated to the memory of both
my father, Bohdan, the first movie buff I ever knew,
and
my grandmother, Zinaida,
who showed me the power of faith and the meaning of history.

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Abstract

This research addresses an emerging scholarship examining relations between media, religion, and culture in contemporary society. Whilst it acknowledges the value of this growing body of work, the study is based on a recognition that an overwhelming concern with the contemporary scene has resulted in a neglect of the history responsible for the conditions of the present. Given the prominence of America as both a source and an object of this scholarship, moreover, the particular national context in which the institutions and practices of the US media have developed has been taken for granted somewhat. Oriented towards these perceived lacunae, this thesis examines the interaction between religion and film as an influence upon the development of American culture in the twentieth-century.

The dissertation is divided into two main parts. The first of these is devoted to an extended discussion of the scholarly background to the research, and argues that the historical dimension of the interrelationship between religion and film in America is worthy of more attention than it has hitherto received. In particular, it stresses the fundamental importance of religion within the discourse of national identity in the United States, and posits the notion of a non-denominational American civil religion as a useful theoretical tool with which to examine Hollywood as a distinctively 'American' form of cinema.

Part Two develops this position through a case study of *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D.W. Griffith, and one of the most famous films of all time. Discussing the picture as a response to a crisis in American Protestantism, the study argues that the race controversy prompted by its Southern viewpoint was, to some extent, a function of Griffith's ambitions to revive the traditional religious bases of U.S. national identity via the medium of film. Furthermore, it suggests that the impact of *Birth* helped enact a broader transformation of American culture, wherein the cinema became instrumental in sustaining the belief that the United States was a nation uniquely favoured by Providence.

Acknowledgements

Prior to its submission here, some of the research for this study has already begun to appear elsewhere. The origins of Chapter One can be found in book reviews for the *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* (Spring 1997) and *Media, Culture, and Society* (July 1998), whilst elements of Part II, and Chapter Five in particular, have been previously used as the basis for a number of conference papers. One of these has been revised for a forthcoming article in *Culture and Religion*.

This dissertation is, in truth, a little overdue, and apologies are due to all family, friends, and colleagues affected by my profligacy in this regard. Because the fact that it even came close to completion is due in large measure to the encouragement, advice and support I have received from them and others, I welcome the opportunity to express my humble thanks.

While the fateful decision to further my undergraduate interests and begin a research degree was mine, I was encouraged to do so by a number of people at the University of Stirling, several of whom gave fine advice on drafting my initial proposals, most notably, Nancy Morris, John Izod, and Brian McNair, all then in the Department of Film and Media Studies, along with Richard King and the Reverend Mary Maaga, now both departed from the Department of Religious Studies. The practical support I have received from the staff of the School of Arts office began at this early stage also.

It would have been impossible to pursue my research, however, without the generous full-time financial support, over four years, of the Humanities Research Board of the British Academy. Receipt of funds from such a prestigious source was not only a material benefit but gave me confidence in my own potential as a scholar.

As one might expect, major thanks are also due my two supervisors, Mike Cormack from Film and Media Studies, and Keith Whitelam from Religious Studies, who have remained unstinting in their support, often with no good reason. I have gained much from their thoughtful responses to my work and constructive suggestions as to its further development. But while their advice has been important,

their patience has been truly remarkable. Particular thanks are due to Keith for continuing his supervision despite a move to Sheffield last year. At the same time, I appreciate that this has meant Mike bearing the brunt of the administrative duties, not to mention regular student crises, which attend the latter stages of such a project. I have also benefitted from the efficiency of staff working in the respective departmental offices and the university library. Similarly invaluable help with regard to computing has come from Oron Yoffe and Marilyn Scott.

Studying at a relatively intimate institution such as Stirling has also given me the chance to discuss my work with members of the academic staff on a less formal basis. Both departments have proved supportive and stimulating environments in which to work in this respect, with Philip Schlesinger, Mary Keller, Jeremy Carrette, Raymond Boyle, and Malory Nye all warranting a special mention. However, particularly thanks go to Colin Nicolson from the Department of History, whose generosity in terms of time, advice, and reading materials has helped broaden my understanding of American history and culture considerably. I would also like to thank my fellow postgraduate students for lightening the load over the past few years, especially Matthew Hibberd, Kathryn-Jane Hazel, Jacqui L'Etang, Will Dinan, as well as Nicki Page, Rita Torrao-Lago, Julie Kelso, the Reverend Arnold Temple, and all others with whom I was pleased to work on the good ship D21.

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INTRODUCTION

The Hollywood film now rules the entertainment culture of our planet, and seems well on the way to becoming a universal secular religion, the first to offer its devotees anything they want and ask for nothing in return, other than the admission price of their tickets. Night after night, its congregations gather in their neighbourhood cineplexes, eager to worship the harsh gods of violence, sensation and spectacle.

(Ballard, 1998: 14)

To borrow a phrase used by Keith Whitelam (1996: 2), this study 'is an attempt to articulate an idea': that there exists a symbiosis between American religion and American film. Arising out of interests developed at undergraduate level as to the nature of relations between religion and the modern mass media, it began as an effort to understand the religious aspects of American cinema. In general, and despite the manifest and widespread mobilization of religious ideas, imagery, motifs, and stories across the whole spectrum of American commercial film production, by directors as famous and influential as, for example, D.W. Griffith, Cecil B. DeMille, John Ford, King Vidor, Michael Curtiz, Frank Capra, Alfred Hitchcock, Francis Ford Coppola, and Martin Scorsese, scholars of film have been peculiarly disinterested in pursuing the 'religious' dimension as a line of enquiry, especially as it might relate to the broader social context. Nor was there much evidence of curiosity from students of religion with regard to the impact upon their field of interest of the most important and influential medium of the first half of the twentieth century. A desire to address the perceived neglect of what seemed to be a self-evidently important strand of meaning within American movies provided the initial impetus and motivation for the study presented below.

As work progressed, however, it became increasingly clear that the visibility of the religious in American films was but one consequence of the widespread

significance of religion as both a symbolic and practical resource within the broad cultural processes of US national life. Writing in 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville (1966: 269) observed that in spite of the formal constitutional separation of religion and the American state, 'religion...should...be considered as the first of their political institutions.' Religion, he argued, was fundamental to the life of the national community. The United States may have changed somewhat over the last one hundred and sixty six years, but the Tocquevillean perspective has remained a relevant and influential one. Moreover, a persistent religious presence has been one of the distinctive hallmarks of the modern mass media as they have developed in America. So much so in fact, that it leads one to suggest that the establishment and development of the America nation as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991) has, in its particulars, been profoundly influenced by the relationship between religion and the media. In continuing to pursue American film as an object of study, therefore, the research presented herein begins to explore the nature and extent of that influence upon the national community.

Originally, the project was to have taken the form of an historical survey which would have examined religious themes in a range of films from the silent era to the present day. Such a broad conception proved to be unmanageable; not least, because there was no pre-existing theoretical framework from which one might move to examine relations between religion, film and the national culture. This state of affairs prompted a reorientation of the research, away from the films themselves towards an exploration of theories and methods which might lend themselves to the study of religion and film in American culture. The idea was to indicate the potential value of this hitherto neglected area to other researchers, and suggest ways of going about such work. Nevertheless, the interdisciplinary (and interdepartmental) character of the project posed an even more fundamental problem which needed to be addressed if the study was to develop in a coherent way: who, exactly, was the intended audience for the research? Was this to be a discussion of film for scholars of religion who, like most people, were likely to have an interest, albeit non-

academic, in movies? Or was it an attempt, possibly futile, to remind media scholars of a set of cultural activities and resources they had, in the main, learnt to ignore? For a researcher, the question of to whom their work is being addressed is an important one as it determines not only the aims and objectives of one's work but also the kind of arguments which might develop out of it.

Thankfully, any confusion regarding the intended audience for this study began to dissolve with the discovery of an emergent interdisciplinary scholarship similarly interested in relations between media, religion and culture. As Chapter One elaborates in more detail, this work has begun to move beyond bipolar conceptions of religion and culture, media and culture, and/or media and religion, to suggest instead that 'media, religion, and culture should be thought of as an interrelated web within society' (Hoover and Lundby, 1996: 3). Challenging the assumption that secularization represents the inevitable death of religion, this broad triangulation of theory and research offers rich possibilities for those seeking a greater and more sophisticated understanding of the cultural dynamics at play in contemporary society. As one might expect, moreover, much of this work focuses upon the United States. The process of 'rethinking' relations between media, religion, and culture cannot help but be informed by a recognition of America's current global hegemony in matters of politics, economics, and culture (Hoover, 1996). At this still early stage of development, however, the overwhelming concern with the contemporary scene, whilst understandable, has resulted in a neglect of the history behind the conditions of the present. Indeed, despite the prominence of the American example, the particular national context in which the institutions and practices of the US media developed, as well as the theoretical issues raised by questions of national identity, have all been taken for granted somewhat. Reflecting these twin lacunae, the development of motion pictures in America, both as an industry and a cultural institution, has received scant attention from within the 'evolving paradigm' (Hoover, 1996) of work 'at the intersection of media, culture, and religion' (Clark and Hoover, 1996). This study addresses that gap.

The upshot of the considerations outlined above is a thesis organized around a critical, interpretive, historical, sociological, and cultural, case study of D.W. Griffith's epochal motion picture, *The Birth of a Nation*. Released for the first time in 1915, *The Birth of a Nation* is probably the single most important, influential, and widely discussed movie ever made. Exerting an influence and fascination extending into the present, and still screened to this day, the film remains one of the great landmarks of world cinema. Crucially though, it was also the first American motion picture to have a genuinely national impact; something, the study argues, which the film itself prefigured in explicitly religious terms. An enquiry as to the nature of the film's appeal to national sentiment and notions of 'Americanness' provides the focus for this research. That is not to say, however, that this thesis is about Griffith's picture or even the extensive literature engendered by that movie's release eighty-six years ago. Rather, *The Birth of a Nation's* legacy as a multi-faceted but self-evidently important 'event' in the cultural history of the United States, 'the incontestable keystone movie in the history of American cinema' as Phillip French has described it (quoted in Robinson, 1993), suggests it to be an obvious point of departure for research seeking to explore the history of the complex relations between media, religion, and culture in America.

Although the intended audience for this research is, in the first instance at least, the emerging scholarship into media, religion, and culture, the project cannot help but address concerns which will be familiar to students of American cinema. This constituency has hitherto displayed little interest in the relationship between religion and the movies. To them, the salience of *The Birth of a Nation* might appear to make Griffith's picture a less than inspiring choice around which to organize a doctoral thesis. Much, too much perhaps, has been written about *Birth* in the last eighty-six years. The emergence at some time in the future of any major new factual information about the film is unlikely, and there is little discussion of the film itself within this study which is not based upon existing critical and historical writing about it. Nevertheless, the movie's importance, both as a cultural event and an object of

critical debate, makes it a logical choice for this project given the overall aims of the research.

In broad theoretical and methodological terms, then, this study aims to move beyond existing understandings of *The Birth of a Nation* by reconsidering that truly remarkable motion picture, from a vantage based in the evolving paradigm of scholarship rethinking media, religion, and culture. Indeed, it is a basic contention of this thesis that our understanding of the movies and their significance within (and beyond) the culture of the United States would be substantially enriched by a serious discussion of religion in the life of the nation. The extensive literature on American religion, a wide-ranging body of work predicated on the recognition of how important religion has been in shaping the attitudes and actions of Americans throughout their history, is all but unread within film studies. Hence, the key difference between the case study around which this thesis is organized and previous work on *The Birth of a Nation* is that, here, religion is taken seriously; as something integral to notions of American national identity and the narratives of chosenness, righteousness, transformation, and redemptive violence around which Hollywood came to represent 'the land of the free and the home of the brave'.

Previous writing on the picture has tended to revolve around two main issues. The first is *Birth's* status as a landmark in the history of the medium. Whilst not really an example of what has become known as the classical Hollywood cinema (e.g. Bordwell *et al*, 1985), Griffith's movie was an important precursor of what was to come. Crystallizing many of the developments which had taken place within the American film industry in the previous years, the success of *The Birth of a Nation* helped lay foundations for the emergence of one of the most powerful cultural institutions of the twentieth century. The other main point of debate, is the picture's racism. Representing African-Americans in a derogatory and inflammatory way, the film spawned a fierce debate which continues to this day. In recent decades, scholars have come to treat these two issues as rather more closely connected than was previously thought. This study follows that trend. However, it seeks to do this

by relating such issues to the broader processes associated with modernization, and the concomitant transformation of American religion.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, immigration, industrialization, urbanization, and the rising intellectual authority of the scientific worldview undermined the cultural hegemony hitherto enjoyed by American Protestantism. One of the key aims of this study is to relate *The Birth of a Nation*, and, by extension, the development of the US film industry, to this religious crisis. Within film studies, the particular national context of the American cinema, whilst not ignored, has in many accounts been overshadowed by the portrayal of Hollywood as a 'global' phenomenon. Moreover, scholars of American film have, in the main, predicated their work upon an implicit assumption of secularization. But for a few instances, the question of religion has simply not figured in their deliberations. Yet, as the politically significant resurgence of conservative Protestantism in post-Vietnam America demonstrates, religion as a social force within national life may have changed but it never really went away. This recognition undergirds the thesis presented below. Furthermore, as global a phenomenon as Hollywood rapidly became, the considerations, largely commercial, which have shaped the American film industry have always been firmly rooted in the national context.

The issue of nationhood suggests another potential audience for this research; scholars of American religion. As has already been mentioned, much has been written with regard to religion in America and its significance within the life of the nation. Despite the constitutional separation of church and state, and its position as the most modern and powerful nation on Earth, America is still characterized by a popular religiosity of considerable variety and vitality. For all the economic benefits deriving from the application of a scientific worldview, and a political tradition based in Enlightenment rationalism, many of the distinctive features of American culture continue to be shaped by a widespread belief in the supernatural and active expressions of faith. This apparent paradox is one of the key issues in the study of American religion. Yet although this has prompted a substantial discussion of US

national identity in terms of 'civil religion' (e.g. Bellah, 1967), little effort has been made to examine the media's use and inevitable transformation of those (religious) ideas, images, and stories through which American national identity is articulated. Along with its other aims, therefore, the case study of *The Birth of a Nation* presented below addresses that neglect also. Whilst it leaves open the question of how far the medium of film can be thought of as being properly 'religious', it argues that Griffith's picture was quite explicit about staking a claim on behalf of the film industry for those aspects of the national imagination which had hitherto been the preserve of historians, political orators, and the Protestant churches. Indeed, the unprecedented success of *Birth* was a sign that, in practical terms, the narratives via which Americans continued to understand their significance as a 'chosen people' or 'New Israel' would derive less from the pulpit and the Bible, and ever more from the 'stories in picture' produced in the studios of Hollywood.

Thesis Outline

In terms of its structure, the thesis is presented in two parts. The first of these offers an extended discussion, over three chapters, of the scholarly context(s) within which this research is located. Elaborating some of the concerns already indicated, Chapter One offers a critical overview of existing writing on religion, media, and culture. Indicating the value and potential of this emerging body of work, it nonetheless highlights a somewhat ahistorical neglect of the cinema and its crucial role in shaping American culture in the twentieth century. This provides a point of departure for Chapter Two's review of the existing writing on film and religion in American culture. Whilst there is some evidence which suggests a complex interrelationship between religion and the movies in America, mainstream film scholarship has shown very little interest in this area. Where writing on film and religion exists, moreover, it has most often been prompted by concerns rooted in theology and hermeneutics. It has thus tended to ignore the social and historical (e.g. national) contexts, in which film production and consumption takes place.

Responding to this perceived neglect, Chapter Three establishes some of the key theoretical bases for the rest of the study by discussing the role of religion in shaping American culture and national identity. Whilst it acknowledges some of the problems associated with the concept, it posits the notion of an American civil religion as a useful tool with which to explore the ways in which the idea of the nation has been invoked within the American cinema.

Part II takes up the issues raised in the first three chapters through an in-depth examination of *The Birth of a Nation*, over two chapters. The first of these serves as a re-introduction to the film and the vast literature prompted by it. Whilst highlighting those aspects of the picture, its production, and reception suggestive of a deeper connection with the traditions of American religion, it argues that these aspects to the film remain largely unexplored. Building on this, Chapter Five, discusses the film as an event in American religious history. Locating the picture in relation to the religious bases of American national identity, it argues that Griffith's highly problematic representation of African-Americans should be understood as something more than just a powerful expression of white supremacy, and that the picture's legacy needs to be rethought accordingly. In particular, it stresses how the southern viewpoint of the film not only reflected the director's own cultural background, but also suited his ambitions for the cinema as a vehicle of moral reform. Despite, or perhaps even because of, the controversy prompted by *Birth*, moreover, the impact of the film helped enact a transformation of the ways and means in which Americans thought of themselves as members of a national community uniquely favoured by Providence.

PART I

Religion and Film in American Culture: The Scholarly Context

CHAPTER ONE

Researching Religion, Media, and Culture: An Evolving Paradigm

Introduction

This chapter discusses the condition of existing research into religion, media, and culture. By doing so, it locates the present study in relation to an emerging scholarship interested in the nature and place of religion within mass-mediated, postmodern, western culture.

Like the project to hand, the basic subject matter for much of this work is America; a fact which reflects the background of many scholars working in this field as well as the hegemonic position of the United States within the broader global culture (Hoover, 1996: 290-91). The attention afforded the U.S. can also be explained by what some might hold to be the paradoxical status of religion there: despite being as self-consciously 'modern' in terms of its economy and politics as any nation could be, symbols, stories, and institutions based in traditional notions of religion continue to exert a significant influence throughout American culture. Even with the constitutional separation of church and state, it is by no means entirely fanciful to suggest, for example, that being a woman or black is less hindrance to those who would seek the US presidency than a confession of atheism. In many instances it may indeed be 'less difficult to come out of the closet as homosexual in America today than to declare yourself an atheist or an agnostic' (Ellen Johnson quoted in Reed, 1999: 11). America has proved itself resistant to the once

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widespread assumption of secularization as the inevitable accompaniment to modernization, something often ignored in discussions of the US media.¹

The chapter begins by examining the broad trends which have, until fairly recently, characterized work on media and religion. This is followed by an account of an 'evolving paradigm' (Hoover, 1996: 285-87) of theory development and research in regard to religion, media, and culture. Whilst the fairly comprehensive triangulation of theory proposed and elaborated by Hoover and Lundby (1996) and others is welcomed, particularly as a basis for addressing contemporary American culture, three main areas of concern are identified. The first is the general lack of attention afforded the historical dimensions of this theoretical triangulation. Related to this, the second area of concern stems from insufficient consideration of the particular national background to what Hoover and Lundby (1996: 10) describe as the 'convergence of religion and media within contemporary culture', and the consequent under-examination of power relations within this convergence. The global hegemony of American media and popular culture is the furthest extension of a national culture which cannot help but bear the marks of tensions and conflicts rooted in issues like economics, gender, race, region, religion, sexuality and social class, all played out amidst the historical transformations and upheavals wrought by modernity. That those attempting to rethink media, religion, and culture in the present appear to have little interest in reconsidering the past is, moreover, reflected in the third area of concern identified below; the lack of attention scholars in this field have afforded the medium of film, especially as an agent for, and product of, the profound social, religious, and cultural changes which transformed America during

¹ Affirming the commonly held assumption of its apparent inevitability prior to a re-appraisal of the place of the supernatural in modern life in *A Rumour of Angels* (1969), Peter Berger (1967: 107) offers a widely cited definition of 'secularization' as 'the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols'. Challenging such assumptions, however, more recent statistics suggest that as many as '95% of Americans profess belief in God' (Gallup Poll results quoted in Ostling, 1995: 72). For a useful recent discussion of the secularization thesis in relation to contemporary American society see Harper and LeBeau (2000).

the first part of the twentieth century. These three basic issues inform the rest of the study.

Existing Research into Media and Religion

Despite obvious differences in terms of their specific lines of enquiry, it is a relatively simple matter to describe certain basic similarities and common interests between research into the media and academic studies of religion. Both are inter-disciplinary fields examining notions of collective identity and community, the social significance of symbols and stories, structures of power, etc. Both offer insights into the nature and purpose of that quintessential human activity, the generation of *meaning*. Yet, for all that, the relationship between these two broad areas of scholarship has, until fairly recently at least, been characterized by a somewhat surprising lack of communication. Indeed, taking Cultural Studies as the most obvious arena in which Media Studies and Religious Studies might productively overlap, the near total lack of interest afforded religion there contrasts sharply with the more traditional discipline of Anthropology. Clearly, some cultures are more popular than others (Frow, 1998).

Religion as the Blindspot of Media Theory

In a bold critique of this state of affairs, Stewart M. Hoover and Shalini S. Venturelli (1996: 251) suggest that ‘the realm of belief, spirituality, ontology and deep meaning conventionally constructed as “the religious”’ represents ‘the blindspot of contemporary media theory’. Re-reading the roots of contemporary social theory in the legacies of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber, ‘the theorists who have most directly addressed and constructed religion as a legitimate field of inquiry’ (1996: 251), Hoover and Venturelli (1996: 252-58) point out that despite the widespread assumption that secularization would inevitably accompany the rationalizing processes of modernity, and the observable decline in the power, influence and attendance of the formal religious institutions of Europe, ‘non-rational’ beliefs and practices persist as fundamental components of meaning-making in

contemporary western society. Moreover, whilst they acknowledge the privatization and commodification of social and cultural life under capitalism, a supplanting of 'religious consciousness with a world of objects' (1996: 256), Hoover and Venturelli interrogate the traditional analytical distinction between the sacred and the profane, and propose secularization as 'a transformation in religious – not extra-religious – consciousness' (1996: 255), thus radically relocating the category of 'the religious' within the realm of 'the secular', especially the mass media.

Although Hoover's and Venturelli's terse discussion of what is meant by the categories of 'religion' and the 'religious' needs to be unpacked somewhat if it is to be fully exploited, it does indicate how re-examining these terms might provide a useful means of addressing the relationship between religion and media. What is of more immediate concern, however, is that the re-conceptualization of 'the religious' proposed by Hoover and Venturelli carries implications both for media practice and, more crucially here, media research.

For one thing, Venturelli and Hoover highlight the profound tension between the maintenance of political and moral community on the one hand, and life in a modern media-saturated environment on the other:

The "religion of secularism" with its canons of rationalism, practical action, and values constructed as commodities, presents, via the media, a totalizing worldview intended to obscure multivalent ontologies and sensibilities. Only in the private sphere of the self does the possibility of moral feeling unencumbered by the demands of the rational order, persist.
(1996: 263)

Furthermore, they observe that the uncritical adoption of Enlightenment secularism by media researchers and theorists has led to 'an almost conscious distancing from the realms of deep meaning' (1996: 258). Given the persistence of religious worldviews around the globe, this leaves those involved in Media and Cultural Studies open to the charge of arrogance, hubris even, and calls into question the relevance and meaning of their work. Hence, Hoover and Venturelli (1996: 263)

conclude their essay by calling for 'a new attention to be paid to the category of the religious within the field of media theory and research'.²

Media Blindness in Religious Studies

In parallel with Hoover's and Venturelli's notion of a 'blindspot' within media studies, though addressing the academy from the other side of the inter-disciplinary divide, Chris Arthur (1996a&b) has commented on the 'media blindness' (after Masterman, 1985) which afflicts religious studies. Highlighting points drawn from the work of John Hinnells (1990), Gregory Schopen (1991), Margaret Miles (1985), and William Graham (1987), Arthur emphasizes the extent to which 'media-blind' studies of religion tend to privilege the written word at the expense of other forms of expression.³ The assumption 'that the written word is natural, normative, [and] authoritative' (Arthur 1996b: 4) leads to an unsatisfactory and elitist understanding of religion which plays down the significance of 'the person as the most important medium of all' (1996b: 7). Indeed, Arthur (1996b: 4) acknowledges the parallel between 'media-blindness' and 'gender-blindness' citing June O'Connor's (1995: 48) recognition that 'the epistemological significance of feminist research in religion lies in its asking questions about how we know what we know, what the sources of our knowledge are and why we trust them.'

2 A similar argument is made by John Frow (1998: 207) who comments on 'the failure of cultural studies—with rare exceptions—to come to terms with, to theorize in any adequate way, what is perhaps the most important set of popular cultural systems in the world, religion in both its organized and disorganized forms'. He suggests that cultural studies needs to move beyond its 'embarrassment' with regard to religion, abandon the secularization thesis and 'take religion seriously in all of its dimensions because of its cultural centrality in the modern world' (1998: 208).

3 JohnHinnells (1990: 257) stresses the importance of examining the arts as a 'major form of religious expression', especially if one is to avoid 'plugging in to a level of religion which most of the practitioners are not, or have not been engaged in'. Schopen (1991) points out how 'Protestant presuppositions' have privileged writing as the locus of 'real' Buddhism in the study of Indian Buddhism. Miles (1985) demonstrates the extent to which it has been 'images rather than words' which have informed the identity and sense of purpose of many millions of historical subjects outwith an atypical and privileged minority of those able to read and write. Graham (1987) discusses the important but often neglected oral aspect of scripture.

Moving towards a plea for 'a more media-conscious approach in religious studies' (1996b: 7), Arthur develops this basic position by utilizing some of the ideas of Walter J. Ong (1969; 1982), and Jack Goody (1986; Goody and Watt, 1968) to highlight the transformative impact of writing on consciousness and, thus, religion. For Ong, writing enabled societies to move away from the 'highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind that inhibits intellectual experimentation' (1982: 41) which derives from oral societies' need to continually repeat information and stories to avoid forgetting. Instead, Ong argues, writing set up 'conditions for "objectivity" in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing' by separating 'the knower from the known', thus allowing the possibility of 'new speculation' (1982: 46). Similarly, Goody and Watt (1968: 53) suggest that oral cultures find it hard to conceive of a word like "God"...as a separate entity, divorced from both the rest of the sentence and its social context. But, once given the physical reality of writing, it can take on a life of its own'. For Goody, therefore, the relationship between writing and religion is one in which literacy facilitates the growth of 'world' as opposed to local religions, 'religions of conversion, not simply religions of birth' (1986: 5).⁴ Whilst such discussions of the profound importance of writing are suggestive of why scholars of religion might have tended to focus on written texts, Arthur is also mindful of suggestions of 'a media revolution, involving a move from a typographic to a televisual epistemology' (1996: 8). Thus, his main concern is with reminding us that 'media are not just inert channels through which religious information flows in aseptic conditions, wholly uninfluenced by what carries it. They profoundly affect the way in which religious thinking operates' (1996a: 1). It follows, therefore, that 'if religious developments are significantly shaped by available media, then looking at the impact which such media have on religions may help us to understand the dynamics of religious change' (1996a: 2).

⁴ For critiques of Ong and Woody which examine the ideological assumptions embedded in their work see Street (1984) and Carruthers (1990).

'Religion' and the Modern World

Implicit in Arthur's work is an important question regarding the efficacy of disciplinary boundaries and the extent to which they help or hinder any attempt to understand the interplay of media and religion within actual lived experience. As Arthur (1996c: 187) writes elsewhere,

an assumption about what religion is, whether expressed explicitly in a definition, or implicitly as a media-bias that leads us only to consider one type of material, can have the effect of directing our inquiries away from the actual religiousness of those who constitute the living reality of a faith toward abstract formulations whose claim to be representative of such faiths is open to question

In the jargon of media studies, one might describe Arthur as proposing a reception based understanding of religion. Such a position tends to lead away from the notion that the meanings of religious rituals, stories, and symbols are inherent or fixed, emphasizing instead the active and historically contingent role of individuals and religious communities as creators of meaning as they encounter religious phenomena. Returning to Hoover and Venturelli's (1996) notion of a 'blindspot', however, one can extend Arthur's argument by indicating the way received assumptions regarding 'religion' (as an irrelevance) and 'secularization' (as the inevitable and, some would say, welcome 'death of religion') result in a near-total absence of the 'religious' within much media studies, and the subtle denigration of what is a fundamental aspect of many people's lives.

The irony in all of this though, is that such blindspots were more or less inevitable once 'religion' became a distinct object of study. As Talal Asad recognises, the emergence of 'religion' as an '*analytically* available' (1993: 28, emphasis in original) category within Western scholarship implies an essentialist definition of religion 'as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon' (1993: 28). Addressing Clifford Geertz's (1973) well known and widely cited definition of 'religion as a cultural system', Asad (1993: 29) rejects any such essentialist or universalist notion of religion 'because its constituent elements and relationships are historically

specific, [and] because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.’ Noting that a universal definition of religion fits neatly ‘with the liberal demand in our time that [religion] be kept quite separate from politics, law, and science—spaces in which varieties of power and reason articulate our distinctively modern life,’ Asad (1993: 28) argues that ‘this separation of religion from power is a modern Western norm, the product of a unique post-Reformation history’.⁵

Asad’s trenchant critique of Western scholarly conceptions of religion is revisited in Chapter Three’s discussion of religion in the American context. Here though, Asad’s (1993: 27-54) problematization of ‘religion as an anthropological category’, as an index of ‘a particular history of knowledge and power...out of which the modern world has been constructed’ (1993: 54) is certainly suggestive of why scholars in media and cultural studies might perceive the ‘religious’ as something marginal within contemporary society. It also indicates why scholars of religion contend with the prospect of their endeavours being dismissed as largely irrelevant to an understanding of how modern society functions by those outwith the field. Furthermore, particular difficulties arise in following the process of religious change if such a transformation involves, or gives rise to, phenomena not conventionally categorized as religious. In an environment so devoted to the production and circulation of meanings in carefully structured and disciplined written forms as the academy, there is a somewhat inevitable problem of scholarly credibility which attends attempts to ascribe religiosity to such banal phenomena as a rosary hanging from the rear-view mirror of a cab in Manhattan, say, or the purchase of a replica Manchester United shirt replete with ‘Red Devil’. Faced with this problem, this study argues that the question of whether or not such things are authentically ‘religious’ is largely irrelevant to the development of a broad sensitivity to the proliferation of resources and strategies via which humans create meaning and negotiate power in

⁵ Indeed, Asad introduces his discussion by noting how ‘Victorian evolutionary ideas’ led to ‘the rationalist notion that religion is simply a primitive and therefore outmoded form of the institutions we now encounter in truer form (law, politics, science) in modern life’ (1993: 27, parentheses in original).

our various 'lifeworlds' (after Habermas, 1987). Nonetheless, the persistence of those elements conventionally understood to be 'religious' alongside other nominally 'secular' aspects of day-to-day life indicates the utility of seeking out or developing theories and research methods which can cope with the religious aspects of contemporary life.

Researching Media and Religion: Initial Trends

Until fairly recently, writing on religion and the media was, in general, characterized by two main trends. The first is rooted in broader western Christian concerns regarding the effects of the mass media and popular culture on religious institutions, spirituality, and society in general (e.g. Nelson, 1976; Muggeridge, 1977; Bluck, 1978; Atkinson, 1979; Goethals, 1981, 1990; Fore, 1987; Coleman and Tomka, 1993). Often reflecting the influence of Marshall McLuhan (1964), but only rarely engaging with the subsequent theoretical development of mainstream media studies, such writing usually presents fairly negative understandings of the media themselves. Like the more secular, mainstream, but similar media criticism of Neil Postman (1987), for example, it tends to focus on television as the dominant medium of our time, seeing T.V. as a kind of all-pervasive 'substitute for sacraments' (Goethals, 1981) fundamentally at odds with a 'genuine' or 'authentic' religiosity. However, whilst there is a sub-strand of writing which emphasizes the positive potential of the media for disseminating Christian messages (for example, Armstrong, 1979; Benson, 1988), one suspects that pessimism is indeed an appropriate Christian attitude towards the difficulties facing the churches as a result of the communications revolution.

The second major strand of writing on religion and media also has its roots in the Christian criticism of the media outlined above but has grown into the now quite extensive literature on televangelism (e.g. Kuhns 1969; Owens, 1980; Hadden and Swann, 1982; Horsfield 1984; Frankl, 1987; Hadden and Shupe 1988; Hoover, 1988; Bruce, 1990; Schultze, 1991). Although televangelism is a somewhat obvious focus

for interest in media and religion, it has facilitated the development of more sophisticated theoretical and methodological approaches towards the field as a whole.

Certainly, the mushrooming of serious interest in televangelism during the 1980s can be attributed, at least in part, to its political significance. Recognizing televangelism's capacity 'to visualize and thus give public voice to the valences of the Religious Right, including authoritarianism, nativism, xenophobia, homophobia, and, in its extreme, militarism and the desire for a theocracy', Clark and Hoover (1996: 18) comment that 'televangelism is not only the place of origin of the Religious Right, but offers a form of its ongoing public discourse'. Yet, despite its clear relevance to a whole range of debates, and reflecting in part perhaps, Steve Bruce's (1990: 233-34) point that however it may appear, 'the first and most important point about televangelism...[is that] watching religious television is still an infrequent activity of a small part of the American people', the literature on televangelism is more an adjunct to, rather than a component of, mainstream media and cultural studies. This is a pity, for as Hoover and Lundby (1996: 10) recognize, there is a small but expanding body of work on televangelism which seeks to problematize the conventional view of religion and media as separate categories within contemporary culture (e.g. Hoover, 1988; Peck, 1993; Alexander, 1994).

Indeed, as work on religion and the media has begun to move out of the twin ghettos of religious criticism of the media and televangelism, the complex nature of the relationship between religion and media within culture has become increasingly apparent. For example, in addressing the widely supposed anti-Christian bias of the American media (Lichter, Rothman, and Lichter, 1986; Olasky, 1988; Carter, 1993), Mark Silk (1995) moves well beyond Dart and Allen's (1993) attribution of the lack of news coverage afforded religion to ignorance on the part of media 'elites'. Rather, Silk (1995: 11) argues that to the extent that they are concerned with religion itself, the news media approach the subject in ways which reflect and support religious and moral values 'embedded in American culture at large'. Such findings point to the

desirability of theory which can accommodate both religion and media as important and interwoven ingredients within the cultural process. It is towards the emergence of just such a 'triangulation' (Hoover and Lundby, 1996: 3) to which we now turn.

Religion, Media, Culture: An Evolving Paradigm of Research

Although the respective critiques of media studies and religious studies offered by Hoover and Venturelli (1996) and Arthur (1996a&b) were, at the time of their writing, generally accurate in their assessments, they were also indicative of a steady if still unspectacular expansion of scholarship in the field of media and religion. Over the last decade or so, this development has taken something of a slow but definite 'cultural turn' in its overall orientation. The acknowledgement of cultural context as being of fundamental importance in shaping relations between media and religion, has been accompanied by a growing recognition that the analytical distinction between religion and media may not be as hard and fast as convention would have us believe. Indeed, interest in the unexpected but continued presence of the religious within modern, mass-mediated culture has, in turn, prompted an interrogation of this theoretical distinction (Hoover and Lundby, 1996). Several conferences and conference seminars have been devoted to work exploring these long ignored interstices.⁶ There have also been a few anthologies of related writings published. While the quality, scope, and utility of the latter has been variable they do provide a useful indication of how work within the field is changing.

⁶ For example: 'Media-Religion-Culture' held at the University of Uppsala, Sweden, in 1993; the Media, Religion, and Culture conference held at the University of Colorado at Boulder, USA, in 1996; the British Association for the Study of Religions (BASR) 1996 annual conference devoted to Religion and Media held at University College of St. Martin, Lancaster, England; the 3rd International Conference on Media, Religion, and Culture, University of Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1999. Panels and round tables on Media, Religion, and Culture have also featured at a number of other major international conferences, within both the field of media studies and religious studies..

'Religion and the Media'

As an early attempt to pull together many of the issues implicit in the field, *Religion and the Media: An Introductory Reader*, edited by Chris Arthur (1993), tends to be more illustrative of the problems which attend such endeavours than the potential benefits available to interested scholars. Indeed, the editor opens his introduction to the book by noting the vast potential subject matter available to any study of media and religion: 'after all, every expression of human religiousness is, inevitably, a *mediated* expression' (1993: 1). Despite this observation, however, and the inclusion of some useful and thought provoking work, Arthur's collection lacks something in terms of balance and rigour, and fails to live up to the suggestion of breadth (if not comprehensiveness) implicit in its title.⁷ Some of these problems stem from a lack of religious perspectives from outwith Western Christianity.⁸ Of course, a Christian perspective need not be a problem in terms of the individual papers. For instance, even if we do not share her particular spiritual commitment, the inclusion of an essay by Dorothee Sölle (1984) provides a trenchant critique of the consumerism underpinning our media-saturated environment. Nevertheless, although the editor's introduction does make clear that 'the book is primarily intended for students of theology and religious studies and for those in training for the ministry' (Arthur, 1993: 3), the Christian bias of the collection only serves to undermine its credibility as a piece of media studies. So, although the book is consistent with the fairly extensive literature providing a Christian critique of the mass media discussed above, one wonders how well served the supposed readership is by pieces in which an assumed religious and moral authority is allowed to override argument based on evidence and theory which acknowledges the complexity of media-bound human society. Whilst it does not even mention religion, a paper discussing the role of television news in a

⁷ To be fair to Arthur (1993: 3), he does admit that his volume consists of 'selected papers on religion and the media rather than a systematic study of this area', commenting that although 'such systematic study is, of course, needed,...it is not the task of the present volume to provide it'.

⁸ The obvious exception in respect of the rest of Arthur's book is S.A. Schleifer's (1993) stimulating and historically grounded discussion of Islamic perspectives towards the news.

democratic society from John Eldridge (1993) of the Glasgow University Media Group only serves to highlight the discursive shortcomings of some of the other offerings.

Most disappointing in respect of this study is the book's predictable over-emphasis on television. Included are various essays on TV in general, the news, soap operas, religious programmes, etc. For Arthur (1993: 2), this merely reflects 'the extent to which television is the dominant medium in contemporary society'. Perhaps so. Yet, aside from Stewart Hoover's (1993) statistical study of American newspaper readers' attitudes towards press coverage of religion, little serious attention is given to any other medium. As a result, discussion tends to disregard the complicated and historically specific, socio-economic, political, and cultural processes which have shaped the technology, institutional structures, production practices, and consumption of TV within a multi-media environment. Moreover, because few of the writers see television as anything other than a (spiritual) problem (similar to an outdated 'hypodermic model' of media effects), the essays in Arthur's collection contain little discussion of the influence, both subtle and direct, of religious ideas and organizations on the media.

'Religion and Mass Media'

A little more sophisticated in terms of its theoretical and methodological orientations is Daniel A. Stout and Judith M. Buddenbaum's (1996) collection, *Religion and Mass Media: Audiences and Adaptations*. The editors of this volume hope it represents 'a creative synthesis of ideas between mass communication research and the sociology of religion' (1996: 5) moving towards 'an audience-centered approach to the study of religion and media' (1996: 9). As Stout and Buddenbaum (1996: 6) note, 'scholars in both areas have worked in relative isolation, with no clear bridge of understanding between them', and that their 'book represents one of the first attempts to promote interdisciplinary dialogue on the subject of religion and media' (1996: 5). With this as a starting position one might reasonably expect a sustained

effort to develop theory which might provide that 'bridge of understanding'. Taken as a whole, however, Stout and Buddenbaum's compilation concentrates on empirical studies of *how* various contemporary American Christian denominations experience and use modern mass media. Much of the evidence gathered suggests that among the religiously committed there exists a more diverse set of attitudes towards the media than might commonly be supposed by those academics who see religion as little more than an anachronistic refuge for the conservative (e.g. Valenti and Stout, 1996; Buddenbaum, 1996). Like Arthur's volume, though, it is hard to imagine Stout and Buddenbaum's book reaching beyond the converted as it lacks the boldness to go on and exploit the discursive possibilities inherent within it with regard to politically charged issues such as race, class, and gender.

A basic problem of the book in this respect is the limited range of enquiry. Most obvious, perhaps, is the use of 'religion' in the title as a term to describe little more than the denominations of US Christianity. Within the crude political and economic consensus of American culture, religion has offered American citizens an alternative symbolic arena in which they might play out their differences (see Chapter Three). Even minor divergences in doctrine take on significance within such an essentially democratic religious environment. Suggestions of this expressive, 'bottom-up' religiosity emerge in the section of the book which deals with the role of religion in shaping audience behaviour, particularly in Thomas Lindlof's (1996) examination of letters to a local newspaper generated by the controversy surrounding Martin Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ*. In a book largely devoted to dry empirical studies of *how* certain audiences behave, Lindlof (1996: 148) is worthy of praise because he highlights the *meanings* generated by some of the participants in this particular episode of the 'culture war', which is still being fought out in the American news media around issues like abortion, gay rights, and school prayers, etc. He brings out the crucial difference between opinion and *belief* by asking what was at stake, and thus offers an explanation as to *why* individual members of the audience felt compelled to engage in such an emotive debate. It is

this 'why' question though, which flags the book's exclusion of religious groups outside of the mainstream. In an America where a majority still claim to be 'Christian', committing oneself to Islam for instance, or to one of the many new religious movements dismissed by the majority as 'cults', *means* something. Yet, there is barely a nod in the direction of the astonishing variety of non-Christian or non-traditional religious groups that do exist there, all staking a claim for American hearts, minds and pockets. By choosing to ignore the voices at the margins, the editors lost the opportunity to enter into a deeper, and perhaps more provocative, analysis of the problems facing contemporary American society.

The essential conservatism of Stout and Buddenbaum's anthology is compounded by its concentration on audiences and readily identifiable denominations. Leaving issues like ownership and content aside means the editors did not need to engage with the sticky theoretical problem of what 'religion' actually means nowadays. One looks in vain for a genuinely 'creative synthesis of ideas' (1996: 5). Adopting an unproblematic and rather narrow definition of the 'religious' may have enabled efficient and easily managed data gathering. But given the key role of both Christianity and the media in shaping the national culture, such an approach elides rather more interesting questions. Certainly, Stout and Buddenbaum (1996: 35-36) acknowledge Tocqueville's still relevant observations regarding the fundamental importance of religious voluntarism and press freedom in maintaining the social and political well-being of America. Meanwhile, pieces on Catholicism and Censorship (Jelen, 1996), and the 'uneasy alliance' between Evangelicals and the media (Schultze, 1996), indicate the difficulties and tensions generated within a modern media-saturated environment by attempts to reconcile belief in an absolute with the liberal ideals enshrined in the US constitution. Such efforts notwithstanding, however, Stout and Buddenbaum's book displays little interest in placing the circumstances which make the study of media and religion in America a worthwhile and relevant endeavour in a broader context.

'Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture'

In contrast to Stout and Buddenbaum, and as the title of their collection *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* suggests, Stewart Hoover and Knut Lundby (1996) recognise that the development of theory is crucial to the opening up of this relatively novel area of scholarship. With no sign of the reticence which prevents Stout and Buddenbaum from interrogating conventional notions of 'religion', *Rethinking* oozes a confidence befitting its ambition: the triangular linkage of theory, enabling us to think of media, religion, and culture 'as an interrelated web within society' (Hoover and Lundby, 1996: 3). Moving beyond 'the simpler, two-sided relationships between *religion and media*, *media and culture*, and *culture and religion* that up to now have characterized both theory and research' (1996: 3, emphases in original), Hoover and Lundby's volume represents an important ground-levelling exercise which seeks to open up the field and indicate its potential riches to other researchers. As the editors admit in their introduction, 'it is presumptuous to suppose that any theoretical perspective can ultimately account for the phenomena of concern here' (Hoover and Lundby, 1996: 8). In that sense, their project does not in itself imply the construction of a new meta-theory, although there are moves here to build on the notion of *mediation*, and develop 'a theory of mediated religion in culture' (Lundby and Hoover, 1996: 303). Rather, Hoover and Lundby (1996: 8-9) claim that instead of enforcing any unitary framework on their book, they and the various contributors 'attempt to raise the discourse to a new level by presenting material that either illuminates or challenges the received assumptions about issues of religion and media, media and culture, and contemporary religious and cultural matters'. As befits such an aim, *Rethinking* draws on a wide range of potentially relevant scholarship to present a wealth of ideas, leads, and possibilities in terms of theory. In this way, it effectively elaborates various ways and means of addressing both the 'blindspot' in media and cultural studies that Hoover and Venturelli (1996) identify and the 'media blindness' of religious studies highlighted by Arthur (1996a&b). With regard to this present study, therefore, the significance of *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* derives

from its broad articulation of hitherto disparate literatures. The book establishes a flexible but still coherent 'evolving paradigm' (Hoover, 1996: 285-87) for future research, theoretical development, and scholarly debate. Thus, it provides a much-needed point of reference for the various individuals, groups, institutions, and networks who might be interested in exploring and developing the possibilities of the field.⁹ In doing this, it represents a key constituency within the perceived audience for this study.

Especially important in this respect is a forceful 'bibliographic essay' by Lynn Schofield Clark and Hoover (1996) which builds upon the initial agenda set by Hoover and Lundby to propose that

Religion...is not limited to what happens in a 'sacred' realm, traditionally conceived, but is that part of culture that persuasively presents a plausible myth of the ordering of existence. In this sense, culture and religion are inseparable; and what is 'sacred' may be understood in Lundby's phrase 'as a variable, ranging from the substantial to the functional [Lundby, 1996: 161]. As it exists in the wholeness of human thought and practice, religion is thus an important consideration in theories of culture and society. (Clark and Hoover, 1996: 17)

Prior to a broad survey of relevant work in the areas of Religion and Media, Cultural Studies, Ritual Studies, and Religious Studies, therefore, Clark and Hoover (1996: 18) 'argue that the time is ripe for media scholars to begin to probe questions of religion in culture more directly'. As they subsequently demonstrate, such inquiries would represent an extension of 'recent trends in media studies that have foregrounded questions of meaning and being and have adopted methodologies that examine the everyday practices and discourses of individuals and groups (Clark and

⁹ Of obvious importance in this respect is the 'Uppsala Group' which was formed as a result of the 'Media-Religion-Culture' conference held at the University of Uppsala, Sweden, in 1993, 'both to encourage and to carry out research at the intersection of media studies, religious studies, and cultural studies' (Hoover and Lundby, 1996: ix). Connected with this and the Conference on Media, Religion and Culture are bodies such as The International Study Commission on Media, Religion, and Culture, (1999), 'a group of scholars and practitioners who have gathered to consider the shape and direction of both productive and reflective work in these three intersecting fields', and 'is intended to facilitate continuing dialog and to stimulate and support both scholarship and media production in the area'. Probably the most prominent research project within the field is the *Symbolism, Media and the Lifecourse* project (2001), nearing completion at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication of the University of Colorado under the aegis of Stewart M. Hoover

Hoover, 1996: 18).¹⁰ Indeed, although Clark and Hoover (1996: 28) note that scholars of religion are moving 'away from institutions and structures and toward studies of religion in private life', they write that 'trends in ritual scholarship highlight the public and procedural aspects of religious behaviour, contradicting the idea that religion is limited to the private sphere'.

Building on this point, Clark and Hoover (1996: 28) acknowledge the widely perceived decline of institutional religion within Europe, Canada, and the United States. Mindful of 'the significance of the North American case in media and religion' (1996: 15-16) they point out, nonetheless, that 'the majority of Americans still identify themselves as religious or spiritual' however much 'what is meant by the terms *religious* and *spiritual* has changed' (emphases in original). Addressing religion in relation to the issue of 'identity construction', Clark and Hoover (1996: 28) argue that 'authority over religious experience and expression is increasingly in the hands of the individual,' a relatively novel extension of something historically consistent with the voluntaristic principles of American religion (see Chapter Three). Given such 'postmodern' developments, 'the extent to which symbolic resources of the mass media are drawn into these processes' becomes 'an essential question' within the overall examination of media, religion and culture (1996: 29).

Despite this recognition, however, the relationship of those 'symbolic resources' to the overall political economy of the media is hardly dealt with at all within *Rethinking*. This is somewhat surprising given Hoover and Venturelli's (1996: 256) recognition of 'commodification' as one of the key transformative processes of modern capitalism. Moreover, the elision of supply-side issues of ownership and control and their influence on the provision of, and struggles over the 'symbolic resources' of the media, be they explicitly religious or not, signals a weakness within

¹⁰ Clark and Hoover (1996:22-26) draw particular attention to writing within the tradition of British cultural studies from the 'founding texts' of Richard Hoggart (1957), Raymond Williams (1961), and E.P. Thompson (1963), through to the work of Hall and Jefferson (1976), Stuart Hall (1973), David Morley (1980) and others associated with the Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, although they criticise the creeping neglect of religion within this tradition as it has developed.

the book as a whole; the lack of any explicit conceptualization and interrogation of *power*, a central concern within all the relevant contemporary scholarly disciplines Clark and Hoover discuss.

In concluding their essay, Clark and Hoover indicate six areas of work 'that seem worthy of further exploration' (1996: 31). Of these, the first two 'would refine and extend current research' into '*religion and the news*' focusing 'on producers, texts, and audiences', and 'studies of *televangelism*'. The third 'would examine the *interplay between religious thought and popular culture*'.¹¹ A fourth would take a look at '*new modes of spirituality*, and would examine how religious symbols are contested and constrained in the public sphere to create a public discourse of religion'. The fifth area covers 'work on *mediated therapeutic discourse*' whilst the sixth, 'and perhaps the least explored, is...examination of *the affective*' (1996:31, all emphases in original). Of these, the third, fourth, and sixth areas are, to varying degrees, addressed directly by this study. All six of them, however, offer potential insights into the nature and practical workings of power.

Clark and Hoover (1996: 32) also indicate three basic themes of particular relevance to the overall project of research 'at the intersection of media, culture, and religion' (1996: 15). Firstly, there 'is the shift from *modernity to postmodernity*' a process 'which has foregrounded the roles of commodification, transnationality, and globalization, and in general the flattening of time and space occurring simultaneously in both media and religious practices'. Developing out of these conditions is the second theme, '*identity negotiation*, both individual and collective...[within] the *mediated public sphere*.' Hence the third theme: 'the postmodern question of the creative *reworking of the text at the site of the audience*' (1996: 32, all emphases in original). Explicating the enquiry in terms of the overall project, and articulating the reception-centered concerns which have characterized

¹¹ Clark and Hoover (1996:31) cite 'Hebdige's (1976) work on reggae and Jindra's (1994) analysis of *Star Trek* fandom' as indicative of the possibilities within this area and write that 'the former suggests the study of historical religious roots of particular genres and texts' while 'the latter examines the ways in which religion emerges in everyday life in unexpected forms mediated by popular culture'

the methodological orientation of their own work in the wake of *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* (Clark 1996, 1998; Hoover, 1998a&b), Clark and Hoover (1996: 32) ask,

How are people using existing media texts and converting them to stories of religious inspiration, for example? Do these stories have connections to deep myths of the Abrahamic faiths, or do they resonate with other traditions (perhaps civil religion, or other religious traditions)? How do these readings work themselves back into the production of media?

Despite the present study's focus on media development within the historical frame of 'modernity' rather than 'postmodernity', all of these themes and questions are relevant here. Yet, what is striking about Clark's and Hoover's articulation of the concerns which inform the 'evolving paradigm' is its overwhelmingly presentist orientation. There is little apparent interest in the actual (as opposed to assumed) historical background to conditions and events which have brought about, out of scholarly necessity, a convergence of theoretical perspectives on media and religion within postmodern culture, and the privileging of reception over production and distribution. That the history of this convergence is played down is of concern here, not least because the issue of power is implicit in, and central to, all three underlying themes Clark and Hoover identify. Following Jeremy Carrette's and Mary Keller's (1999: 22) contention that the developing 'interconnection of critical registers' within religious studies means that 'it is not possible to study religion without recognising the multiple forces which shape belief and practice, and even the study of religion itself'; and noting that the emergence of a predominantly American scholarship 'at the intersection of media, culture, and religion' (Clark and Hoover 1996) is taking place within a global context characterised by the political, military, economic, and cultural hegemony of the United States; one is drawn to ask whose interests are being served by this reconfiguration of theory and research?

Framing such an enquiry may appear unduly suspicious of a project clearly informed by serious concerns over the moral, ontological, and spiritual implications of a media-saturated postmodern environment. But it is by no means the intention here

to disparage scholarship that warrants wider support both within and beyond the academy. Rather, the question represents a means of addressing certain lacunae within the 'evolving paradigm' set out in *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*.

Inevitably, some of the concerns and sentiments expressed by the contributors to *Rethinking* echo those found in Arthur's (1993) volume and the other Christian critiques of the media detailed above. We should not be surprised that much of the impetus behind the convergence of work on media, religion, and culture comes from within the Christian faith community. There is, however, a much more explicit recognition of the need to underpin a sense of moral engagement with theoretical explication if work in this field is to reach a broader audience. Indeed, for several writers, academic understanding is merely a prelude towards activism. Thus, Clifford Christians (1996: 69) utilises Martin Heidegger's (1977) view of technology as 'a cultural process in which human existence is established in relation to natural reality', to argue that triadic theories of mediation must not only root understandings of religion and media in culture, but also account for the ontological implications of technology. From this position, Christians (1996: 76-79) outlines an attitude of 'prophetic witness', an explicitly religious mode of resistance to contemporary 'technological conditions radically opposed to human freedom' (1996: 76). Concern of this kind is echoed in Gabriel Bar-Haim's (1996) Durkheimian and rather pessimistic description of 'the crisis of ritual and the triumph of the spectacle' (1996: 145). Subsequent work, often addressed to the concerns of faith communities, merely confirms a 'flattening' of symbols: the authority of religious symbols is becoming submerged as audiences generate meaning from the resources available in the symbolic marketplace of the media sphere (Clark 1996, 1998, Hoover 1998b). This does not mean, however, that these same audiences are no longer concerned with questions of 'deep' or 'religious' meaning. It simply means that people are looking for answers to these questions outwith the bounds of traditional religion.

Hence, Jesús Martín-Barbero (1996) offers a more hopeful take on 'disenchanted modernity'. Recognising the media as 'a process of creating cultural identities...bringing individuals into coherent publics that are "subjects of action"', he points to transformations in Latin American religion over the last forty years or so, and argues that the Mass Media can function as a site for the 'resacralization of contemporary cultures' (1996: 102). Indeed, along with the diversity of opinions on the consequences of modernity offered in *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*, some of the conclusions found there present an explicit and sometimes surprising challenge to the presuppositions of post-Enlightenment scholarship. For example, Tomaselli and Shepperson (1996: 221-22) suggest that

televangelists seem to have a way of recovering compelling aspects of preliterate oral consciousness, thereby restoring the power of dynamic relations of cosmological force to names and labels that are lost to Cartesian literate consciousness through the objectification of meanings attached to words.

Although they note that this 'power has been harnessed...to the demands of the political economy of the electronic church' (1996: 222), they argue that the recovery of this oral consciousness within a mass-mediated environment could facilitate the empowerment of communities within a public sphere in which democratic and religious attitudes are reconnected from the bottom up.

To a limited extent, an engagement with practical issues of the present leads Robert White (1996) and Peter Horsfield (1996) to invoke history as a context for their particular discussions. White's theoretical exploration of 'Religion and Media in the Construction of Cultures' examines both religious studies and media studies as examples of the inherent 'reflexivity' within social theory (Giddens quoted in White, 1996: 41); finding their 'common ground as discourses that monitor, evaluate, and orient the integrated development of cultures' (1996: 40). Drawing on Klaus Bruhn Jensen's (1995) *Social Semiotics of Mass Communication*, a theoretical perspective which emphasises the key process of 'signification' as both product and constituent

of social reality,¹² White looks at the possibilities for a creative intervention from the practitioners of religious studies and media studies within the ongoing dialogue between secular and sacred out of which meaningful symbols of the sacred emerge into the public sphere. Arguing that ‘the creation of sacred symbols and the “poetic” construction of meaning are too important in the construction of cultures to be excluded from the public sphere’ (1996: 60), he recognizes that

the construction of cultures, especially the signification of the sacred, is always a contested process in which some groups attempt to affirm that their cultural capital is sacred, natural, and beyond question, and other groups attempt to delegitimize and desacralize these symbols of identity (White, 1996: 49).

White is thus explicitly mindful of power and ‘the issues of hegemony and ideological co-optation of the search for religious meaning’ (1996: 61) and sees research as a process which can address itself to them. Nevertheless, one is still left wondering exactly what this might entail in the real world beyond theory. How do religious symbols relate to more earthbound struggles? Is it realistic to hope that academics could take on the mantle of artists and actually help generate stories and symbols articulating the religious *zeitgeist*.

Like White, Peter Horsfield (1996) is also concerned with the reformation and development of moral structures in the present-day context of media change. For Horsfield, the impact of mass communications technology and institutions in the present is a key issue which needs to be addressed by the Christian community at both a theological and ecclesial level. Arguing that the media need to be seen not ‘as one social institution among others’ but as ‘the “web” of the culture, the matrix where most people now get most of their insight, influence, values and meaning’ (1996: 177), he recognizes that ‘religious organizations may no longer be the main source of religious information, truth, or practice, even for their own members’ (1996:

¹² Jensen (1995: 61) takes ‘as an initial premise, at the *theoretical* level of analysis, that societies come before media as generators of meaning. Meaning flows from existing social institutions and everyday contexts, via media professionals and audiences, to the mass media, not vice versa’ (emphasis in original).

178). Indeed, Horsfield's piece is unusual within the terms of *Rethinking* as it addresses the issue of power directly:

A central element of culture that is affected by changes in means of communication is the aspect of power. Communication underlies and shapes the recognition and exercise of sociocultural power. Access to information, the status and resources to construct meaning; and the ability to identify, muster and construct resources—all essential characteristics of communication—locate and sustain one within social power structures. The various media of social communication function competitively, in terms both of their association with recognized exercisers of power and of their ability to fulfill desired social functions. They coexist through a competitive process of ordering and by carving out a competitive place and function within a social or economic sphere (1996: 172).

Despite a critical discussion of consumer capitalism and the impact of what he terms 'commoditization, that commercial process whereby noncommercial human activities and services are appropriated, re-formed, packaged, and then sold as commercial products or services' (1996: 179), Horsfield's conceptualization of media power is, however, somewhat abstract. As with *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* overall, theoretical explication tends to gloss over real life conflicts and struggles. The inevitable battles for political control and economic resources over issues such as education, the environment, freedom of expression, gender, nationhood, race and sexuality, are all played out in and through both religion and the media. Whilst all of these discourses impact in some way upon this study, two in particular, gender and race, indicate telling blindspots within the evolving paradigm in its still admittedly early stages of development.

Taking gender first, it might be argued that there is no need to worry. Within *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* there is a useful literature review by Claire Badaracco (1996) which may prompt non-specialists to examine the important insights generated by feminist scholars of religion. Aside from this short piece though, the collection ignores the whole question of gender in a way reminiscent of the 'founding fathers' of social and anthropological theory (Erickson, 1993). Given the preponderance of women over men, both in the congregations of traditional

religious institutions and the organizations of more innovative movements, but not in the clergy of mainstream denominations, one might observe that the gender problematic needs to be placed at the centre rather than the margins of the project the book is setting out. For instance, the mobilization of symbols deemed female rather than male has been an important theme in changing attitudes towards the natural environment (e.g. Ruether, 1992, 1996) itself an obvious but ignored topic within the broad discussion of religion, media, and culture.

Even more perplexing, is the near-total absence of race as an issue within *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*. Given the book's justifiable emphasis on the United States, it is astonishing that one of the deepest and most persistent sources of division and conflict within American culture and religion is, to all intents and purposes, ignored. Religion provided much of the original rationale for White Anglo-American racial ideas regarding the supposed inferiority of Africans (Jordan 1974), and, despite emancipation, this ideology was routinely reproduced in the national culture. As Jane Rhodes (1993: 185) writes,

American society responded to the existence of African, Asian, and indigenous people by erasing their cultures and substituting images that supported a system of racial dominance and control. Over time, these representations of America's subordinate groups nourished the nation's popular culture and helped fuel the rise of mass media. Members of these groups responded, when they could, with images of their own creation, and alternative media to disseminate them. Yet, they could do little to counteract the prevailing definitions of race.

She adds, moreover, that the

struggle between the transmission of racist ideology and dogma, and the efforts of oppressed groups to claim control over their image, is part of the legacy of the American mass media. Racial identity has been—and continues to be—a crucial factor in determining who can produce popular culture, and what messages are created. (1993:185)

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The value of the 'evolving paradigm' derives from an insistence that religion, so often dismissed as little more than a vestigial category by western scholars, should be integral to the academic investigation of media and culture. Nevertheless, the marginalization and neglect of, among other things, gender, race, and the political economy of the American media, however unintended, leaves those working within it open to negative criticism. Whilst this may be a harsh assessment if based on one book, the predominantly white, American, male profile of the contributors to *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* might lead sceptical observers of the broader project, of which the book is merely a foundation, to dismiss it via an invocation of bell hooks' (1996: 3) powerful formulation, 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy'. This would be unfair. As Lynn Clark (1996), for example, demonstrates, researchers in this field are by no means unaware of the issues which undergird their work. Commenting on the concept of identity informing her research into media audiences, she writes that it

is connected with the concept of the self and the "sovereign" individual. It is rooted in the 18th century Enlightenment ideals of humanity and reason which developed as critiques of the older feudal order in which ontological understandings had been based in one's relation to a deity and to a king. Thus the concepts of selfhood, "the individual," and identity undergird and legitimize the rise of capitalism as the socio-economic order that replaces feudalism. This underscores the fact that the ideas of the 'self' and of identity are not neutral or ideologically 'blank' ones, but are inherently related to the Western cultural context in which they developed.

Despite this general awareness, however, that there is a history to the conditions of the present, ignoring the particulars of that history does scant justice to the human cost of present day media culture. If research at the intersection of media, religion, and culture is to gain the wider currency it seeks, therefore, the field must incorporate a critical interrogation of the history behind such a convergence.

Within *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture*, Graham Murdock's (1996) shortish essay on 'the re-enchantment of the world', a wide-ranging survey of the interplay between media and religion within the broad transformations of modernity, provides an indication of how interesting and valuable a substantial engagement with

the history of media and religion in culture might be. Attacking the assumption within British Cultural Studies that the religious dimension of contemporary social life was little more than a 'residue', Murdock examines culturally and politically determined shifts and differences in relations between religion and the media in a variety of settings. Discussing America, he draws on Colin Campbell's (1987: 219) recognition of 'two strands of thought within Protestantism...even within that especially harsh and vigorous branch of it known as Puritanism'. One corresponds with Max Weber's (1930) famous argument 'that the moral imperatives of Puritanism had provided an essential cultural support for the practices of accumulation that fuelled the rise of capitalism' (Murdock, 1996: 91). The second, however, 'developed into the Romantic sensibility that fed into the consumer system' (1996: 91). Campbell (1987: 227) writes that 'the cultural logic of modernity is not merely that of rationality as expressed in the activities of calculation and experiment; it is also that of passion and the creative dreaming born of longing'. Hence, he locates the source of American energy and dynamism in the permanent and fundamental tensions 'between dream and reality, pleasure and utility' (1987: 227). Murdock (1996: 91) comments that 'the shifting relations between these two sides of Protestant culture is especially marked in America, where the consumer society and the religious marketplace are both most advanced'. In a similar vein, Murdock (1996: 93) notes the importance of religion as subject matter in establishing the commercial viability of the film industry in America. As brief as it is, however, Murdock's piece is probably the most historical and historicized within *Rethinking*. Moreover, his two paragraph discussion of cinema (1996: 92-93) is all the medium would appear to warrant within the book's 'triangulation of theories'.

Leaving aside the potential relevance of the extensive work carried out within the field of film studies looking at areas such as authorship, film narration, genre, representation, spectatorship and reception, as well as race, gender, and the political economy of the film industry, this neglect reinforces the perception of the emerging or evolving paradigm as ahistorical. As Mike Cormack (1992: 77) has written,

during the greater part of the twentieth century the most influential media format has been that of the narrative film. This is not just because for much of this century it has been a major source of entertainment for millions of people in countries round the world, but also because it has had a central role in developing the styles and content of popular visual fiction. Its influence is evident on television drama of all kinds, on advertising, on music video, on fashion, and even (although not so obviously) on written fiction.

Yet, the influence and socio-historical importance of cinema is not really addressed within *Rethinking's* overwhelming concern with contemporary culture. There is no account, for example, theoretical or otherwise of the medium's pivotal role within the not-so insignificant shift away from print towards the televisual emphasized by Chris Arthur (1996 a&b) above. Indeed, given the emphasis within the evolving paradigm afforded notions of practice (e.g Hoover, 1996; Lundby and Hoover 1996), it is surprising that the transformation of mass culture enacted by the coming of cinema has not been addressed as a matter of urgency.

'Selling God': Religion, America, and Commodification

One writer who does address the historical relationship between the cinema and American religion, albeit fairly briefly, is R. Laurence Moore (1994: 220-31). Cited by Hoover and Lundby (1996: 5) in their introduction, Moore's (1994) *Selling God*, is an important counterpoint to the overly presentist orientation of *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture*, by describing how integral religion was to the development of American commercial culture. In Moore's account, the religious marketplace in America, created in part by the First Amendment, meant that the Protestant denominations became key participants in the twin process of commodification democratization which came to define the parameters of modern culture there. Not only were commercial practices used in the service of religion but religion was deployed on behalf of business. Thus we should not be surprised to find that the development of a commercial film industry in the United States was inflected by this symbiosis (see Chapter Two). Moore's point though, is that the commodification of

culture and religion so central to the concerns of scholars like Hoover is nothing new. Rather, it is something peculiarly American.

Recent Developments in the Evolving Paradigm

The 'stuff' produced and consumed by Protestants is of particular interest to art historian David Morgan (1998, 1999). Concerned largely with popular religious images and material artefacts as components of a 'visual piety', something he defines as 'the set of practices, attitudes, and ideas invested in images that structure the experience of the sacred' (1998: 2-3), Morgan's work has done much to open up the historical dimension of the evolving paradigm of media, religion, and culture. Deploying a social constructivist perspective (e.g. Berger and Luckmann, 1967) within his historical approach, he pays special attention to the unfashionable, quotidian, and often mass-produced religious images that have been almost totally ignored within the mainstream of Media and Cultural studies. Morgan alerts us to the fact that these visual materials are not just by-product of the religious worldview, but, in fact, constitutive of it *and* the social identities thus articulated. Sensitive, moreover, to issues of race, class, gender and sexuality, without reducing his historical analysis to these factors, Morgan highlights not only the rich variety of meanings believers have generated through the use of apparently 'kitsch' images such as Warner Sallman's famous *Head of Christ*, but also their importance as repositories of human memory.

Morgan's work is an indication that the potential inherent to the evolving paradigm is beginning to be fulfilled, and that the concerns identified above in discussing *Rethinking Media, Religion, and Culture* with regard to history and power relations are now starting to be addressed. Of particular interest here though, is Morgan's (1999) challenge to assumptions about the iconoclasm associated with Protestantism in tracing the emergence of a distinctively Protestant iconography across America from the early nineteenth-century onward. Somewhat like Moore (1994), Morgan argues that far from being an instrument of secularization, the

emergence of a mass culture based upon the ready availability of printed materials spurred efforts to evangelize America. Organizations such as the American Tract Society, he contends, were so closely involved in shaping the new print culture that they had a significant impact upon the process of national development. Over time, moreover, the didactic illustrated tract came to be replaced by more sentimental devotional images, which were intended to influence and persuade children and others deemed in need of moral uplift. Such a shift anticipated many of the ideas and techniques which were just starting to be deployed in commercial advertising and deepened the symbiosis between religion, entertainment, and commerce which, in many respects, defines the national culture of the United States.

Further development with regard to the significance of religion within American culture is to be found in a recently published compilation of essays edited by Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (2000). Bringing together a diverse range of material of varying quality and vintage, Forbes and Mahan's book is in many respects too eclectic to fully engage with the issues raised by Hoover and Lundby's (1996) volume. Thus while one can indeed 'learn more about widespread perceptions of religion, and the role religion plays in the everyday lives of people' (Forbes, 2000: 2) through the study of popular culture, the wide variety of concerns voiced in Forbes and Mahan's collection functions better as an useful introduction to the field than a sustained development of it.

Religion and Popular Culture is organized around four different ways of thinking about the interrelation between the popular culture and religion. In the first of these, 'Religion in Popular Culture', we find examinations the ways in which American popular culture is shot through with references to religion. Thus, Mark Hulsether (2000: 77) discusses Madonna, 'as one among many high-profile stars...who articulate strong religious themes in their work', in relation to black and feminist liberation theologies. The second reverses the flow to look at 'Popular Culture in Religion'; the way in which organized religion has been inflected and indeed transformed by elements of the host culture. Here, Stewart Hoover (2000)

offers a challenging meditation on the 'megachurch' at Willow Creek as a market-driven but still authentic expression of religion within a cultural context defined by the media-driven process of commodification. The third set of essays, which discuss 'Popular Culture as Religion', highlight the parallels between religion and popular culture as sets of practices both oriented toward the generation of meaning. It is here that the problem of defining what we mean by 'religion' is most apparent, and includes a revision of Michael Jindra's (1994) essay on *Star Trek*. Jindra highlights the way the programme is in some respects akin to a 'civil religion', in as much as it takes the American myth of westward expansion and projects it into the future. He argues that at a time when organized religion has lost much of its social authority, a cultural phenomenon such as *Star Trek* can be seen as having taken on, for its fans at least, some of the more serious functions associated with religion. Indeed, the inclusion of a piece by David Chidester (1996) indicates a tension between academic accounts of 'Religion' and the way such terminology is invoked within American popular culture. What is at stake in defining something as religious?

This question is a useful prelude to the fourth and final section of Forbes and Mahan's volume which looks at 'Religion and Popular Culture in Dialogue'. As we have seen, this dialogue usually takes the form of a faith perspective being applied to elements of 'secular' culture. Thus the book includes a chapter from Jewett (1993) and a piece by Christian feminist Meredith Underwood (2000) on the status of gender relations in cyberspace. However, there is an interesting reversal of this in Anthony Pinn's (2000) critical discussion of African-American theology in the light of insights gained from blues and rap music.

Even from this brief survey of way Forbes and Mahan's book, it is possible to recognize that the project of rethinking relations between religion and contemporary media culture is becoming increasingly sensitive to issues of race and gender. Furthermore, the editors recognize that the categories they use to organize their

book are not exclusive (Forbes, 2000: 17). There is, however, very little history.¹³ This, again, leads to the context within which these various interchanges between religion and popular culture take place being taken for granted: that is, the process of American nationhood. To be fair, Forbes (2000: 11) does engage briefly with Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence's notion of an 'American Monomyth'. Drawing on the ideas of Joseph Campbell (1956), Jewett and Lawrence summarize the distinctive American variant on the heroic monomyth thus:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil: normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task: aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisaical condition: the superhero then recedes into obscurity. (Quoted in Forbes, 2000:11).

Examples would include westerns such as *Shane* and comic book heroes like *Superman*. Moreover, Jewett and Lawrence see this monomyth as secular 'replacements for the Christ figure, whose credibility was eroded by scientific rationalism' and the superhuman qualities of these heroes 'reflect a hope of divine, redemptive powers that science has never eradicated from the popular mind' (quoted in Forbes, 2000: 11). That Christ has been replaced is a debatable claim. Yet, although Jewett and Lawrence's description of the American monomyth does indicate the preponderance of redemptive narratives abroad in the national culture, one might still wonder why such stories hold so much power in America.

The concluding essay by Jeffrey Mahan (2000: 292) suggests that there are two basic issues addressed by the book: 'whether American pop culture has a religious face', and the ways in which religion 'developed and adapted in the midst of a consumer culture'. Yet, viewed from the other side of the Atlantic, one might also ask, why is being American so bound up with the religious worldview? What historical processes have helped to sustain this symbiosis between nation and religion? Thus, one notes also that Forbes and Mahan include no discussion of the

¹³ The one real exception to this in Forbes and Mahan's volume is Jane Naomi Iwamura's (2000) account of 'The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture'.

cinema beyond reproducing Jewett's (1993) application of Pauline theology to Clint Eastwood's *Pale Rider*.

That a re-examination of film history might have much to offer the 'evolving paradigm' is indicated by some of the preliminary findings of work on the *Symbolism, Media and the Lifecourse* project directed by Stewart Hoover. In a paper entitled, *Religion, Media and the Cultural Center of Gravity*, Hoover (1998b) ventures to offer three observations as to the "effects" of the media on religion'.

The first is the aforesaid 'flattening' of religious symbols within the broader universe of symbols available in the media. Commenting on generational differences with regard to the authority of traditional religious symbols, Hoover cites the example of Sinead O'Connor tearing up a photograph of Pope John Paul II on television. In contrast with audience acceptance of Madonna's sexually suggestive use of the crucifix, the controversy prompted by O'Connor's actions is interpreted by Hoover as an indication that while 'the cross, as an object of history and tradition, had lost much of its power to shock and convict,' the Pope's iconic media presence led him to be understood 'in the here and now' as 'a real human being'. The second type of effect Hoover describes is the "agenda setting" function of the media...not so much telling us "what to think" as "what to think about". As he puts it, if 'the symbolic marketplace of the media sphere is coming to be the place where religious meanings are made, then the raw material of those meanings will necessarily be a narrower set of resources than all possible ones'. Indeed, in a media environment more or less given over to commercial imperatives, economic considerations will inevitably impact on both the content and form of media product. This relates to the third effect: 'that certain narratives, symbols and stories come to be established at the expense of others'. Some myths or 'symbolic constructions' are made to appear 'natural' while others are denied. Narratives are crucially important in identity formation and determining the course of human action. Hence, whether articulating religious beliefs, national sentiment, or any other form of cultural identity, there is considerable social power bound up in the circulation and exchange of stories.

Although Hoover does not reference the cinema, the point to be made here is that all three of these 'effects' have been shaped, in the American context and beyond, by the advent of motion pictures. That the movies impacted upon the religious environment of America is an argument running throughout this study. But here one might observe, for example, that in so far as it demands an investment of emotions in personalities rather than abstract principles or values, the star system developed by Hollywood bears more than a passing resemblance to a pantheon of gods or saints. The Pope's status as a media 'star' reflects, perhaps, the extent to which the whole world has come to share in the Hollywood cult of personality. Similarly, the commercial principles upon which the American movie industry was founded have not only determined what stories ended up on the screen, but led also to the development of a particular style of narrative film (Bordwell *et al*, 1985); a style whose influence has extended throughout twentieth century popular culture. In short, the movies were integral to the emergence of a twentieth-century culture based in consumption (e.g. May, 1983). For that reason as much as any other their history demands to be re-assessed from within the 'evolving paradigm' of scholarship into media, religion, and culture. This study is based upon the observation that work of this sort is almost entirely non-existent.

Conclusion

The aim of this opening chapter has been the location of this thesis in relation to an emerging scholarship which addresses media, religion, and culture 'as an interrelated web within society'. As a strategic exercise, the chapter has sought to outline the key concerns of this 'evolving paradigm' and to indicate the rich potential of this growing body of theory and research for those who wish to gain a better understanding of contemporary culture and society, especially in the American context. However, a review of this still developing field has highlighted certain lacunae within it; shortcomings which this research would address.

The most significant of these is the lack of any fully realized historical work which might deepen our understanding of those forces and developments which have shaped the contemporary situation which will, no doubt, remain the primary focus of this area of study. Hence, this thesis is based on the premise that sustained examination of the past is a pre-requisite for developing a considered and worthwhile vantage on the present.

Related to the perceived lack of historical perspective within the 'evolving paradigm' is the under-examination of power, understood here as both a determining force and a resource to be struggled over. The political and economic contexts, shaping media, religion, and culture, especially issues of nationhood, appear taken for granted at times; as inevitable rather than the result of historically contingent desires, tensions, conflicts, and settlements. As it is argued throughout this thesis, the particular national context of the US makes it impossible to ignore the extent to which struggles over issues like education, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and, of course, race, as well as religion, were integral to the historical development of American culture and the modern mass media. Such themes are only starting to be addressed within the literature on media, religion, and culture.

The third main gap in the scholarship on media, religion, and culture is the lack of serious attention afforded the medium of motion pictures. Whilst the movies are still important within contemporary culture, they carry an even greater significance in historical terms, especially in terms of enacting a broad shift away from print media towards televisual communication. Despite a perceived lack of interest in the medium from within the scholarly paradigm outlined above, therefore, the movies readily suggest themselves as appropriate subject matter via which one might develop a more historicized understanding of relations between media, religion, and culture. Indeed, the point is underscored by observing the more or less self-evident importance of both religion and Hollywood in shaping popular conceptions of American nationhood.

As the following chapter will demonstrate, however, the history of the relationship between religion and film within the broader context of American culture has received only sporadic attention, be it from the mainstream of film studies or from the more specialized scholarship on film and religion. While this might be a little disappointing, in the light of the preceding discussion, it also represents unexploited potential. The rest of this study is a response to the opportunities therein.

CHAPTER TWO

Approaching Religion and Film in American Culture

Introduction

In surveying the growing body of research into media, religion, and culture, Chapter One identified three main areas of concern the rest of this study would seek to address. The first was the somewhat ahistorical concern with the cultural forms of the present which characterizes the 'evolving paradigm' overall. The second was an inadequate interrogation of how power relations inform the interrelationship between religion, media, and culture. Third was the lack of serious attention afforded within the field towards cinema. Whilst the study as a whole should be understood as a positive contribution to an emerging body of work with much to offer, this chapter develops the critical perspective outlined above by examining the condition of existing writing on religion and film.

As Chapter Three will elaborate, the discourse of religion has been integral to the process of nation building in America. From its 'great awakenings' and revival meetings, through to its mythologies, political rhetoric, and even comedy, religious stories, ideas, and imagery have been key resources from which the people of America have not just made sense of their personal and collective experiences but constructed a civilization. This fact is largely ignored within the now extensive writing on the American cinema; largely but not totally. The first section of this chapter examines this state of affairs while drawing out some of the observations

and insights concerning the relationship between religion and cinema within American culture scattered across the field of film studies. Whilst some useful and suggestive material does exist with regard to issues such as censorship for example, and the representation of religious minorities, discussion within the mainstream of film studies has been limited by a lack of interest in the theoretical issues raised by the distinctive character of American religion.

This is followed by a survey of writing which has addressed the movies from perspectives based in theology and religious studies. As with most of the early discussion of media and religion, interest in film and religion has tended to come from within the Christian faith community. Rooted in the traditions of theology and hermeneutics, and deploying methods adapted from the text-based study of literature, 'religious film-analysis' (after Nolan, 1998) has made little impression on non-believers. Thus, although this body of work does at least take religious concerns seriously, its ahistorical and rather speculative character has, until quite recently, offered little to those who seek an understanding of the medium in its cultural or societal context. There are signs that things are changing, however, with the emergence of approaches to film derived from religious and cultural studies rather than theology. Whether this shift in emphasis will prompt more interest within the mainstream of film studies is open to question. Nevertheless, it is argued that development of this sort has the potential to make the study of film an important rather than peripheral component of scholarship into media, religion, and culture. What is needed though, is a greater sense of the medium's historical development.

Film Studies and Religion

To some extent, the lack of interest as regards the cinema from within the 'evolving paradigm' of research into religion, media, and culture merely reflects the curious and slightly absurd disjunction between film studies as an academic discipline in its own right and contemporary scholarship into communications and media. For all the

obvious overlapping between these two areas of endeavour, acknowledgement of shared interests and concerns is by no means as common as it might be. Whilst the importance of film as a medium has diminished somewhat since the advent of television around the middle of the twentieth century, movies are still integral to the contemporary media environment. Yet one finds little discussion of film scholarship in mainstream media and cultural studies journals. This is something which probably reflects the concern with present and emerging manifestations of the communications revolution which characterize the field overall. At the same time, film-as-text based work still 'provides film studies with much of its distinctive focus' (Hill, 1998: xix). Hence, despite the emergence, since the 1970s, of a positivist film historiography which has provided the empirical base for an enriched and more complicated understanding of the medium's historical development (e.g. Balio, 1985 [first edition 1976]; Allen and Gomery, 1985; Bordwell *et al*, 1985; Staiger, 1992a), and the adoption of culturalist approaches which seek to relate films to the wider social context (e.g. Dyer, 1979, 1987; Uricchio and Pearson, 1993), the engagement with social theory which underpins the mainstream of media research is little more than a background influence upon film studies, and vice versa. Thus, Andrew Tudor (1998: 193-94) notes that 'a sustained sociology of film is still something of a pipe-dream', despite the suitability of sociology as an 'intellectual resource' to a 'multidisciplinary understanding of twentieth-century culture, a culture within which film itself played a historically crucial formative role'.

That there are possibilities being spurned here is recognized by Philip Schlesinger (2000), who describes how contemporary analyses of 'national cinema', a concept invariably defined in opposition to Hollywood (i.e. American) cinema, rarely make explicit reference to the sociological thinking which furnishes the background framework of ideas within which the debates surrounding nationhood take place. Likewise, film scholarship hardly figures within sociological analyses of identity formation at the national level. Schlesinger (2000: 29) comments that these 'two lines of inquiry...ought not only to converge but also to be thoroughly integrated as

part of a broad programme of work on nation and culture in the age of so-called globalization'. Whilst such concerns might appear to be beyond the scope of research into media, religion, and culture, the 'relevance of the American case' within the 'evolving paradigm' (Hoover, 1996) suggests otherwise. Hollywood is the 'national cinema' *par excellence*. As a medium, an art form, a social practice, and an industry, the cinema helped to shape and define American society in the twentieth century (e.g. Sklar, 1975; Jowett, 1976). At the same time, and contrary to many expectations perhaps, many Americans have continued to embrace religious ideas and practices which would appear to have been at odds with the scientific rationalism guiding the world's most modern and powerful economy. In these circumstances, positing a relationship between film and religion might represent an appropriate starting point from which to enquire into the nature of American culture. Because that possibility remains to be fully explored, it is a basic aim of this thesis to demonstrate that the relationship between religion and film within the national culture of the United States, is not merely historically interesting, but also important sociologically.

As already been suggested, the mainstream of film studies, like media studies as a whole, is characterized by a 'blindspot' with regard to religion. This was not always the case, as the writings of such seminal figures as André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer testify. Whether prompted by faith, in Bazin's (1967) case a Catholicism heavily influenced by the radical visionary Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, or with the Marxist Kracauer (1960), merely articulated in such religious terms as 'the redemption of physical reality', the work of these pioneers reveals an overriding concern with the moral and ontological implications of cinema. With the emergence of film studies as an academic pursuit during the late sixties, however, considerations of this kind all but disappeared from the mainstream of film scholarship. The advent of a broadly counter-cultural materialist theoretical orthodoxy, a development Stephen Heath (1976: 11) describes as 'the encounter of Marxism and psychoanalysis on the terrain of semiotics', created a scholarly

environment hostile to the serious treatment of religion. The question of religion and its relationship with the cinema was all but ignored. Beyond some discussion of Hollywood films, particularly Westerns, in terms of 'myth' (e.g. Cawelti, 1971; Wright, 1975) based in an appropriation of the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963, 1969), interest in such aspects of the medium has been sporadic, being largely confined to the margins of the field. With just a few exceptions, the issue of religion has barely figured in the most important and influential scholarly examinations of American movies and the industry that makes them, though there are some recent indications that this may slowly be changing.

As one might expect, some acknowledgement of religious themes and influences can be found (despite, on occasion, some poor indexing) in writings devoted to key directors such as D.W. Griffith (Simmon, 1993), Cecil B. DeMille (Higashi, 1994), John Ford (Sinclair, 1979; Gallagher, 1986), and King Vidor (Durgnat and Simmon, 1988). Even leaving aside Griffith for the time being, some of this work carries significant implications for work on media, religion, and culture. Worth special attention here is Sumiko Higashi's (1994) invocation of Edward Said's (1985) seminal *Orientalism* in his discussion of the silent films of Cecil B. DeMille and that director's characteristic, and often religiously sanctioned, deployment of the spectacular. DeMille's films, Higashi (1994: 203) argues, demonstrate how 'fabricating spectacle became a form of commodity fetishism involving both producer and spectator in a process of reification'. DeMille's films both mapped and influenced the transformation of the dominant 'genteel middle-class culture' from which the director had emerged into a culture organized around the principle of consumption. On this basis, Higashi (1994: 203) concludes that 'the increasing dominance of representation in twentieth century economic, political, and cultural life attests to DeMille's enduring legacy as an architect of modern consumption'.

In a slightly different vein, Neal Gabler's (1988) *An Empire of Their Own* is a provocative and highly readable account of Hollywood history which focuses on the role of the immigrant Jewish studio moguls. Despite an anecdotal rather than

academic style, Gabler's (1988: 7) argument, that in 'creating their idealized America on the screen, the Jews [of Hollywood] reinvented the country in the image of their fiction', is a compelling one.¹ Given their intense desire for assimilation, the moguls' Jewishness might be seen in terms of ethnic identity more than those of religious belief. Nevertheless, the suggestion is there that religion, however understood and/or exploited, was an important influence on decisions which shaped the American movie industry. This supposition is lent credence by many of the films themselves. This is most obvious in that most derided of genres, the Hollywood religious spectacular or 'Biblical epic', to adopt a convenient, though not entirely accurate label.²

The Biblical Epic

In spite of the genre's huge box-office success during the 1950's,³ and a tradition which can be traced back to the very earliest days of the American film industry (Campbell and Pitts, 1981; Herx, 1988), hardly any scholarly attention has been afforded Hollywood's religious epics: a fact which would appear to confirm the existence of the previously discussed 'blindspot' with regard to religion which characterizes film and media studies. Until fairly recently, discussions of the Biblical epic were largely confined to a few surveys, often addressed to a general readership, which did little more than list and describe films, from Hollywood and beyond, whose subject matter is more or less explicitly religious (Butler, 1969; Campbell and Pitts 1981; Pavelin, 1990; Kinnard and Davis, 1994). Indeed, even with the emergence of

1 See also *Hollywoodism: Jews, Movies and the American Dream*, a documentary based on Gabler's book, directed by Simcha Jacobovici (1997).

2 Following the lead set by Babington and Evans, 'the term "Hollywood Biblical Epic" is taken to cover three sub-types of film: the Old Testament Epic; the Christ film; and the Roman/Christian Epic (of the beginnings of post-Christ Christianity). Recognising the term lacks precision, particularly in relation to the third category, they nevertheless note that 'a satisfactory alternative is hard to find' (1993: 4).

3 Babington and Evans (1993: 5-6) demonstrate the astonishing popularity of the genre in the Fifties by pointing out that *Ben Hur* (d. Wyler, 1959), *The Ten Commandments* (d. DeMille, 1956), and *The Robe* (d. Koster 1953) were, respectively, the first, second, and fourth biggest box-office draws in the decade 1951-60. Similarly Forshey (1992: 1) points out that, according to *Variety*, religious spectaculars had topped the annual list of box-office during the Fifties, six years out of ten.

some scholarly analyses of the place and role of these pictures in American culture, their impact on film studies has been minimal.

The first serious book-length study of the American Biblical epic, Gerald E. Forshey's (1992) *American Religious and Biblical Spectaculars*, is perhaps a little under-developed. Its most obvious flaw is a rather cursory treatment of the silent era, a time in which the bases of the Hollywood system were established (Bordwell *et al*, 1985). In a brief introductory survey, Forshey (1992: 4) notes that 'religious spectaculars grew out of two popular artistic traditions – the spectacular stage melodramas and the popular quasi-religious novels of the nineteenth century'. He also highlights Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), and that picture's then state of the art demonstration of cinema's capacity for spectacle, as important influences on the religious film (1992: 4). These roots are left largely unexamined, however. So although he describes the genre as 'a staple of the film industry' (1992: 4), Forshey is content to ignore silent examples of it, discussing the significance of the biblical epic within the historical development of the American motion picture industry only from the 1930s onwards. Yet, despite this and other problems, not least a rather abstract conception of the American public for these films, Forshey's study is a success in so far as it highlights the importance of the religious epic within the national culture.

Examining popular examples of these spectaculars within a matrix of 'political, religious, and film history' (1992: 11), Forshey (1992: 1) suggests that within 'these films, the persistent tensions in American culture are fashioned into popular art. They reveal a great deal about American values'. In particular, Forshey (1992: 1-3) highlights three persistent themes in the Biblical epic: first, the problematic relationship between a naturalistic or scientific worldview and religion; second, the close identification of the American nation with the notion of the 'good' society based upon 'eternal principles'; third, the basis of ethical behaviour in a pluralistic society, especially with regard to 'sex, violence, and success'. These are big issues, and fundamental to the life of the nation. Hence, he argues that 'although

Biblical or religious spectaculars...are only tangentially interested in religion per se', they need, nonetheless, to be understood as 'serious treatments of problems in the culture' (1992: 184). Far from being "mere entertainment", Forshey (1992: 191) concludes that prior to the upheavals of the sixties at least (civil rights, feminism, Vietnam, etc.) Biblical epics 'filled the needs of Americans as...social changes altered the perceptions of the nature of reality, and legitimacy of national policy, and the basis of personal and social morality'.

How far one can properly distinguish between religion and the national culture is debatable, and an issue at the heart of this thesis. The question of defining 'religion' and/or the 'religious' is one that Forshey does not address. Nor does he fully acknowledge the absurdities of the genre. Still, by taking the religious epic seriously, Forshey supports the view that as with many aspects of American culture, religious considerations have been integral to the industry's growth and development, and that Hollywood has always been sensitive to shifts and changes in the nation's religious economy.

In Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans' (1993) *Biblical Epics*, the roots of the genre in the particular conditions of American religion are made much more explicit. Following Gilles Deleuze (1986: 148-51), these British scholars begin their study by arguing for a recognition of 'the absolutely pivotal place of the Biblical History film in the American cinema' (Babington and Evans, 1993: 11). Whilst, Deleuze (1986: 149-51) admits that 'it is easy to make fun of Hollywood's historical conceptions', he writes that they are nonetheless important because they furnish 'a strong and coherent conception of universal history' which, among other things serves as a vantage, a source of 'ethical judgement', on the condition of American civilization. This is of acute relevance to the study at hand. As Chapter Three will discuss in some detail, the provision of 'an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality' is basic to Robert Bellah's (1967) conception of an 'American civil religion'. How far Bellah's ideas are applicable to the movies is a question this thesis seeks to answer. Thus despite

Babington and Evans' (1993: 13) fairly orthodox theoretical position with regard to American religion, that it is both more popular and less authentically 'religious' than that found in Europe, their 'interest..in the social and intellectual functions of religion' (1993: 22) does lead them to at least take the religious aspects of the Biblical epic seriously. This is a strategy this study applauds and hopes to develop. Unlike writers such as Michael Wood (1975) and Steve Neale (1980) who, like Forshey (1992) whom they do not cite, view the explicitly religious content of these epics as a mere pretext for the expression of other more 'secular' concerns, Babington and Evans (1993: 12) 'insist on not treating the film's religious content simply as a screen for other preoccupations, real though these may be'. They argue that 'it is not a case of either/or, text or subtext; the Biblical Epic is both. Comprehensive analysis necessitates consideration of the originating site of its most obvious interests, the unique context of American religion'.

Because such a position does not depend on tracing the origins of religion through any 'persuasive but ultimately unproveable hypotheses' (1993: 22), be it, for example, Marxist, feminist, or psychoanalytic, it represents a usefully 'open' starting point from which one might examine the broader cultural relationship between religion and the cinema in America. At the same time though, it would appear to have hampered Babington and Evans in so far as their study lacks for a strong central thesis. For instance, they display little interest in developing the theoretical implications of the genre's centrality within the industry and its relationship to the wider culture of America and the nation's religious economy.

Some exploration of this area has been done by Richard Maltby (1990). In an article on DeMille's *King of Kings* (1927), Maltby locates the production of the film within a deteriorating relationship between a film industry desperate for respectability and an increasingly riven Protestant elite. In particular, Maltby highlights the influence on the film of Bruce Barton, a liberal Protestant advertising executive, who had in 1925 written the best-selling *The Man Nobody Knows: A Discovery of Jesus Christ*. At a time of growing consumerism and materialism somewhat at odds with

traditional Puritan ideals, Barton's book served to legitimate this process by describing Jesus as a kind of tough, pioneering, visionary businessman. Maltby argues that although the film developed this project, becoming in the process a substantial box-office success, it did little to repair relations between the industry and the liberal Protestant establishment. Thus it failed to diffuse the pressure to censor the movies which would eventually lead to the Catholic sanctioned imposition of the Production code in 1934 (see further discussion below).

While Maltby's piece is criticized by them (Babington and Evans, 1993: 22-24) for neglecting the film itself, it does prompt one to suggest that Babington and Evans, whose discussion is largely based upon lengthy textual analyses of particular examples of the genre focused in the main on the representation of sex and gender, might themselves have been a little bolder in theorizing the social significance of these movies. Still, they do make many useful observations indicating the importance of the religious spectacular within the industry. Despite the critical derision later heaped upon them, something which Babington and Evans recognize as having hampered scholarship in this area, Biblical epics were usually regarded as prestige productions by the studios, with resources being diverted to them (1993: 5). For instance, the films were often among the first to benefit from technical innovations. Moreover, Biblical epics were, as Forshey (1992) also indicates, key in establishing representational norms with regard to issues such as sex and gender. As important (and profitable) as the genre was, though, Biblical blockbusters were merely the most obvious manifestation of the American film industry's widespread appropriation of religious stories, ideas, and iconography.

Hollywood as 'Melting Pot': Issues of Ethnicity and Race

Scholarly explorations of this broader tendency to incorporate religious elements and express religious concerns in American movies are rare in film studies, and tend, on those rare occasions when the question arises, to revolve around issues of representation which often conflate religious identities with ethnicity. They can,

however, be seen as suggestive of the cinema's sociological importance; as an arena in which the tensions of religious pluralism could play themselves out in the service of the nation.

Patricia Erens (1984), Lester D. Friedman (1987), and Michael Rogin (1996) all concern themselves with depictions of the Jew in American film. Erens' main aim is to document the representation of Jewish characters in American films between 1903 and 1983, i.e. what films were actually made, the role of Jewish characters within the narratives, etc. In addition, however, she does analyze the wider social significance of changes in these depictions over time. Noting 'the large numbers of Jews who have played an active role in the American film industry' (1984: 22), Erens indicates the ways in which movies reflected the gradual, sometimes difficult, and, in the end, incomplete assimilation of Jewish immigrants and their offspring into American society. Erens (1984: 32) writes of the formative years of the silent era, for example, that from 1909 onward, and despite stereotypical characterizations,

Jewish films reflect contemporary life and social problems arising from the American experience. Earning a living, educating children, co-existing with foreign neighbours were all a part of ghetto life. The narratives juxtapose old moral and religious values, which have held Jews together for two thousand years, with the modern customs and attitudes held by the gentile majority.

Many of these pictures were made specifically for a Jewish audience. Indeed, a Yiddish cinema distinct from Hollywood flourished in America until the outbreak of World War II, with some Yiddish pictures being produced right into the sixties (1984: 164). This did not stop the movies serving the process of assimilation, however, something indicated by the success of *Ben-Hur* (directed for MGM by Fred Niblo) in 1926. Despite their obvious relevance, Erens' book ignores the Biblical epics in the main. She does nonetheless comment that in contrast with the stereotypes of the ghetto picture, the pawnbroker, the scheming merchant, the stern patriarch, etc., 'millions of Americans now enjoyed a unique experience, seeing a handsome, athletic Jewish character as the hero of Silent Cinema's greatest blockbuster' (1984: 100). *Ben-Hur* might be a rather exceptional instance of the assimilationist tendency

within Hollywood cinema. Erens (1984: 73) herself indicates that while anti-semitism is rare in American cinema, 'the pervasive image of the Jew as an Outsider and Victim' persisted throughout the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the possibility that the medium of film offered Jews a place in the mainstream of American culture should not be dismissed lightly.

Like Erens, Friedman's (1987) survey also traces changing representations of Jewishness in American film. Recognizing that 'America became conscious of its films and its Jews almost simultaneously' (1987: 9), however, he acknowledges that 'unlike films about other American minorities, movies with Jews were often scrutinized by one segment of that minority group with the power to decide how the entire group would be presented to society as a whole'; that is, the producers. Thus although Friedman's is a largely untheorized examination of the relationship between representation and the place of Jews in American society, he notes that not only does 'a discussion of Jewish-American films and characters...necessarily become an exploration of Jewish historical and cultural problems in America' it also involves examining 'the ways in which the movies attempt to explain, and, ultimately, to solve them' (1987: 10). What Friedman appears to suggest is that the influence within the industry of Jews such as Sam Goldwyn, Louis B. Mayer, David Selznick, etc., gave the movies special potential, as long as they remained profitable, to smooth the process of assimilation. Indeed, Friedman (1987: 5) prefaces his study by citing Jill Robinson's provocative anticipation of the argument advanced by Neal Gabler (1988): 'Hollywood - the American Dream - is a Jewish idea. In a sense, it's a Jewish revenge on America. It combines the Puritan ethic...with baroque magnificence. The happy ending was the invention of Russian Jews, designed to drive Americans crazy'. Accurate or not, such an assertion raises a bigger question: to what extent did concerns raised by migration and rooted, ultimately, in religious and/or racial conflict, affect what appeared on the screen?

Treating Jewishness in terms of ethnicity and race rather than religion, Michael Rogin (1996) brings a psychoanalytic edge to his history of the use of

'blackface', i.e. the imitation of blacks through the use of make-up (usually burnt cork), by Jewish screen performers, most famously Al Jolson and Eddie Cantor, in the first half of the twentieth century. Although Jewish immigrants had many experiences in common with blacks, not least the Old World association of Jews with spiritual darkness by Christians who believed their own souls had been 'washed white' by Jesus (Rogin, 1996: 20-21), Rogin argues that their use of blackface helped to gloss over ethnic differences among white Americans, by defining 'Americanness' in opposition to 'blackness'. Prompted in the first instance by the historic importance of Al Jolson's 'blacked-up' performance in *The Jazz Singer* (1927, d. Alan Crosland), the first movie to use synchronized sound, Rogin probes the deeper cultural politics of burnt cork.⁴

Rogin (1996: 5) describes blackface minstrelsy, 'the first and most popular form of mass culture in the nineteenth-century United States', as a form of 'racial cross-dressing' (1996: 4 *et passim*). This echoes Frederick Jackson Turner's famous suggestion, made in 1893, that American national identity was forged in the settlers' (self-)transformative encounters with the native Americans and wilderness at the 'frontier'. Just as 'slavery forced Africans to perform for whites', so minstrelsy appropriated those elements of blackness that whites desired, such as 'expressive power and supposed emotional freedom', at the same time as making them 'safe for white attraction' (1996: 22). Explaining the significance behind the loss of whiteness in the blackface performance in terms of contemporary cultural theory, Rogin (1996: 51) cites Stephen Greenblatt: "Imagined self-loss conceals its opposite: ruthless displacement and absorption of the other". Thus, for Rogin (1996: 18), the use of burnt cork by Jewish performers 'displays the peculiar feature of American nationalism, a popular expression that emerged (by way of the frontier myth on the one hand, blackface minstrelsy on the other) not to free oppressed folk but to

⁴ In fact, Rogin (1996: 73) argues that 'four race movies—*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Birth of a Nation*, *The Jazz Singer*, and *Gone With the Wind*—provide the scaffolding for American film history.' Rogin's (1987) analysis of *The Birth of a Nation*, is discussed further in Part II's case study of Griffith's film.

constitute national identity out of their subjugation'. He concludes that 'blackface made visible the deep structure of American history, in which the black role must serve the white' (1996: 251).

By attending to what is now a largely ignored aspect of twentieth century American popular culture, Rogin's history serves to emphasize the degree to which questions of race and ethnicity have shaped US national identity. Although religion is no more than a background influence within his study, the lesson contained there for scholars of religion, media, and culture in the American context is an important one: race is not a side-issue. If, as the evidence gathered in this review suggests for instance, media, religion, and culture do indeed now need to 'be thought of as an interrelated web within society' (Hoover and Lundby, 1996: 3), any historical understanding of this interrelation must take the unique and tragic character of race relations in the United States into full account. Social divisions between black and white pervade American culture in much the same way that religion does. So much so, that one might easily confuse one with the other. With regard to historicizing the 'evolving paradigm', therefore, the 'obvious' racism of *The Birth of a Nation* makes that movie an ideal choice from which to develop a discussion of film, religion, and US national identity.

Of course, Rogin's thesis does to some extent elide the complexity of race problems in US society; rather like Hollywood's occasional attempts to deal with them. Skin colour is not the only issue, although it is certainly the most pernicious. Take, for example, the second coming of the Ku Klux Klan. Whilst the resurgence of the Klan in the late teens and early twenties emanated from the South, and is widely believed to have been prompted by the release of *The Birth of a Nation*, the objects of their ire were not only black. Admitting only native-born white Protestants as members, the Klan was merely the most extreme manifestation of a widespread and xenophobic distrust of immigrants, Catholics, and Jews which would lead to the federal regulation of immigration during the 1920s, and the imposition of a quota system biased against southern and eastern Europeans. Outwith the South, and

away from the metropolitan centres of the Northeast, the Klan's attentions were largely directed towards Catholics. This was nothing new. In a country whose national mythology and, if Max Weber is to be believed, economy are so closely associated with Protestantism (see Chapter Three), the place of the church of Rome was always likely to be somewhat problematic. Suspicion, moreover, was exacerbated by the close association of American Catholicism with the Irish, whose numbers grew rapidly following the large-scale immigration which took place in the 1840s. Protestant antagonism towards them found expression in such phenomena as the temperance movements which culminated with Prohibition in 1919, and sporadic Anti-Catholic riots. How, then, did Catholics fare in the Hollywood melting pot?

Catholicism, Censorship, and the American Film Industry

In contrast somewhat with the fairly extensive treatment of Hollywood and the Jews, the relationship between Catholicism and the American film industry has been somewhat neglected aside from the key issue of censorship (see below). In that respect, Lester and Barbara Keyser's (1984) *Hollywood and the Catholic Church*, an examination of how American pictures have portrayed Roman Catholicism is quite unusual. Like Erens' (1984) and Friedman's (1987) surveys of how Jews were represented on the screen though, the Keyzers are largely content merely to document the changes in the portrayals of Catholics, rather than use those changes as the basis for a deeper analysis and theorization of the interrelationship between Hollywood and the changes experienced by Catholics and their institutions in twentieth century America. How far, for instance, might the sacramental nature of Catholicism have influenced the mythological America articulated in the work of directors from Catholic backgrounds such as John Ford, Frank Capra, and Leo McCarey? The visual nature of the medium is well suited to Catholic sensibilities (Shafer, 1991). Thus, as with the Jews, another group excluded from some aspects of the American mainstream, the emergence of the cinema might be seen as having

afforded Catholics an opportunity to slowly re-present America as a nation to which they too belonged.

In describing images of Catholicism in crime movies, for example, the Keyzers (1984: 41-92) move from highlighting the immigrant Catholic milieu portrayed in such popular and, at the time, notorious gangster pictures like *Little Caesar* (1930, d. Mervyn LeRoy), *Public Enemy* (1931, d. William Wellman), and *Scarface* (1932, d. Howard Hawks), through to a recognition of the pivotal role of Catholic priests in later films such as *Angels With Dirty Faces* (1938, d. Michael Curtiz) and *Boys Town*, (1938, d. Norman Taurog) dealing with the problems of crime and juvenile delinquency. By the time of Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* (1954), a screen priest, Father Barry (played by Karl Malden), was extolling the virtues of union-bashing and informers in a strong and not entirely coincidental echo of McCarthyism. Such observations are profoundly suggestive of a link between Hollywood and the gradual incorporation of Catholics within the mainstream of American national life which culminated with the election of John F. Kennedy as the first Catholic to the Presidency as President in 1960. Such possibilities, however, remain to be fully explored.

The most thoroughly documented aspect of the relationship between Catholicism and Hollywood is the Church's part in bringing about censorship of the movies. Based in extensive archival research, books by Gregory D. Black (1994) and Frank Walsh (1996) trace the influence of the church on the development of the film industry. These histories examine how from the First World War onwards, clerics, lay Catholics, and eventually the church itself launching the Legion of Decency, worked to draw up and impose a production code on the industry, thereby curbing what these guardians of morality saw as the excessive sex and violence of the movies. Under the auspices of Will Hays, a Presbyterian, and president of the industry's trade association, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), and based upon a code drawn up by Jesuit priest Daniel Lord with the help of Martin Quigley, the lay Catholic proprietor of the *Motion Picture Herald*, the

leading trade journal, the Production Code Administration (PCA) was set up in 1934. Directed by another lay Catholic, Joseph Breen, the PCA gained total control over movie content, surveying scripts and directly influencing what ended up on screen. Although the Lord-Quigley code was comprehensive in its coverage of what was and was not permissible on screen, much scorn was directed at the code's predictable concern with sex. Still, the power of the PCA was based ultimately in economics, the ultimate sanction in Hollywood, and the threat of Catholic boycotts in the most lucrative markets, the big cities. Hence, the code stuck. The result was that from 1934 onwards films without a PCA stamp of approval could not be shown in any major American movie theatre.

Whilst the story told in Black's and Walsh's empirical studies is an important one, one might reasonably complain that neither book really takes on the theoretical issues raised by the history of Catholic involvement in censoring the movies. What motivated certain Catholics, both individually and collectively, to campaign for a production code? Taking up a classical liberal standpoint with regard to freedom of expression, both Black and Walsh appear to argue that imposition of the production code led to movies of poorer quality. This is open to argument and some degree of revision. Many of the films made within the system as it evolved are still regarded as classics. More significantly perhaps, Walsh and Black would seem to have ignored the possibility that the pressure to censor was based less in Catholic 'puritanism' than in doctrine and a development of ecclesial strategy. With regard to doctrine, Ted Jelen (1996: 48-49) explains that the Catholic church has always been willing to censor because it 'is not committed to *intellectual freedom* as that term is conventionally understood'. Elaborating the point he writes that

In contrast to the classical liberal model of free expression, Catholic doctrine regards human reason as readily corruptible and, therefore, a suspect, if necessary means by which the faithful can discern truth. By virtue of its special status with Christ, the church seeks to provide guidance for people attempting to make intelligent and moral choices about the information and media to which they pay attention....[T]he primary function of the church is a *teaching* responsibility, through which people can

internalize the norms of Catholic natural law doctrine and...apply God-ordained law to themselves.

Indeed, scholars of religion from Durkheim (1915) onwards have come to recognize the significance of boundaries between what is deemed permissible and what is not in the structuring of individual experience and the maintenance of collective social life (e.g. Douglas, 1966). Hence, there emerges the possibility at least, that alongside its defence of a conventional public morality, American Catholicism's involvement in censorship and its assertion of authority over the film industry was also part of a more strategic renegotiation of the Church's place and function in an increasingly secular society.

These broader possibilities are tackled in an anthology on the history of *Movie Censorship and American Culture* edited by Francis G. Couvares (1996a). Whilst it covers a period from the very beginnings of American cinema, through to the early nineties, the book is not content merely to recount history, but builds on it to theorize the deeper significance of movie censorship. Instead of treating censorship as an individual or collective act of defining and/or prohibiting the 'indecent' and 'immoral', Couvares introduces the collection by arguing for a perspective on censorship which sees it as a loose set of processes whence a society's values and understanding of reality are created. Based on a recognition that 'determining what is legitimate to say, hear and see...is a central activity of all societies and social groups', Couvares (1996a: 12) argues that battles over the censorship of motion pictures are part of 'a complex and continuing social drama in which the parties in conflict engage, albeit in different ways, fundamental questions about how to live in a modern, capitalist, democratic, and plural society'.

With regard to present concerns, what is refreshing about the poststructuralist framework articulated by Couvares, is that there is a genuine attempt within it to understand the religious background to movie censorship as something more than a simple top-down exercise of hegemony. For example, Charles Musser (1996) describes how films based on the Passion Play of Oberammergau, a number of

which emerged in the first few years of the cinema, were lauded by members of the Protestant clergy who saw evangelical potential in the new medium. This helped, within a decade of the medium's emergence, to subvert traditional Protestant objections to religious subject matter on the theatrical stage. The result was that by 1904 productions of the passion play were being mounted across America.

By Musser's (1996: 65) account, the gradual abandonment by Protestant clergy of the view that dramatization of the passion was sacrilegious, 'underscores the ways in which a new mode of representation such as the cinema can alter and destabilize not only specific cultural forms of which they are a part...but the broader cultural landscape'. Indeed, Musser's piece carries implications of substantial interest to scholars examining the 'commodification' of religion. Citing Walter Benjamin's famous essay on 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', 'which noted that all art had its basis in religious ritual, the location of its original use value', Musser (1996: 65-66) argues that

Cinema did much to disrupt the relationship between religion and certain cultural practices....First photography and then cinematography... 'emancipate[d] the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual,' resulting in the 'liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.' The fight over the passion play in nineteenth-century America was precisely a fight over its ritual significance. Evangelical Protestants refused to accept the Passion as a suitable subject for dramatic treatment, concerned that what Benjamin would have called its 'aura' or 'authenticity' would be blasphemized. As reproductions of a religious-based ritual, these films freed the passion play from the weight of tradition and soon enabled it to function both in the artistic sphere and beyond it. It allowed avatars of urban commercial popular culture to appropriate a subject that had previously resisted easy incorporation into a capitalist economy and modern culture.

As Musser goes on to admit, the rapid expansion of the film industry from 1905 soon led to a resurgence of Protestant suspicion with regard to the morality of the movies (see Chapter Five). Nevertheless, his analysis is a provocative one in terms of media, religion, and culture, in so far as it signals the cinema as integral to the

process of modernization which was then uprooting American national culture from its traditional Protestant bases.

For Couvares (1996a), the cultural instability which accompanied the growth of the movie industry necessitates a far more nuanced and subtle understanding of what was at stake in the debates over movie censorship than either a classical liberal (Black 1994, Walsh 1996) or perhaps marxist standpoint would allow. While the medium of film was widely recognized as powerful, Couvares (1996a: 2-3) suggests 'that the Dream Machine was not quite the Hegemony Machine'. Because Hollywood did not control the context within which movies were consumed, the industry 'fully controlled neither the meaning nor the effect of that consumption (1996a: 3). Hence, Couvares (1996a: 5) writes that politicians, reformers, and clergy critical of Hollywood, were less concerned with halting the industry's development than with 'coming to terms with the most popular medium of communication and persuasion in their world and thereby securing their own cultural authority and political power'. In short, calls for censorship were about more than just control of the movies.

This point is well illustrated by Couvares' (1996b) own piece on the role of the Catholic church and its changing relationship with the industry prior to the institutionalization of the Production Code. Couvares sets out to address 'the unanswered question' articulated by Garth Jowett (1976: 247) as to 'why...the Catholic Church suddenly decided to bring its massive influence to bear on the problem of motion picture immorality.' In fact, he argues

that the encounter of church and movie industry was...less a struggle than a mutual embrace, motivated by an urge on the part of both movie moguls and Catholic clerical and lay leaders to defend their institutional interests and achieve respectability and cultural authority in twentieth-century America. (1996b: 129)

Opening out the historical perspective, Couvares (1996b: 129-30) suggests that the American film industry's problems with censorship and boycotts were but part of a

more extensive '*Kulturkampf*' which lasted roughly from the 1870s up to the Second World War:

In that cultural struggle, the social accompaniments of industrialization—immigration and ethnic conflict; urbanization and the rise of commercial “mass culture”—set off a series of skirmishes over public morality that pitted native against stranger, Protestant against Catholic, Christian against Jew, “modernist” against “fundamentalist,” small town against city, and at one time or another, most of these groups against the “merchants of leisure,” who seemed capable of subverting the moral lessons of family, church, and tradition.

Hence, the Catholic Legion of Decency's defence, in 1934, of 'American values' against the 'alien' threat coming from Hollywood was but a variation of an old theme. As Couvares (1996b: 130) summarizes, 'in trying to control the content of movies from the 1910s to the 1930s, critics and moviemakers entered an essentially political contest over the locus of cultural authority in the modern United States'.

What Couvares recognizes is that many of the reasons for Catholic involvement in the censorship debate and their success in forcing the studios to accede to the strictures of the Production Code came from the complex dynamics of American religion. At a time when Protestant America was increasingly riven between the poles of liberalism and fundamentalism, a range of opinions which made it difficult to ascertain where mainstream morality lay, Catholicism represented a united front with regard to issues of morality. A new generation of Catholics, anxious to distance themselves from the latest wave of immigrants and prove themselves respectable Americans, provided a base from which clerics and lay intellectuals, confident in the moral certainties furnished by church doctrine and natural law, could presume to speak on behalf of not only other Catholics but the nation as a whole. As Couvares (1996b: 151) points out, the Catholic charge 'that secularized Protestant Americans had lost touch with their own roots, particularly with the natural-law tradition that had produced the nation's founding documents', set 'the tone for the anticommunist conservatism that would flourish in the post-World War II period'. Yet, this moral fundamentalism had its attractions for the film industry, as

Catholics were firmly opposed to Federal or state control of the movies. Outside of the big cities, anti-Catholicism flourished, ensuring the failure of Democrat presidential candidate Al Smith in the election of 1928, and the continued imposition of Prohibition, a distinctly anti-Catholic measure. Recognizing the limits of their influence, therefore, Catholics campaigned, 'in terms nearly identical to those employed by Will Hays and the studio moguls' (1996b: 143) for self-regulation of the film industry rather than state censorship.

By the 1950s, sociologist Will Herberg (1960: 258) was led to observe that Catholics and Jews were as much a part of mainstream America as Protestants, something 'quite unprecedented in our history', and a state of affairs confirmed by Kennedy's election to the White House at the end of the decade. How far this is due to the influence of motion pictures in reshaping popular conceptions of what 'Americanness' entailed is an open question, but not an entirely fanciful one. If we view the Code as an important determinant of what Americans saw on their screens over the next couple of decades, then one might suggest that its imposition in 1934 marked an crucial moment in the history of American religion as well the history of American film and popular culture, for it emerged from Catholic efforts to refashion the United States in their own image. As Couvares (1996b: 152) notes, 'the struggle over movie censorship responded to an important shift in the internal organization of Protestant and Catholic communities and in the relative power of each within the American polity'. From 1934 onwards, Hollywood's output was, in its way, a monument to that shift.

Religion and the History of American Cinema

To scholars working to develop the evolving paradigm, Couvares' collection is a useful reminder that the interrelationship between media, religion, and culture is a ever-changing process with a long, complex, and sometimes surprising history, at the heart of which lie debates concerning the value and relative legitimacy of different forms of representation. Sadly, his nuanced understanding of American

religion is unusual in the context of writing about film, including film history. For instance, Robert Sklar's (1975) landmark *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* is prefaced with 'a recognition that movies have historically been and still remain vital components in the network of cultural communication, and the nature of their content and control helps to shape the character and direction of American culture as a whole' (1975: vi). Something, one need hardly point out, they share with the churches. Sklar (1975: vi) even acknowledges religious identities as having shaping the exercise of cultural power by and within the industry. Yet, there is no discussion of this aside from a few cursory and predictable references to clergymen associating them with a middle-class hostile to what Sklar, a marxist, regards as the working-class roots of the medium. While film history has moved on over the last two-and-a-half decades, a crude and under-theorized view of religion in America as little more than an instrument of middle-class hegemony has persisted, even in work which, in other respects, honours the complexity of American culture.

It is not the case, however, that considerations of religion are entirely absent from the historiography of American film. For instance, Garth Jowett's (1976) still standard social history of cinema in the United States, *The Democratic Art*, acknowledges the importance of the creeping secularization of America which took place in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Jowett (1976: 35) points out that the gradual loosening of traditional Protestant strictures against theatrical entertainments helped create the conditions from which an audience for the movies might emerge. The new urban popular culture which spawned motion pictures and other forms of recreation such as the phonograph, the penny arcade, and the amusement park were, for Jowett, part of a major social and cultural reorientation in response to the challenge of modernization. Thus Jowett (1975: 35) writes, that 'as church restrictions were relaxed, informally at first, then later by popular assent, more and more Americans began seeking new diversions, with the major criteria being moral acceptability, accessibility and low cost'. The film industry proved well suited to these conditions.

In a similar vein, Lary May's (1983) *Screening Out the Past* argues that the movies were key to 'a revolution in morals' (1983: xiv *et passim*) which brought about 'a profound alteration in American identity...at the turn of the century....helping to foster the shift from a producer's to a consumer's democracy' (1983: viii). May's thesis is clearly of some relevance to the broader discussion of commodification in relation to media, religion, and the culture, and, unusually for film history, does take account of religion as an influence on the development of the medium. Yet, in line with his somewhat 'top-down' view that dominant social groups controlled the movies from early on, May's notion of religion is limited to its emblematic significance within a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant hegemony. One cannot ignore that aspect of American religion, but it is far from being the whole story. In his relatively brief (given their importance) discussion of the Jews of Hollywood (1983: 167-99), for example, May merely suggests that 'as immigrants with bourgeois values the Jewish moguls were ideal middle men for realizing a fusion of styles' (1983: 175) which could take up and develop the consumerist trends initiated by the traditional social elite of America.

Religion in the History of Early and Silent Cinema

Both Jowett and May indicate the importance of religion within the broader social process out of which the movies and mass culture emerged. Confirming Hoover and Venturelli's point about religion being a 'blindspot' within media theory, however, the theoretical implications of secularization have yet to be fully explored within film scholarship. Aside from the issue of censorship and the history of the Production Code, it is only within the flourishing field of early and silent cinema history that the category of religion even begins to impinge on the mainstream of film studies.

Certainly, the moral concerns expressed by religious organizations with regard to motion pictures once the Nickelodeons had arrived, the various and often contradictory attitudes of clergy towards the medium, and their involvements with the so-called 'uplift movement', have been well documented in histories of the American

cinema from Terry Ramsaye's (1926) *A Million and One Nights* onwards. As one might expect, the upheavals brought on by immigration, industrialization, urbanization, the development of communications technologies, and the rising authority of a positivist scientific worldview were accompanied by religious change. That motion pictures should have emerged as a mass medium at such a time indicates that the relationship between religion and film, while complex, was also at its most fluid and 'open' during this formative period, and perhaps most amenable to historical examination and theoretical explication in the present. This view informs the rest of the study. Indeed, the religious and cultural background to the so-called Progressive Era, as well as the moral and other pressures brought to bear on the film industry of the time by the churches and other reformers are discussed at some length below in Chapter Five. What is worth stressing for current purposes, however, is that within writing on pre-Hollywood American film, the treatment of religion has only rarely moved beyond an attention to the clergy's social role as guardians of public morality.

The most significant work on religion and silent film is to be found in *An Invention of the Devil? Religion and Early Cinema* (Cosandey *et al*, 1992), a volume of proceedings from a conference on the topic held in Québec in 1990. As one might perhaps expect from specialist scholars of film, *An Invention of the Devil?* offers little theoretical interrogation of what 'religion' means and the term is used throughout the collection in its organized, institutional sense. Yet, despite this, and the international scope of the subject matter, the book does contain observations of relevance here.

In their preface, the editors note that the starting point of the conference was an acknowledgement of certain intersections between organized religion and early cinema. Most obvious of these is the fact that many early films were based upon religious materials, be they sacred texts or contemporary stories with religious themes. As has already been indicated, moreover, religious institutions were often the originating sources for much of the early discourse about the social role of the cinema. In conjunction with a format in which relevant films were screened and

academic papers given, these basic observations led the conference to realize that the topic of religion and early cinema allowed a continuous circulation 'between issues of text and context, from the films and their interior configurations of narrative or formal composition to the larger discourses which sought to understand, define or even repress the production and reception of these films' (1992: xx). Thus Cosandey *et al* (1992: xx-xxi) report that participants, 'often during the discussion between presentations', made 'links between the various formal characteristics of filmic discourse evident in the films themselves and the way organized religion provided a discourse which sought to define cinema's place within society'.

Interestingly, a comparison of some of the papers on religious policies regarding censorship reveals that religious attitudes and actions were often determined by national context, even where the institutional framework, e.g. Catholicism, was held in common. Thus in Spain and French Canada the Catholic Church rejected the new medium, while in other locations such as Belgium, France, and Italy, the church was far more supportive of moves to mobilize the power of motion pictures for pastoral purposes (Cosandey *et al* 1992: xxi). As will be elaborated further below, this sort of ambivalence also characterized the reaction of religious groups, largely Protestant, towards the medium in America in its first decades. What Janet Staiger (1992b: 355) notes in her concluding remarks is that such divergent responses were often prompted by the internationalization of film distribution, and the violation of national norms by foreign products, making it difficult for a nation's religious organizations to control film content. Given the various sorts of relations between church and state, differences in approach to this problem were inevitable. On that basis, Staiger (1992b: 355) hypothesizes that 'as long as control of the content of films was in local hands, the church was not disturbed; once control moved to distant sources, concerns developed from differences in norms'. An interesting implication Staiger (1992b: 355) draws from this suggestion, and one which anticipates the basic position of scholars addressing media, religion, and culture as 'an interrelated web in society', is 'that the apparent separation of Church

and State, of religion and secular life, is a false opposition'. This provocative comment is, however, as close as the contributors to *An Invention of the Devil?* or indeed, any other scholars from the mainstream of film studies, come to reconsidering the theoretical implications of categorizing religion in traditional institutional terms.

That said, several contributors to the proceedings indicate areas where filmic practices, particularly those in America were shaped by religious considerations. Thus, Charles Keil's (1992) examination of Kalem's *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912) prompts an observation that an attitude of reverence towards the subject of such New Testament narratives, i.e. Christ, resulted in the 'stylistic retardation' of this and other similar films, relative to the general formal development of American motion pictures which took place in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Keil (1992: 112) writes that although this film was made in 1912, it presents the life of Christ as a series of virtually autonomous tableaux and all but 'eschews any inter or intra-scene editing, varies its camera position but little and moves the camera less, and maintains a fairly persistent medium long shot scale throughout'. This contrasts sharply with the practices of many filmmakers of the time who had by the early teens already discovered the use of techniques such as the close-up, for instance, as a means to invest characters with a psychological dimension. Keil (1992: 114) explains this 'retarded' style by acknowledging that if, as was then (and in America, still) common, one accepts 'the sacred nature of Christ's existence...the very notion of conceiving of Christ in terms of a psychologically-based characterization is problematic'. Citing Frank Kermode's commentary on narrative in portions of the New Testament, Keil (1992: 115) suggests that the style of *From the Manger to the Cross* is similar to the stories of Christ found in the Bible because it lacks "plot—the fulfillment of narrative promise, the insistence on cause and regulated sequence". Keil (1992: 115-16) argues that Kalem's strategy in making the film in this way was determined by a desire to depict the Christ story as history and a belief that such an approach might avoid the pitfalls of interpretation, and the necessity of taking a

particular hermeneutic position. Whilst Keil does not develop the point with regard to the religious context of America in the early twentieth century, it is tempting to suggest that the adoption of such an 'open' style was a deliberate response to the growing divisions between the liberal and conservative strands of American Protestantism.

Far less conservative, at least in terms of technique, were the editing practices of D.W. Griffith. For Adam Knee (1992), the way Griffith developed certain formal techniques during his time at the Biograph company, particularly his characteristic use of crosscutting, articulated a distinctively religious and spiritual worldview. Discussing several pictures from this period, Knee (1992: 319) argues that in these films,

editing and narrative structure function to imbue the diegetic universe of these films with an inescapable moral order, suggesting the ultimate control of an all-knowing deity....Characters can evade neither their interconnectedness nor their moral obligations toward one another, and those neglecting such obligations inevitably suffer through the intervention of the eternal mechanism which seems to regulate all lives in Griffith's universe.

This is not, however, to reduce the editing practices Griffith was associated with to the director's religiosity. As Knee himself (1992: 319) acknowledges, there are a wide range of functions to crosscutting;

from representing simultaneously occurring events and efficiently forwarding the narrative line (or impeding the narrative for suspense) to making socially-oriented comparisons and suggesting character point of view, and these numerous functions are undoubtedly shaped by a wide range of overlapping ideological, economic, and technological determinants.

Nevertheless, as Knee (1992: 323-25) demonstrates in his discussion of, for example, *The Golden Louis* (1909), Griffith's crosscutting relies upon a 'kind of cosmic logic' so that it might be reconciled with diegetic reality.⁵ Thus Knee (1992:

⁵ In *The Golden Louis*, the protagonist, a gambler, envisages and responds to the unease, in an entirely separate location, of a sleeping beggar girl from whom he has, unbeknownst to her, borrowed a gold coin as a stake. He returns to share his winnings with her but too late to save her from a death which might have been prevented had she had some money to hand.

325) suggests a further function for the technique; 'to imply spiritual connections between characters as well as physical, emotional, and economic ones'.

What follows from Knee's thesis, and is further supported by the popularity of Griffith's pictures upon release, is that the religious worldview articulated by the director would have appeared quite normal to large sections of the contemporary movie-going public. It might even be the case that elements of popular religiosity provided important ideological bases for the development of such editing techniques in commercial cinema. Yet, if Griffith's and other filmmakers' innovations were, in some sense, reliant upon existing religious attitudes, they were also changing them by translating them into a new form, the motion picture narrative. As we have seen from Keil's (1992) discussion of *From the Manger to the Cross*, traditional Biblical stories were not that easy to incorporate within the evolving medium of film. Giving a particular visual form, moreover, to a set of beliefs ostensibly based in the Word, would alter the way people related to those beliefs and, by extension, the beliefs themselves, as well as the social relations predicated upon those beliefs.

Whilst evidence of how particular audiences reacted to the religious aspects of movies in the silent era is scant, some discussion of the relationship between religion and reception is provided by Steven Higgins' (1992) paper on Thomas H. Ince's 1916 production of *Civilization*. At a time in which American public debate was dominated by the possibility of joining the war in Europe, *Civilization* articulated the non-interventionist pacifist position in explicitly Christian terms. Given the widespread support for the peace movement at the time, such a project would have had considerable commercial potential. Indeed, Higgins (1992: 339) describes how the film used images of Christ and the Cross in taking up the rhetorical stance of the Woman's Peace Party who had recast the arguments for peace 'in absolute terms: war's total abolition, the complete reeducation of humanity to peace, and the recognition of women's rightful place in effecting these changes'. Such a moral position did not harm the film's box-office appeal, although, as Higgins (1992: 341) points out, film historians have 'uniformly treated it with disdain, even ridicule'. He

cites Kevin Brownlow's evaluation of it as 'simple-minded' and the latter's claim that the 'undeniable impact on audiences of the time now seems baffling.' Higgins rejects this sort of assessment, however. He recognizes that not only is the film that has survived missing around an hour of footage, but that the numerous allusions to Christ and the Bible contained in it would have been readily understood and absorbed by audiences of the time (1992: 339). Arguing against the critical dismissal of the picture, Higgins (1992: 341), develops a far more subtle interpretation of those elements which most jar our contemporary and apparently more 'secular' sensibilities, and suggests that the growing inevitability of American involvement in the war in Europe would have made the notion of 'divine intervention' to 'stop the slaughter' an attractive one to audiences seeking hope. Thus Higgins suggests that the impact of the film was "undeniable" not because it was retrogressive or "simple-minded" but because 'it mirrored what seemed to many the least cynical, most progressive elements of their society'.

While not blind to the potential for exploiting religious beliefs in commercial film-making, Higgins' perspective on religion is unusual in the context of mainstream film scholarship in so far as it allows religious ideas and images a wider set of social functions than the mere reproduction of existing hierarchies. He does not ignore the positive, expressive, even subversive potential of religious symbols. That said, the use of religion in American silent cinema was, often enough, a rhetorical means to align the industry with the more respectable and powerful institutions in society such as churches and schools. While some reformers saw the movies as a threat to social order, others believed it might be a tool of moral and social uplift.

For Peter Kramer (1992), this latter tendency found expression in numerous 'screen sermons'. Instead of attempting to bring biblical history to life as many films still did, these 'religious films' drew on more contemporary subject matter in order to teach a moral lesson, as in, for example, *A Drunkard's Reformation*, directed by D.W. Griffith for Biograph in 1909. Whilst supernatural elements were often, though not always, a feature of such pictures, Kramer draws attention to the way these

'sermons' drew on the developing techniques of film-makers, emphasizing individual psychology and constructing an implicit audience for these films. Discussing the Biograph company's promotional bulletins for their contributions to this 'genre', Kramer (1992: 190-91) writes that while they acknowledged that conversion was based primarily on language and the Word, the bulletins posited film as capable of achieving the same effect:

The audience's relation to the screen was argued to equal that of the convert to the agent of his or her conversion: the minister, the saintly mother or the Bible itself....These Biograph films made after 1907 foregrounded the theme of moral renewal by presenting stories of individuals being transformed through encounters with agents of the divine. The bulletins clearly stated the company's intention to present the transformed character as an object of identification for the spectator, and the transformation of this character as a model for the audience's spiritual renewal through the cinema.

Griffith's role as the leading director at Biograph, and his own input into this sermonizing cinema is touched upon below. What is intriguing about Kramer's discussion here though is the linkage between developments in technique and broader religious concerns. Thus although Kramer fails to develop the point, Janet Staiger, who was herself 'raised in a strong Presbyterian environment' and 'spent several years as a fundamentalist protestant' (1992b: 353) recognizes some of the implications of Kramer's thesis. Drawing further attention to the question of national origins and their relation to the practices of filmmakers, She asks:

does it matter that the U.S. was a predominately protestant country?...In the protestant religion, reformation and conversion are central religious experiences. Are Protestant theologies more suitable to psychologically motivated filmmaking? To narrative climaxes and coherence? Is this perhaps a factor in why American films were early to emphasize individual character actions? (1992b: 357-58)

One might also enquire, what impact did the translation of ideas based in the verbal authority of the Bible into motion pictures, the dominant medium of American Culture for much of the twentieth century, have on the nation's religious environment? Does the formal distinction between religion and the cinema help or hinder our attempts to understand the deeper cultural significance of the medium's development?

Kramer himself refers to the work of William Uricchio and Roberta E. Pearson, whose paper on the Vitagraph company's 1910 five-reel production of *The Life of Moses* (1992), included in *An Invention of the Devil?*, is expanded and incorporated into their book *Reframing Culture* (1993). There, Uricchio and Pearson relate text to context in order to examine the cultural significance of the so-called 'quality films' or 'films deluxe', based on literary, historical, and biblical texts, produced by Vitagraph between 1907 and 1910. The subject matter of these movies ranged from the work of Dante and Shakespeare (*Julius Caesar* shortened to a mere half an hour!), biographies of Napoleon and Washington, through to Moses. From a cultural studies perspective which draws on Antonio Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony, and Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) conception of cultural capital, as well as developments in reception studies (e.g. Morley, 1980; Radway, 1984; Ang, 1985; Staiger, 1992a), Uricchio and Pearson (1993: 5) use intertextual evidence to examine not the films themselves but what they reveal about an historically specific 'interface between film and culture'. Whilst they note that these 'high-art films...constituted a relatively small (though highly publicized) component of the industry's output', Uricchio and Pearson (1993: 5) contend that, a time of widespread concern regarding the social impact of movies, 'they represented one of the most visible markers of the film industry's desire to improve its cultural status, explicitly invoking "high" culture referents but offering them in a "low" culture venue, the moving picture shows'. Moreover, while these films represent 'the clearest instance of the film industry's deliberate attempt to upgrade perceptions of the medium among key authorized interpretive communities and institutions of cultural reproduction' (1993: 195-96), the films were designed in a way so as not to alienate the existing audiences, perceived as predominantly working-class and immigrant, which those dominant social groups were so concerned about.

With regard to *The Life of Moses*, Uricchio and Pearson (1993: 161) suggest that the producers probably calculated that Moses was a subject which 'would appeal to the broadest possible audience, while alienating as few viewers as

possible,...a Moses film, unlike a Christ film, would appeal to Jews as well as Christians'. Furthermore, while *Moses* was, like the other 'quality films', designed to improve the cultural status of motion pictures overall, as a 'biblical', it was especially well suited to dealing with the most vociferous opponents of the industry, the clergy, and thus counter the threat of closing movie houses on Sundays, the most profitable day of the week (1993: 165). Despite such advantages for the producers, however, Uricchio and Pearson argue that such a project was also fraught with difficulties.

Mindful of possible objections to the cinematic representation of biblical figures such as Moses, Vitagraph appointed as special consultant to the project, the Reverend Madison C. Peters, who, having abandoned institutional affiliations, dubbed himself 'The People's Preacher'. It was Peters' job to ensure a suitably reverential treatment of the great Hebrew law-giver. Nevertheless, Peters' belief in the literalness of the Bible was not shared by all the various interpretive communities Vitagraph hoped to please. As Uricchio and Pearson (1993: 173-87) recognize, from the mid-to-late nineteenth century onwards American religious life had become increasingly riven by arguments between liberal and fundamentalist theologians, both Jewish and Christian, and a polarization of positions with regard to the 'truth' of scripture. In that context, the depiction of divine intervention in the natural order, as with the parting of the Red Sea, was, potentially at least, a highly controversial issue. Hence, with both the film and its promotional materials, the studio had to take great care in accommodating what Uricchio and Pearson (1993: 193) term 'the discourses of the natural and the supernatural', so that *The Life of Moses* did not further inflame the fierce debates taking place between fundamentalists and liberals, and thus avoid alienating various constituencies within the broader cultural elite Vitagraph evidently sought to placate. Overall, Uricchio and Pearson suggest, *Moses* was more closely allied to the fundamentalist perspective. Nevertheless, Vitagraph promoted the film by drawing attention to the film's supposed accuracy in terms of natural history and its staging of spectacular miracles, despite the inherent theological contradictions of such strategy.

Uricchio and Pearson (1993: 187-92) further emphasize the potential divisiveness of filming *The Life of Moses*, by highlighting the multivalent understandings of Moses which existed in early-twentieth century America. Most obviously, perhaps, Moses the lawgiver would have represented an attractive symbol of stability and order at a time of rapid social change in America, not least because Mosaic law furnishes the basis of US civil law. Indeed, as the epitome of Judeo-Christian morality, the figure of Moses was even better suited than George Washington to mobilize the pre-existing religious beliefs of immigrants in the service of the American way, and thus bolster the existing status quo. Yet, Moses might also be appropriated in ways the filmmakers would have been keen to play down. What of the seventh commandment, to 'Remember the Sabbath'? Emphasizing this would have flown in the face of one of the key motives for the project, to defend Sunday movie-house opening. More radically, the Mosaic code also carried challenges to the social order of the 'Promised Land' in the form of economic legislation and land reform. Left-leaning critics of the social order invoked Moses as an ally as they sought to redress the unequal distribution of resources in the 'New Israel'. The response of Vitagraph to the various possible appropriations of Moses was to elide 'those aspects of the Pentateuch seized on by reactionaries and radicals', and 'avoid partisan controversy primarily through omission, for example, by not showing Moses mandating land redistribution' (1993: 192).

While there is little direct evidence of the reception of the film, Uricchio and Pearson (1993: 193-94) comment that *The Life of Moses* is

perhaps the clearest example of the dangers to be avoided and benefits to be gained by appropriating a revered cultural figure for presentation in the low cultural venue of the nickelodeon. Through its strategy of carefully positioning itself with regard to other cultural producers, evident in the studio's employment of the Reverend Peters and the care it took to accommodate...the discourses of the natural and the supernatural, Vitagraph placated its most vociferous opponents. Although the particularly vexed nature of religion—as an institution of cultural reproduction that brooked little dissent—potentially rendered any cinematic incarnation of Moses more offensive than that of a literary or historical

figure, such an endeavor also offered the opportunity to garner more praise. A carefully mounted film would appeal not only to those preachers damning the new medium but also to a much broader spectrum of the population, given the absolute centrality of Moses in a Judeo-Christian culture.

Uricchio and Pearson's concluding remarks on the picture are reproduced at length here because they reveal both the benefits and potential pitfalls of developing this line of enquiry. Recognizing the wide-ranging significance of religion in the United States furnishes Uricchio and Pearson a means to engage with the complexities and subtleties of the broader cultural concerns which shaped the development of the American film industry. Indeed, their useful and provocative intertextual methodology is designed to highlight 'the sole remaining traces of an ongoing contestation of dominant interpretations and modes of representation (1993: 199). However, as the conclusion of what is probably, thus far at least, the most developed piece of work analysing the historical relationship between religion and film, the crude theorizing of 'religion—as an institution of cultural reproduction that brooked little dissent' is disappointing, if somewhat predictable within the context of film studies as a whole.

Although they suggest that 'paradoxically, engagements with cultural texts or figures that permitted a very wide range of interpretations and modes of representation also served to reinforce the hegemonic order' (1993: 198), Uricchio and Pearson do not apply the implications of this statement to American religion. Moses, they would appear to suggest, was subject to multivalent appropriations, *in spite* of rather than because of his religious significance. Yet, as Chapter Three will discuss in more depth, the most obvious feature of American religion is probably its diversity, the significance attached to difference. What Uricchio and Pearson ignore is the potential of religious discourse in America to accommodate dissent and expressivity in a society in which prevailing values are so powerful that 'existing economic and political arrangements frequently appear not merely as the best possible arrangements but as the only possible ones' (Katznelson and Kesselman,

1987: 29). As Robert Bellah *et al* (1985) argue, religion has long been a 'second language' via which Americans might articulate differing visions of what their nation is and could be. Such theoretical perspectives, based as they are in the study of American religion, have made no impact upon film studies. If film scholars are to grasp the meanings attached to religion in relation to American film culture therefore, there is need for them to develop a theoretical understanding of the particular character of American religion which moves beyond a crude association of it with an existing hegemonic order to one which facilitates an engagement with the rich vitality of American religious life.

Religious Film Writing

So far, the main aim of this review of existing writing on film and religion, has been to highlight the somewhat scattered but, nonetheless, quite extensive evidence indicating the importance of religion in shaping the development of the American film industry and its role within the national culture. Whilst useful, however, the scholarship in this area emanating from film studies does not fully engage with the theoretical issues raised by the unique characteristics of American religion. We now turn our attentions toward a literature, ignored within the mainstream of film studies, but which nonetheless has been steadily growing from the end of the sixties onwards, explicitly addressed to the religious aspects of the cinema; a body of writing Steve Nolan (1998) has labelled 'religious film-analysis'. It might be thought that writing on the cinema which takes as its starting point a serious interest in religion would have addressed many of the issues largely ignored within orthodox film scholarship. This is not the case. Indeed, the history of the relationship between religion and film within American culture has been largely ignored by scholars from the broad field of religious studies.

Theology at the Movies

Like the early writing on media and religion discussed briefly in Chapter One,

religious film-analysis emerged out of Christian (predominantly Catholic) responses to contemporary culture and its challenge to faith and the churches. Prompted by the drift away from institutional religion, and the emergence of a dissenting youth culture, American writers such as James Wall (1970, 1971) and Neil Hurley (1970, 1978) looked for theological inspiration in the cinema. The movies, they held, offered authentic religious experience, transcendence even, whilst simultaneously engaging with the problems of contemporary culture. Influenced heavily by the *auteur* theory (e.g. Sarris 1962, 1968) already being abandoned by mainstream film studies, their methodology was orientated towards the interpretation, from a Christian perspective, of films largely selected on the basis of quality, i.e. 'art' films, many of them European, which during the sixties and early seventies had garnered a substantial audience.

For example, James Wall (1970: 57) argued that the once-successful genre of the Biblical Epic, that is, films which drew on the shared knowledge and religious presuppositions of the audience, were in fact less 'religious' than what he regarded as a new kind of film which can 'be considered religious to the extent that it speaks to the human situation with the authenticity shared by the individual appraising his own religious understanding of life'. Citing examples such as *The Pawnbroker* (1964, d. Sidney Lumet), *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1966, d. Mike Nichols), and *Blow-Up* (1966, d. Michelangelo Antonioni), he contrasts the success of these movies with the box-office 'flop' of the more traditionally 'religious' Biblical epic, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965, d. George Stevens). Clearly, this sort of approach is not without resonance for scholars of media, religion, and culture who might suggest that 'religion...is not limited to what happens in a 'sacred' realm, traditionally conceived, but is that part of culture that persuasively presents a plausible myth of the ordering of existence' (Clark and Hoover, 1996). Yet, Wall's formula is by no means as 'open' to the notion of religious change and innovation as it might at first appear.

Indicative of the limitations which this strand of writing on film imposed on itself, Wall (1970: 59) sought to justify analysing these films from a Christian

standpoint. Answering his own question as to 'what is unique about the Christian's approach to a film if he is to consider it under the same ground rules as the non-Christian', Wall (1970: 59) wrote that while personal background and history obviously affects one's view of a film 'the Christian, to one degree or another, approaches all experiences out of a particular history he shares with other Christians'; one founded upon the New Testament account of 'the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ'. Acknowledging that this perspective affects one's view of humanity, and thus of films, is fair enough perhaps. But Wall (1970: 59) goes on to argue that in terms of values such as 'the dignity of man, the beauty of human relationships, and the loyalty to a cause [etc.]...our common Christian history has already become the hidden agenda of modern society'. The cinema thus comes to be seen by Wall, Hurley, and others (e.g. Ferlita and May, 1976; Holloway, 1977; May and Bird, 1982; May, 1991; Marsh and Ortiz, 1997) as a locus of religious meaning analogous to more traditional and authoritative Christian sources such as the Bible.⁶ What, though, do approaches to film grounded in theology have to offer those with no commitment to Christianity?

For John May (1982), perhaps the most prominent figure in this field, discussion of religion and film developed out of an interest in theology and literature. Concerned to emphasize the autonomy of film with regard to the concerns of faith, May (1982: 26) argues that 'any discussion of the religious or sectarian dimension of cinema ought to be confined, as far as possible, to the language of film itself. The critic's task is to discover the cinematic analogue of the religious or sectarian question'. Treating film in terms of 'visual story', he draws on a 'theology of story' developed by John Dominic Crossan, in which myth and parable are understood to represent the polar extremes of story, and 'the principal types of story that express religious self-understanding the world over' (May 1982: 33). Within this typology,

⁶ Whilst it claims no denominational affiliation, further and more contemporary discussion of this sort are available online at *The Journal of Religion and Film* (<http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/>).

'Myth...establishes world, whereas parable subverts it' (May, 1982: 32). Yet, although notions of myth and parable might not be entirely inappropriate to the study of films, the problem with such an approach is that it assumes the locus of meaning to be the film itself rather than something created in the experience of viewing the film: one man's myth could well be another woman's parable. Typical, until fairly recently at least, of virtually all the writing of this ilk, May ignores the social context of cinema. Moreover, whilst May's emphasis on film in terms of 'visual story' would appear to have preceded a resurgence of interest in specifically cinematic forms of narration (e.g. Bordwell, 1985a; Branigan, 1992), his work is, in fact, rooted in traditional literary theory. As Steve Nolan (1998: 4) comments,

film is not literature – literary theory does not deal with the operations of the medium on the subject, and is not as sympathetic to film as May allows....and his conception of film as 'visual story' entirely misses the specific operations of film as experience.

Later work by May (1991) and his collaborators is much more explicit about the Judeo-Christian framework within which their quest for cinematic analogues to religious concerns takes place. Yet, as Nolan (1998: 5) writes, for those who do not share such a framework May's work betrays a 'short-sightedness about the already committed nature of analogy, namely, it is necessary to believe first in order to see'.

In his useful critical survey of this literature, Nolan (1998: 11) highlights 'the already committed nature of analogy' as the most serious problem associated with this particular body of film writing. Tending to avoid movies explicitly dealing with issues of faith or theology, such work can offer intriguing analogical 'readings' of films which address the concerns of religious people. But as Nolan (1998: 5) recognizes, 'the extent to which' these readings 'engage genuine cultural values, as distinct from offering religious interpretations of cultural tropes', is 'open to question'. Indeed, he indicates

a myopia among religious film-analysts around the location of meaning, with many assuming that it is located in the text and can be read out by interested readers. This has resulted in, at best, a certain predictability of

film readings, and, at worst, a sanitising/sanctifying of what at times can be a dangerously and religiously subversive cinema (1998: 11).⁷

For Nolan, a theologian himself, and keen to develop this literature, these problems can be overcome by treating film as film and mounting a sustained engagement with film theory. Hence he urges 'a more meaningful dialogue between theology and film studies' as a means to examine 'the construction of meaning as it shapes the subjectivity of those who produce and consume theology and cinematic images' (1998: 11). In stressing 'theories of ideology, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and gender' (1998: 11) though, Nolan does not indicate how far such a project might move beyond the notion of film-as-text to offer a more socio-historical understanding of the medium's interaction with religion in culture.

Despite the largely self-imposed limits described by Nolan, religious film writing has, nevertheless, been subject to some degree of variation and innovation. Thus the New Testament scholar Larry J. Kreitzer (1993, 1994) uses contemporary film and literature as a way of 'reversing the hermeneutical flow' and bringing fresh insights to the interpretation of scripture. Similarly, Robert Jewett (1993) and Bernard Brandon Scott (1994) aim, in rather different ways, to develop a dialogue between the Bible and the movies as a means to engage critically with contemporary American culture. While Jewett's 'prophetic' methodology is rooted firmly in Pauline theology, Scott's approach is unusual within the broad context of religious film-analysis in so far as he recognizes that the social and cultural changes wrought by the mass media, particularly the emphasis on visual images, and the challenges these changes pose to religious institutions, need to be accounted for in historical terms. Frustratingly, however, and despite a suggestive overview (1994: 19-45), based in the work of McLuhan (1964) and Ong (1982), of the relationship between changes in media and changes in consciousness, Scott does not really address the

⁷ David Jasper (1997), surveying the other contributions to Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz's (1997) *Explorations in Theology and Film*, argues that the willingness of writers in this field to offer up theological readings of Hollywood films in particular, tends to elide the fundamental difference between commercial cinema and theology, and, in so doing, makes for bad theology.

particular circumstances which spawned the emergence of the movies. He is more concerned with using the Bible as a critical tool with which to examine the movies as examples of American mythology. Thus although Scott (1994: 158-65) devotes some attention to *The Birth of a Nation*, he does not engage with the theoretical and historical nitty gritty of that picture's relationship with the cultural context whence it emerged, beyond a brief acknowledgement of its monumental impact and the role of race in its mythologizing of national self-understanding. Might there not be a deeper and more complex relationship between the film's economic success, the issue of race, technological development, social change, and the religious conditions of the culture which spawned it? Scott does not theorize the degree to which biblical ideas undergird US nationalism, or how movies function in maintaining national sentiment beyond a few references to Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963, 1969). Thus, one might ask, is a Bible-based theology the most incisive way of examining the mythology of America?

In general, religious writing on film tends to affirm the conventional distinction between religion and theology (sacred) on one hand, and the secular medium of film (profane) on the other; hence the need to analogize. This division between 'high' and 'low' or 'popular' cultural forms maintains the assumed authority of the religious perspective. Yet such defensiveness regarding the challenge of the media to religious authority means that the possibility of a somewhat more complicated two-way relationship between religion and the medium of film is largely ignored. What kind of religion, if any, is the cinema conducive to?

Still unusual in this respect, Robert W. Jenson's (1970) enquiry into the audio-visual nature of film as a means of religious communication embraces the populism of Hollywood. Whilst Jenson understands the artifice of film, he argues that in making the past present, even when projecting into the future the medium is particularly well suited to representing 'a certain kind of mythic religion: the "god of our fathers" variety' (1970: 44-45). Contrasting this God of history with the supposed transcendence of Yahweh, he nonetheless writes that

in this sort of religion, God is identified not merely by one moment of the Beginning, but by a past history; he is the one who led us out of Egypt and thereby established a security which is now our right, or he is the one in whom our brave boys in their recent foxholes all trusted and were saved. The deity of this god is the timeless presence of the past history. This is the religion of Israel before the prophets revolutionized it; or it is that nationalized version of "historical religion" which has been America's civic faith. Moving pictures are the only possible images of such gods. The great sentimental biblical epics, and the religious glorifications of Americanism, were authentic and inevitable expressions of the genius of the movies, and were quite properly experienced by most in their audiences as true communication of their deepest religion (1970: 44).

Within the context of religious film-analysis, this celebration of the much derided biblical epic is still exceptional, and its value here is two-fold. Firstly, although he cannot possibly know how the majority of audiences experienced these films, and despite the problematic ideological assumptions with regard to American history embedded in the association of 'our brave boys' and the God of Israel, Jenson's populism stands in stark contrast with some of the more theologically sophisticated but elitist attitudes expressed elsewhere. Secondly, as Paul Schrader (1972) would agree, albeit on entirely different (non-Hollywood) grounds, Jenson recognizes that the religious content of movies is inseparable from their form.

That cultural form determines experience is a point which was taken up with regard to religion and film, two decades ago, by Thomas M. Martin (1981). In his *Images and the Imageless*, Martin (1981: 55), again following the lead of McLuhan (1964), argues that development of film technology has, in extending human experience, led to changes in human, and therefore, religious consciousness: 'Human consciousness cannot be the same today as it was prior to the extension of its vision through film. Neither can religious consciousness ever be the same'. Whilst overly general in discussing 'consciousness' perhaps, it is, nonetheless, a useful and interesting argument and Martin makes some worthwhile observations. Distinguishing between linguistic and filmic modes of perception (1981: 7-15), Martin (1981: 122) asserts that 'films cannot be reduced to analytical written words'. Thus, despite basing his account in philosophy and theology rather than any genuine

psychological account of how we perceive films, Martin does to some extent anticipate David Bordwell's (1985a) subsequent and highly influential cognitivist rejection of theories based in language as models for film analysis. Martin (1981: 113-27) recognizes, moreover, that 'meaning' is something constructed by us, and emphasizes the importance of narrative in helping us make our lives intelligible and meaningful, arguing that just as narrative forms have developed and changed in the cinema, so too have audiences in their ability to respond to these changes (1981:130-34).

Whilst Martin's ideas have been largely neglected, even within the sub-field of religious film writing, his attempt to relate technological development to religious change is similar to the concerns of scholars who seek to address the interaction between media and religion within culture. There are doubts, however, as to how far one might be able to apply his work within the 'evolving paradigm'. For, in following the likes of William James (1902) and Rudolf Otto (1936), and treating religion in terms of individual response rather than social expression, Martin does not really deal with the social significance of his argument. Despite its obvious historical basis, he avoids tackling the wider, and here at least, more interesting implications of his findings. Indicative, perhaps, of the degree to which those engaged in theological and religious discourses understand themselves to be working, in some way, outwith more quotidian secular activities, this reticence with regard to engaging with the broader cultural context within which films are made and consumed has, until fairly recently, been the norm in this literature.

Developments in Religious Film Writing

Whilst bearing the imprint of religious preoccupations, *Screening America* by Jesuit priest, Richard A. Blake (1991) does at least bring some sort of historical perspective to bear on his analyses of Hollywood films from the decade before World War II. Indeed, Blake (1991: 11-102) devotes much of his book to a discussion of the historical relationship between the film industry, religious communities, and the

importance of religious concerns in prompting the development of serious writing on the cinema which led eventually to the emergence of film studies as an academic pursuit in its own right. Deploying a methodology based in the twin traditions of *auteur* (e.g. Sarris 1962, 1968) and genre (e.g. Warshaw 1964) criticism, Blake (1991: 288) uses his examples in order 'to provide a sense of [American] national identity as it has developed in the twentieth century'. As unusual as this concern with the broader social context of films is within the field of religious writing on film, and as similar as some of his aims are to those of this study, Blake's self-consciously 'old-fashioned' approach, aimed at a general, religiously involved, readership rather more than an academic one, offers little in the way of theorizing the relationship between film, religion, culture, and American national identity. Nonetheless, in broaching the question of national identity from a religious perspective, Blake's book does signal how neglected the issue has been.

The first concerted effort to rethink the relationship between religion and film within the context of American culture came with the publication in 1995 of *Screening the Sacred*, a collection of essays edited by Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr. Addressing both the neglect of religion within film studies, and the disdain for the genuinely popular which had tended to characterize religious film writing up to that point, the book begins with a recognition of the degree to which popular Hollywood pictures like *Rocky* (1976, d. John G. Avildsen) are full of 'Christian themes' and 'civil religion, the ideology that sanctifies the United States as God's chosen nation-state' (Martin, 1995a: 1). Building on the possibility that these religious aspects may in some measure account for the box-office success of such movies, Martin and Ostwalt's collection offers a range of enquiries into the relationship between religion and film, which they conceive of as intersecting but also independent modes of representation and meaningful social exchange. From the premise, therefore, that 'religion is a semiautonomous domain of culture deserving serious academic study', Martin (1995a: 5), citing Daniel L. Pals, writes that the editors of *Screening the Sacred* 'contend that scholars should "press for religious explanations when

presented with religious data”’. This leads them to organize their book by distinguishing three basic critical approaches, all derived from the field of religious studies, to the study of religion in film: theological, mythological, and ideological.

As we have seen, ‘theological criticism’, the application by analogy of traditional theological (most usually, Christian) concepts to the interpretation of films, has been the basic form of religious film writing for most of its history. In that respect, discussions of the allegorical structure of Oliver Stone’s (1986) *Platoon* (Beck, 1995) or the apocalyptic theme of a picture like *Pale Rider* (1985, d. Clint Eastwood) (Ostwalt, 1995a) might seem to offer little of worth to those outwith a position of religious commitment. In proposing mythological and ideological approaches, however, Martin and Ostwalt open up the possibilities of examining the religious aspects of film without the necessity of a prior religious commitment.

Introducing their selection of mythological analyses of Hollywood films, Martin and Ostwalt (1995: 65) note that ‘the rise of film...accompanies the decline of a certain kind of human religiousness’, specifically, a belief in an omnipotent, omniscient God. Like Hill (1992), they argue, nonetheless, that our collective need for mythic narratives remains, and that movies have become an important vehicle for such stories. A mythological analysis of any given picture, then, seeks ‘to illuminate those characteristics or elements of the film that tap into universal human feelings and reactions’ (1995: 68). Especially important in this respect are narratives which describe heroic encounters with a mysterious, terrifying, awe-inspiring, or enchanting otherness beyond our normal experience, and so probe the nature of human existence. Whilst such an approach to the religious dimension of film represents a position outwith the sectarianism implicit in theological criticism, it nonetheless depends, to some degree at least, upon there being a set of assumptions shared by both writer and audience; most obviously in this respect, a belief in universal archetypes beyond the contingencies of culture. Indeed, even if myth is based in something which transcends human difference, how much does abnegating the local and culturally specific actually tell us? Although George Lucas’ epochal re-working

of Joseph Campbell's (1956) 'monomyth' of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* in *Star Wars* (1977) readily (if not predictably) lends itself to Andrew Gordon's (1995) analysis of it as 'a myth for our time', both Lucas and Campbell might be accused of 'cultural imperialism' in so far as their self-conscious myth-making does violence to the social significance of differences between mythic stories.

To be fair to Martin and Ostwalt, they would appear to recognize the political and other uses religious symbols and stories can be put to. Drawing on the marxist notion of ideology developed by Louis Althusser (1970), Martin and Ostwalt (1995: 121) argue that 'far from being confined to churches or limited to a precapitalist era, religious symbols and values are diffused throughout popular culture and continue to shape contemporary subjects'. Attempts to understand the ideological influence of film in shaping attitudes to race, class, and gender, they contend, need to take account of religion within this broader matrix. Thus, Martin (1995b) examines how *Rocky* utilizes Christian symbols and a structure of ritual sacrifice (see Girard, 1978) as a means to re-direct white American working-class anger away from challenging the inequalities of capitalist society and towards African Americans. As we shall see here with the discussion of *The Birth of a Nation*, this filmic strategy has a long history. However, Martin signals some of the shortcomings of his and Ostwalt's project by leaving this fact unacknowledged.

In moving religious film analysis some way towards the concerns of mainstream film studies, Martin and Ostwalt suggest that their tri-partite schema of theological, mythological, and ideological criticism represents but a stage in the development of an as yet unnamed methodological synthesis, 'grounded in generations of thought about the sacred, broadly open to the diverse ways in which the sacred manifests itself, and acutely sensitive to the political and social effects of religious and mythological texts' (Martin, 1995a: 12). In his concluding essay on 'Religion, Film, and Cultural Analysis', Ostwalt (1995b: 154) writes that their study 'is based upon a larger, broader concept of culture that views film itself as part of a cultural matrix, similarly inhabited by religion and other cultural forms'. Hence, the

'new criticism' he and Martin hint at would necessarily be 'one broad enough to deal with the interconnectedness of a complex cultural matrix—one that draws on strengths from film criticism, religious studies, and cultural studies in general'. Clearly, the sort of project Martin and Oswald envisage would sit comfortably with efforts to rethink 'media, religion, and culture...as an interrelated web within society' (Hoover and Lundby 1996: 3). As it stands, however, their book does indicate three basic problems their proposed methodological synthesis might do well to address.

Firstly, there is the question of the audience: the actual experience of spectatorship, is not addressed beyond some rather abstract references to 'people', 'critics' and 'society'. Unlike much of the work of Stewart Hoover and his associates, Martin and Oswald's collection has not really moved beyond the overwhelming focus on the film as 'text' which still characterizes this field of scholarship. How, for example, do particular communities use and understand the religious images and stories presented in movies? In what ways do economic and other industrial considerations impact on the representation of religion in films?

Related to this emphasis on the pictures themselves, the second point which needs to be made is the lack of interest displayed with regard to historicizing the interaction of religion and film. In this respect, Martin's and Oswald's efforts still lag behind developments in film studies and the growth of film history. Certainly, some of the contributors, place the films they examine in some sort of historical context, particularly in the section devoted to ideological criticism. Thus Martin's (1995b) discussion of *Rocky* briefly notes the post-Watergate, post-Vietnam mood of national disillusionment which the film appeared to tap into. Such asides do scant justice to the potential of this area, however. For, as we have seen already, the history of relations between film and religion in America, is a rich and complex one, and one which warrants exploration in depth, both empirically and theoretically.

This brings us to the third problem those seeking to develop Martin's and Oswald's suggestions might need to address: theorizing the unique history and character of religion in America, and the influence this might have had on the

national film culture. Surprisingly enough, the stress Martin and Oswalt place on the utility of approaches to film rooted in religious studies does not extend to incorporating insights from the quite extensive literature on American religion (see Chapter Three) beyond a passing reference to the notion of a national civil religion (Martin 1995a: 1). Again, a more historicized understanding of relations between religious institutions and the film industry which took into consideration, for example, the role of the Catholic Church in the development of the Production Code, an involvement reflecting broader changes in the religious economy of the United States, might be better placed to account for the persistence and social significance of religious elements in the nominally secular medium of American cinema.

Further development of the kind indicated by Martin and Oswalt's contribution is to be found in art historian Margaret Miles' (1996) *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies*. Considering an individual 'film as one voice in a complex social conversation, occurring in a particular historical moment,' Miles (1996: xiii) deploys a methodology drawn from cultural studies which 'refocusses attention from the film as text to the social, political, and cultural matrix in which the film was produced and distributed'. Exploring what she describes as 'popular' films from the eighties and nineties ranging from *The Last Temptation of Christ* through to *Thelma and Louise* (1991, d. Ridley Scott) and *Jungle Fever* (1991, d. Spike Lee), Miles (1996: 4) organizes her study around 'two primary questions....(1) How is the social phenomenon of religion treated in Hollywood film? What forms of religion are "box-office"? and (2) What values are circulated?' Whilst she does not explore the notion in any depth, her study is based in a recognition that the development of popular cinema 'coincided' with a broader cultural change in which the social authority of religious institutions was eroded. As components of this 'new public sphere', then, Miles (1996: 25) argues that 'religion and film *share* an interest in, and attention to values', in so far as they 'help Americans consider the ancient and perennial question of human life: How should we live?' In short, Miles (1996: 185) is concerned with movies as they relate to 'the common good'.

Perhaps the most useful contribution Miles makes to the development of religious film writing is in offering a pragmatic definition of religion in terms of relationships. As with most things 'Hollywood', it is relatively easy to offer counter-examples of any perceived tendency within the industry. Thus films released since Miles wrote her study such as *Dead Man Walking* (1995, d. Tim Robbins), *The Apostle* (1997, d. Robert Duvall), *Kundun* (1997, d. Martin Scorsese), and *Dogma* (1999, d. Kevin Smith) suggest that she overstates the 'widespread skepticism about religion and its effects...apparent in Hollywood' (1996: 12). But she is surely correct in noting the degree to which the Marxist mistrust of religion (see further discussion in Chapter Three) has 'been widely and uncritically adopted by otherwise critical theorists' (1996: 12). Rooting her definition of religion 'in human lives and communities,...as a cultural institution,...perform[ing] cultural work', therefore, she describes religion in terms of relationships:

among individuals, within families, communities, and societies, and with the natural world.... Understandings of relatedness underlie religious beliefs, narratives, and institutions. Defining religion in this way means that relationships and practices between people in faith communities, as well as attitudes toward those outside the group require scrutiny. Thus, understandings of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation are not accidental or incidental to religious perspectives but...*a concrete way religious perspectives are articulated.* (1996: 14-15, emphasis in original)

Whilst this conception of religion indicates the prescriptive nature of Miles' critical standpoint with regard to film, it nonetheless highlights the impossibility of abstracting religion from more secular concerns such as class, gender, race, and sexuality. Whilst Miles does not really stress the point, the underlying issue here is power.

As a consolidation and development of all that has gone before in religious writing on film, it is nonetheless disappointing to find that despite her espousal of a methodology based in cultural studies, Miles' approach is still overwhelmingly film-centred. The industrial and audience contexts of film production, distribution, and consumption remain overwhelmingly abstract and theoretical. Still, Miles (1996: 188) does attend to the specific character of the medium, suggesting, in fact, 'that film is a

weak religious “visual aid” because it is possible to watch a film with little engagement of the imagination’. She contrasts this weakness with the use-value of religious paintings or icons where ‘committed and informed imaginative labor...connects the devout to the religious painting not the subject or style of the painting itself’. Conscious, nonetheless, that commercial cinema does wield real social power, a power founded in the provision of pleasure to as large an audience as possible, Miles (1996: 190) concludes that although ‘no one film has iconic power’, the religious importance of Hollywood flows from the recurrent reproduction and dissemination of conventions, which influence ‘everything from clothing styles to accepted and expected behaviour’. Indeed, noting what she describes as the ‘profound conservatism’ of Hollywood’s films, Miles (1996: 190-92) argues that the film industry is failing to fulfil its potential to furnish ‘rich and varied images that are capable of criticizing and enhancing relationship, community, and society’, and so help Americans ‘picture religious, racial, and cultural diversity as irreducible and delightful,...[and] entertain concretely and generously the question, “How should we live?”’.

Whether it is desirable or even possible for the commercial film industry to take up the particular moral gauntlet thrown down by Miles is open to debate. Religiously motivated critiques of the movies’ social influence are nothing new. Yet, one wonders if Miles has considered the extent to which the ‘profound conservatism’ of the American film industry might in some ways be a product of such religious interventions. Once again, the history of the interaction between religion and film has been neglected. While Miles does on odd occasions acknowledge the history behind her more contemporary concerns, it is never really investigated. In raising the vexed issue of screen violence (1996: 182-86), for instance, Miles sees no reason to enquire into the history of violence within the moral economy of the screen, or, for that matter, the nation.

Indeed, indicative of a common failing within this field of writing, Miles does not elaborate any theoretical position with regard to the historical function(s) of

religion in US society; there is no discussion of religion with regard to national identity and the sacralization of America as the 'New Israel'. Doing this might have highlighted the imbrication of violence and notions of chosenness drawn from Biblical religion, and made the issue of screen violence, in Miles' terms, a religious problem, not something external to religion. If movies do fulfil, to some degree, a religious or quasi-religious function, then violence, like class, gender, race, and sexuality becomes a mode of its articulation. In so far as it is violence which undergirds the specific historical social accommodations to these issues, violence can even be seen as the basis of that articulation.⁸ Might not a critical engagement with the historical development of American cinema shed light on such possibilities?

Miles' (1996: xi) suggestive account of film's 'tremendous quasi-religious power' has been taken up by Christopher Deacy (1997: 227), who applies a notion of redemption 'analogous to that found in Christianity' to *film noir*. Deacy argues that whilst optimistic, escapist types of movie such as the musical 'could be interpreted as redemptive' (1997: 232), the characteristically bleak and pessimistic genre of *film noir* offers viewers the opportunity to be confronted by more fundamental existential questions of futility and suffering, and thus embark upon 'the religious quest for redemption' (1997: 241).

At one level, Deacy's thesis is no more than a variant on the strategy of 'theology by analogy' which has long been the stock-in-trade of religious film writing. He does though, like Miles and others, recognize the possibility that it is towards film and other cultural forms, not the traditional religious institutions, that many people in contemporary western society look for meaning so that they may find their ontological bearings. Furthermore, he does recognize the specific historical

⁸ Responding to Miles, Bryan P. Stone (1999) surveys the top grossing films of the 1990s and argues that when religion is portrayed in connection with violence, it is rarely taken seriously as a motivating force for rejecting violence. On the contrary, while religion can play a chaplaincy or sanctuary role on screen for victims of violence, it typically serves either as a force for justifying and legitimating violence or as a device for enhancing the entertainment value of violence.' He concludes that in either case, we as filmgoers are steadily habituated to violence as both "natural" and "right."

circumstances, for example, post-war disillusionment (both World War II and Vietnam in Deacy's schema), out of which the particular conventions of *noir* emerged. In positing some sort of transference of authority from religious institutions to film (and other media), however, Deacy, Miles, and others appear content to accept simply that it has happened; not to ask why or how, and what deeper cultural implications attend the specific process wherein such transference took place. Hence although, religious approaches to the cinema are drawing ever closer to the concerns of mainstream film studies, there is still some way to go before this type of work breaks free from its theological ghetto, not least a reexamination of the medium's history.

Conclusion

Building on the preceding discussion of an evolving scholarship into media, religion, and culture, this chapter has surveyed the condition of writing on the relationship between religion and film in American culture. Whilst one might hesitate to describe the range of work in this area as comprising a 'literature' in any reflexive sense of the word, the evidence collected here does begin to indicate that the interaction between religion and film has been a rich and complex one with important ramifications for the medium, American religion, and the national culture. From a vantage in the evolving paradigm these possibilities demand further exploration. Moreover, some attention needs to be diverted towards linking some of the findings and insights that have already been made so that a framework for further development can emerge free from the particular problems and disciplinary constraints which have hitherto limited research in this area.

For a long time, the unquestioned assumption within mainstream film studies that secularization, understood as representing the death of religion, was the inevitable accompaniment to modernization simply excluded considerations of religion from the broader discussion of American cinema. Aside from scattered efforts to account for the salience of the Biblical epic, and to surveys of Jews and

Catholics in the movies, it is only in the last decade or so that serious attention has been afforded the influence, both direct and indirect, of religion in shaping the history of the US film industry. This work has been focused on two main areas: first, the role of the Catholic Church within the struggles over film content which culminated with the adoption of the Production Code in 1934; second, the significance of religious ideas, images, and institutions in shaping American filmmaking in the crucial formative period prior to World War I and the subsequent development of the classical Hollywood cinema. Taken altogether, these various bits and pieces suggest that right from its very earliest beginnings, American film culture was subject to the strains and tensions of the nation's pluralistic religious environment, and profoundly influenced by it. Apart from Francis Couvares (1996a), however, few scholars in mainstream film studies have made the effort to reconsider American religion as anything other than a set of institutions which serve to bolster the existing social order. This may be true to some extent. But what of those religious communities, Catholics and Jews being the prime examples, which were for a long time excluded from the mainstream of national life? What of opposing tendencies within the supposedly hegemonic formations of American Protestantism? These sorts of questions indicate that the role of religion within the national culture is a complex one which needs to be theorized in a more subtle way if scholarship in this area is to develop a more nuanced understanding of the interrelationship between religion and film in American life.

With this in mind, it is somewhat disappointing to find that writing on film which does take religion seriously has largely ignored the broader social, cultural, and historical contexts within which films are made and consumed. Overwhelmingly theological in its orientation, and only rarely venturing beyond the film-as-text for its material, this scholarship has fought shy of engaging fully with the implications which attend the supposition that the movies are a site of meaning analogous to more traditional religious sources. Whilst offering, on occasion, a sense of moral engagement with the products of Hollywood, this strand of writing has made little

impact on film studies, and there is a sense in which it does little more than preach to the converted.

This is a shame. Religious studies has much to offer students of the American cinema; not least, the theoretical tools with which to engage with the national culture which gave rise to Hollywood. Similarly, the serious examination of films and film culture can enhance our understanding of religion in the modern and/or postmodern contexts. In what ways have the movies reflected and/or contributed to religious change? Such considerations suggest that there exists a middle ground of considerable but as yet largely unexploited potential wherein religion and film are *both* recognized as having furnished important means whereby Americans could imagine themselves as members of the national community. One might even suppose that over the course of the twentieth century the interaction between religion and film has had a significant impact on how Americans have perceived their country and its institutions. Gaining some understanding of that impact is one of the motives for this study. Ahead of such explorations, however, there is need for an enquiry into the role of religion in the life of the nation. For, given its historical priority as an influence upon American life, one might reasonably hypothesize that religion was foundational to the cultural matrix within which motion pictures took on the not unprofitable function of nation building.

CHAPTER THREE

America Redemptor:

Religion, Culture, and National Identity

Introduction

The previous chapter argued that discussions of the relationship between religion and film in American culture only rarely acknowledge the distinctive character and social importance of American religion. Despite the manifest influence of religious stories, ideas, images, and institutions on the movies, and the persistence of God-centered belief within the culture of the most powerful, modern, and technologically advanced nation on Earth, scholars working in this broad and still largely uncultivated field have tended to bypass the theoretical issues raised by the special features of religion in the United States. Seeking to establish a pragmatic vantage for the present study with regard to the construction and maintenance of US nationhood, this chapter addresses that neglect. To that end, it theorizes the historical importance of 'religion' as something integral to American national self-understanding, and indicates the kind of cultural power invoked by the deployment of religious ideas, images, and stories in nominally secular activities such as filmmaking.

With regard to the broader concerns of the emerging scholarship into media, religion, and culture, however, the chapter also argues that the issue of national identity needs to be placed at the very heart of such considerations. For instead of taking religion to be *sui generis*, as something which in its essentials transcends the

kind of temporal and geographical specifics associated with the modern nation-state, the view taken here is that the institutions, practices, stories and other cultural forms associated with the category of religion are not to be abstracted from historical circumstance.¹ Indeed, the emergence of the nation-state as the most important and powerful form of social organization associated with modernity is a key aspect of the same broad historical process that has not only brought about religious change but also stimulated the specialized study of religion. Yet, issues of national identity barely figure within scholarship into media, religion, and culture. Notwithstanding plenty of recent evidence to the contrary, work within the field appears to include an implicit acceptance of the thesis that the nation is, or at least soon will be, a thing of the past. While supranational and globalizing trends based in economic and technological development pose a threat to the viability of the nation-state as an especially potent form of collectivity, it might well be counter-argued that the cultural phenomena associated with such trends do not in themselves constitute any sort of emotionally convincing alternative to it (Zelinsky, 1988). There is still immense social power bound up with notions of nationhood.

Acknowledging this within the context of media studies, Philip Schlesinger (1991: 172) argues that questions regarding national identity should not be taken for granted within contemporary discussions of culture and communication. Rather, they ought to be seen as something foundational to them, and explored accordingly. Despite such promptings, though, work on the role of media and film in relation to national identity has tended to take for granted somewhat the particular terms via which US nationhood is articulated. As Susan Sontag (1977: 48) writes 'the American partiality to myths of redemption and damnation remains one of the most energizing, most seductive aspects of [the] national culture'. Yet, there is little evidence that this religious or quasi-religious dimension is taken seriously by

¹ For a critical account of how the notion of *sui generis* religion has been routinely reproduced by scholars seeking to validate the field of Religious Studies within the academy, see McCutcheon (1997).

scholars of the US media.

A similar neglect is evident within religious studies also. In spite of a growing emphasis on issues of culture, and the extensive literature on religion in the context of the United States, theoretical discussion of the nation and the nation-state as the (now media-saturated) contexts within which religious identities are formed, remains under-developed.²

Taking up and applying Schlesinger's emphasis on the problem of national identity, its construction and maintenance, to the religious economy of the United States therefore, the chapter contends that it is the broad process of nation building which represents the most useful conceptual frame within which to account for the history and distinctive character of American religion and, by extension, relations between media, religion, and culture in the American context.

Religion by Other Means? Culture, Power, and National Identity

Supporting this chapter's account of religion in the construction and maintenance of American national identity, this opening section addresses three broad questions: What do we describe when we refer to notions of national identity and culture? What is involved in building and sustaining the nation as an especially potent form of collective identity? If nations are constituted in and integral to modernity, what is the relation between culture and the supposedly premodern forms of communication and social organization conventionally associated with religion?

Theorizing National Identity

Despite its common usage at all levels of cultural exchange, from the vernacular to the intensely formal, the concept of the nation remains a contested one, both in

² There are, of course, exceptions to this general lack of attention afforded issues of nationhood from within religious studies: Bellah and Hammond (1980); Juergensmeyer (1993); Smart (1995); Whitelam (1996); and King (1999). Moreover, some scholars are now reconsidering religion in relation to the construction of national identities: see Hastings (1997); Van de Veer and Lehmut (1999); Smith (1999).

terms of definition and, practically, as a form of collective identity. Definitions of the nation range from subjective, metaphysical or quasi-religious notions of 'a soul, a spiritual principle...a moral conscience' (Renan, 1882: 16-17), through to Stalin's (1973: 20) prescriptive statement that 'a nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture'. Where some will equate the nation with the institutional machinery of the nation-state (Giddens, 1985) others will indicate the nation as an intangible essence which serves to bind 'a self-aware ethnic group' (Connor, 1978). These differences of opinion with regard to definition should not distract us, however, from acknowledging that nations are made up of people, and that the significance of a 'national culture' or a 'national identity' derives from how it informs, and is in turn informed by what people believe, say, and do. The issue here is really one of power. That nationalist rhetoric will often utilise references to 'the people', not least in America, is some indication of how obvious but, nonetheless, important, this point is.

Commenting on the problem of defining the nation, John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (1994: 4) note that as important as it is to differentiate the nation from other forms of collective identity such as race, class, gender, and religion, etc., 'there is little agreement about the role of ethnic, as opposed to political, components of the nation; or about the balance between "subjective" elements like will and memory, and more "objective" elements like territory and language'. Developing the point, however, they write that

What is often conceded is the power, even primacy, of national loyalties and identities over those of even class, gender, and race. Perhaps only religious attachments have rivalled national loyalties in their scope and fervour. At the same time, national attachments can intermingle with, even slide into, other forms of collective identity, or alternate with them in terms of power and salience. (1994: 4)

The reference here to religious attachments has obvious relevance within the ongoing discussion of the relationship between religion and national identity in the American context. For although both the nation and its political embodiment, the

nation-state, are generally thought of as core constituents of modernity, the social, political, and economic power made available through appeals to national sentiment would appear to derive from aspects of the human condition which appear as timeless as our need for water, food, shelter, procreation, and social status; a desire to belong, and the quest for existential meaning.

That there is a basic continuity between what we refer to as religion and the concept of the nation is hardly an accident. For Benedict Anderson (1991: 11) the coming of the Enlightenment, the erosion of traditional religious (and dynastic) authority, and the apparent 'absurdity of salvation' did not mean the end of suffering or questions of existential meaning but, rather, demanded 'a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning'. Writing that 'few things were [are] better suited to this end than an idea of nation' (1991: 11), he argues 'that nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which - as well as against which - it came into being', particularly 'the *religious community* and the *dynastic realm*' (1991: 12, emphases in original).

In his classic and widely-cited definition of the nation-state, Max Weber (1948: 78) described it as 'a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory'. Contemporary scholarship on the nation, though, as something often (though by no means always) coterminous with the nation-state yet analytically distinct from it, has come to revolve around understandings of it as a cultural entity or process (e.g. Deutsch, 1966; Babha, 1990; Schlesinger, 1991; Smith, 1991; Billig, 1995). Even where stress is placed on the role of the state and the determination of material forces like industrialization, there is still a recognition that the politics of 'nationalism' has an important, indeed crucial, cultural dimension (Gellner, 1983). As a particular kind of collective identity, therefore, a nation is functionally dependent upon the effective communication of stories, symbols, and traditions through which we imagine ourselves, both spatially and temporally, as participants in the broader drama of

national life. Especially important in this respect is the 'continual' and 'selective' mediation of the temporal relationship between the nation as collected in the present and the past (Schlesinger, 1991: 174). Thus, accounts of how a collective feeling of national belonging is developed and maintained often emphasize the importance of shared myths and narratives in furnishing the sense of continuity or 'tradition' without which a nation simply cannot exist (e.g. Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Babha, 1990; Hobsbawm, 1990; Anderson, 1991; Smith, 1991). As 'natural' as national identities are often claimed to be, therefore, particularly with regard to claims regarding ethnicity or land, they are cultural constructions.

This is not to claim, however, that because nations are imagined or 'invented' that they are mere fabrications. Instead, the 'deep, horizontal comradeship' or 'fraternity' of a national community might be more usefully understood as a cultural invention in the creative sense of the term (Anderson, 1991: 6-7). A national identity might orientate and impart social meaning to a wide range of activities and life experiences ranging, for example, from childbirth through sport, to war. So although we need to acknowledge that nationalism has itself evolved along with other currents of economic, political, social, and cultural change, especially perhaps the development of print and other media technologies (Anderson, 1991), the 'well-nigh universal acquiescence, even joyous acceptance of the nation-state system, would be utterly unthinkable in lieu of some powerful emotional commitment' (Zelinsky, 1988: 1). While nationalist sentiment has often been mobilized in order to justify the use of force, the urge to violence is perhaps less integral to nationalism than the willingness with which people sacrifice themselves on behalf of their nation (Marvin and Ingle, 1999). This suggests that national identity depends upon eliciting consent from below rather more than exerting coercion from above.

Culture and Hegemony

Emphasizing notions of consent does not mean that one's national identity is entirely a matter of choice. Cultural power is not distributed equally among the members of a

given society but organized via its institutions and structures. As Karl Deutsch (1966: 188) writes, 'the essential aspect of the unity of a people...is the complementarity or relative efficiency of communication among individuals - something that is in some ways similar to mutual rapport, but on a larger scale'. Hence, our experience of belonging to a nation depends variously on communication through such means as education, a shared language, art, literature, and music, as well as the media, and is reproduced and affirmed at all levels of social exchange; from the prestigious and rarified activities of so-called 'high culture' (Gellner, 1983) through to some of the most routine or 'banal' aspects of everyday life (Billig, 1995). In an important sense therefore, our nation chooses us. Indeed, while national identity might be 'an objective function of communicative competence and belonging', Schlesinger (2000: 20) reminds us that the social integration which communication brings also implies 'social closure' and the exclusion or at least 'othering' of foreigners. What defines a given national identity, what makes it different from other national identities, thus becomes a resource of power, and in many instances, the construction of a national culture has involved, or indeed been organized around the subordination, the expulsion or, worse, mass murder of those who do not belong.

With regard to the cultural power necessary to establish and maintain a national identity then, this thesis argues from a model based in the ideas of the influential Italian marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci. Whereas traditional marxist theory asserted that the cultural life and consciousness of a society was determined 'top-down' by a ruling class holding political control of its material resources (e.g. Marx and Engels 1924), Gramsci (1971) suggested that political power was largely dependent upon the achievement and/or maintenance of *hegemony* and consensus at the level of 'civil society', particularly institutions such as schools and universities, the church, the media, and professional associations; that is to say, cultural and intellectual life outwith the official 'political society' usually associated with the state. Indeed, by Gramsci's account, 'ideas are "material forces"' (Bennett *et al*, 1981: 200), and he sought to broaden the definition of 'the State' as an amalgam of political and

civil society; as 'the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules' (Gramsci, 1971: 244).

Within this analysis, the hegemony of a dominant class depends on cultural consensus as well as coercion, and consensus is only maintained to the degree that the dominant class succeeds in making its moral and intellectual leadership appear natural, as based on the way things really are, as 'common sense'. Hence Gramsci (1971: 12) defined hegemony in terms of a

"spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.

There are some similarities here with a more straightforward 'top-down' marxist model of ideology as a kind of 'false consciousness'. Nevertheless, Gramsci's ideas have been taken up extensively by students of culture because they lend themselves to a more complex, subtle and nuanced understanding of "culture" as a "whole social process", while still based in the 'recognition of dominance and subordination' within that process (Williams, 1977: 108).

As Raymond Williams (1977: 112), whose own work was heavily influenced by Gramsci, elaborated:

A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realised complex of experiences, relationships and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits. In practice, that is, hegemony can never be singular. Its internal structures are highly complex, as can readily be seen in any concrete analysis. Moreover..., it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own.

In other words, a hegemonic class has not only to promote its own 'consciousness' of reality but it also needs to articulate the concerns and desires of subordinate (and potentially oppositional) classes and sub-cultures within that broad cultural process if it is to engender consensus. As Gramsci (1971: 161) noted, 'the fact of hegemony

presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised'. In an important sense, therefore, even the most effective hegemony is negotiated and temporary, as the beliefs which sustain it are subject to the conflicts and vicissitudes of historical experience. This leaves the way open for a "crisis of authority" (Gramsci, 1971: 210, 275-76) and the demand for change, something which threatens the dominant group's control of its material resources. Moreover, because hegemonic groups will seek to protect their vital interests against encroachments from below, culture, within the Gramscian framework, represents the site of a more or less constant ideological battle 'for hearts and minds' (Schlesinger, 1991: 15) wherein a new, but nonetheless, unstable, 'equilibrium' or social reality is continually re-negotiated in relation to new developments and changes in circumstance. On that basis, Schlesinger (1991: 174) argues that a 'national culture', should not be understood as a repository 'of shared symbols to which the entire population stands in identical relation' but, rather, approached as a site 'of contestation'.

Whilst the Gramscian model is, in its origins, a class-based one, in practical, historical terms the key unit of hegemony has been the nation-state (Schlesinger, 1991). There are good reasons for this. Most obvious perhaps is the central role of the state in controlling knowledge and thus shaping collective understandings of the reality of which it is a part. Taking up Karl W. Deutsch's (1966: 4) still relevant observation that the nation-state represents 'the chief political instrument for getting things done', and his stress on the importance of social communication as the basis for a nation being 'held together "from within"' (1966: 98), one can see the importance of education in providing the necessary skills, especially a shared language, to enable efficient social communication. If the market-driven spread of print-capitalism was as important to the emergence of large scale imagined national communities as Benedict Anderson (1991) suggests, high levels of literacy were a prerequisite. Thus, for Ernest Gellner (1983), education, driven by industrialization, but organized by the state, is the key mechanism for disseminating the national idea,

and reproducing the same shared 'high (literate, training sustained) culture' (1983: 38) which sustains it. In Gellner's (1983: 38) modernist understanding of what a nation is and how it functions, the state 'take[s] over quality control in th[e] most important of industries, the manufacture of viable and usable human beings', and loyalty to a culture overrides ethnic, faith, and other pre-industrial forms of identity.

Culture and Modernity

Gramsci recognized that economic and political power is inherently bound up with culture. Economic or political activities are not in themselves enough to establish and maintain a consensual collective identification with a particular hegemonic order. Culture matters. Thus, although we might be able to side-step the problem of defining what a nation is in order to examine how national identity is articulated, emphasizing culture as the ground of nationhood begs the question, what is 'culture'?

'Few terms', writes Tomoko Masuzawa (1998: 70), 'are more foundational to our sense of reality and more thoroughly naturalized in our everyday discourse than "culture"'. Yet it is also, as Raymond Williams' (1983: 87) observed, 'one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.' Indeed, Williams' own examination of the term reminds us that the use of 'culture' as a concept is rooted in the same 'general pattern of change' associated with modernity (Williams, 1961: 13) which saw the emergence of not only the United States, but the nation-state as the key unit of social organization.

Williams (1983: 87) noted that 'culture' was, in pre-modern usage, a noun which referred to 'the tending of something, basically crops or animals'. Setting aside this still current biological use of the word, however, 'which depends on a literal continuity of physical process' (1983: 90), he identified three other key categories of usage. Firstly, culture is taken to describe 'a process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development'. Second, there is the anthropological use of the term 'which indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity

in general'. The third of Williams' categories, and which probably represents the most common present-day usage of the term, 'describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity', and refers to communication through such things as 'music, literature, painting and sculpture, theatre and film' (1983: 90).

Such activities, nominally secular, are often understood to be analytically distinct from religion. Indeed, theologians and other supporters of religion, often claim that 'religion is...that which always and necessarily exceeds culture'; that it is 'something essentially distinct from, surpassing, and sometimes standing decidedly against "mere culture" (Masuzawa, 1998: 70). Hence, Protestant theologian Paul Tillich (1959: 7-8), famously described 'religion' as '

ultimate concern...manifest in the moral sphere as the unconditional seriousness of moral demand (,)...in the realm of knowledge as the passionate longing for ultimate reality(,)...in the aesthetic function of the human spirit as the infinite desire to express ultimate meaning.

Within such a *Theology of Culture*, 'religion is the substance of culture, culture is the form of religion (1959: 42). Religion, in the more usual institutional sense, or as 'personal piety' was necessary, only 'because of the tragic estrangement of man's spiritual life from its own ground and depth'. It was important because it could open up this dimension of depth 'which is usually covered by the dust of our daily life and the noise of our secular work' (1959: 8-9). For those of a more atheistic or sceptical bent, of course, religion is a cultural institution defined by its works and practices, as opposed to transcending them, and religious authority is contingent upon its social utility (e.g. Marx, 1844). Yet, to what extent can we distinguish this understanding of culture, from Williams' second, broadly anthropological notion of culture as 'a particular way of life', wherein religion is routinely understood as the central belief 'system' of any given 'culture' or society (e.g. Durkheim, 1915; Geertz, 1973)? Furthermore, how does the notion of development fit into all this?

In the light of contemporary scholarship which seeks to understand the relationship between the evolution of *homo sapiens* as a species and the signifying practices of culture (e.g. Dunbar *et al*, 1999), Williams' (1983: 90) abstraction of

culture and society from the biological processes of life could stand some revision.³ Yet, to be fair to him, Williams' body of work does emphasize culture as lived experience. Moreover, it is as much from 'the range and overlap of meanings' associated with the term that the significance of 'culture' derives (1983: 91). As he put it, 'the complex of senses indicates a complex argument about the relations between general human development and a particular way of life, and between both the works and practices of art and intelligence' (1983: 91). Furthermore, where certain disciplines tend to emphasize 'material' production at the expense of 'symbolic' production, or vice versa, Williams' central concern was with 'the relations between "material" and "symbolic" production' (1983: 91). Hence, Williams himself was instrumental in extending the scope of cultural studies 'to include not only the traditional arts and forms of intellectual production but also all the "signifying practices" - from language through the arts and philosophy to journalism, fashion and advertising', and the opening up of 'distinctively new areas of interest, in "the media" and "popular culture"' (1981: 13). Unlike more traditional activities perhaps, these newer, more modern cultural practices and communicative forms are embedded in the material economy in quite obvious ways. While this makes distinguishing between culture in the sense of artistic and intellectual activity and culture as a way of life difficult, it also lends credence to the materialist perspective of Williams, and his stress upon 'language and signification as indissoluble elements of the material social process itself, involved all the time both in production and reproduction' (1977: 99). Recognizing communication as constitutive of experience and thus integral to human development, Williams, a Marxist, was more interested in how cultural forms 'work' in a social and political sense, how they mediate social relations within broader 'structures of feeling' (1965, 1977), than in the interpretation of any particular 'meanings' which they might impart.

From the point of view of the present study, Williams' (1980: 40) not untypical

³ Interestingly in this respect, Williams (1983: 219) himself wrote of 'Nature' that it 'is perhaps the most complex word in the language'.

view of religion as one of the mere 'residues - cultural as well as social - of some previous social formation' is unhelpful, going some way to explain the neglect of religion within the field of British cultural studies (Murdock, 1996: 89). He did understand, however, that the transformation and abstraction of 'culture' as an idea by English intellectuals from the late eighteenth century onward was prompted to a considerable extent by the social upheavals which attended industrialization and the broader process of modernization; something which included the erosion of church power and the emergence of the nation-state as the key locus of social and political authority (Williams, 1961). Indeed, Masuzawa (1998: 73) comments that the association of culture with a literary or artistic tradition and an 'ideal of human perfection' in, for example, Matthew Arnold's (1869) *Culture and Anarchy*, was 'intentionally regulative and disciplinary': what came to be described as 'high culture' was closely 'allied with the increasingly important sense of national identity, the presumption of the hegemony of the West over the rest, and the recognition of the West as the vanguard, if not the sole proper agent, of the civilizing process'.⁴ Responding to such tendencies, Williams' own work was directed towards an egalitarian reconfiguration of the relation between culture and community in the British context, a project which by and large excluded the issue of religion. What needs to be stressed here, though, is that Williams' keen sense of how the notion of culture was deployed in a conservative and hierarchical way, as a hedge against the democratization of society, is profoundly suggestive of the degree to which cultural activities can be seen as having taken on, in an anthropological sense at least, religious or quasi-religious functions in maintaining or, on occasion, even subverting the social and moral order in a world of nations. It was this broad context of modernization, including the scientific and technological developments associated with industrialization, the philosophical and political ideas associated with the Enlightenment, as well as colonial expansion, which furnished the intellectual context

⁴ See also, Said (1985, 1994).

within which religion might be abstracted as an object of scholarship in its own right.

The Category of Religion

The United States of America emerged from the first major and successful colonial rebellion of the modern era. In keeping with its revolutionary origins the new nation was constituted on the basis of what were then radical Enlightenment principles of liberty, equality and democracy. Under the influence of philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, what had hitherto been virtually unthinkable became *the* guiding idea of what was to become the most powerful nation on Earth; the belief that sovereignty flows not from a divinely ordained monarch or any other individual, but from the will of the people. Symbolic as well as practical, this break with the hierarchical ways of the Old World brought with it an entirely new religious settlement; a formal separation of church and state.

Enacted in 1791, the first Amendment to the American Bill of Rights went beyond the original constitutional dictum of 1789 that 'no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States', to state that 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof'. Integral to the amendment's broader guarantee of free speech, this was a significant break with the political traditions of the Old World. Prior to this 'second revolution' (Marty, 1985: 131), established churches had been the norm for most of the American colonies. Indeed, several states retained a religious establishment for a few years after 1791, with Massachusetts giving up the last vestiges of establishment as late as 1833 (Bellah *et al*, 1985: 220). Despite such pockets of reluctance though, the political arguments had been already been won at federal level, and Americans were, in effect, guaranteed freedom of and from religion as a right of citizenship. Somewhat paradoxically perhaps, what followed was the emergence of a vibrant, distinctive, highly competitive and plural, religious economy.

While the epochal separation of church and state is central to any discussion of the relationship between religion and American nationhood, it is invoked here in order to illustrate a particular set of theoretical problems concerning the category of religion. For example, Richard Grigg (1990: ix) notes a broad assumption in American culture

that the term religion properly refers to a distinct domain of human behaviour, thought and experience. The American Constitution...assumes religion as a given. Americans generally accept the idea that it is natural for people to have a religion and that being religious is a legitimate way to live....[T]his is to say that in American life religion is a native category. It is a basic classification that our culture routinely uses to sort out and organize the complexity of human existence.

Yet, just how natural is this 'category' of religion which the US constitution formally separates from the functions of state? What does the term 'religion' refer to, and what are the implications of such a classification? Is religion really such a 'given'?

Asking similar sorts of questions, a growing number of scholars have, in recent years, engaged in a reflexive and critical examination of the presuppositions which inform the study of religion (e.g. Asad, 1993; Capps, 1995; McCutcheon, 1997; Smith, 1998; King, 1999). Rather than working from the long-standing assumption that religions and religious phenomena can be readily identified as such (if not always so easily understood) with reference to a definable something called 'religion', a new generation of scholars has begun to turn its attention away from the study of, say, Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism, in order to examine what informs this assumption and what it might tell us about the practice of studying religion. This gradual shift in emphasis has led to a growing suspicion that far from being a given or native category, 'religion' is in many respects 'a term created by scholars' (Smith, 1998: 281): one which tells us as much about the historical and intellectual context within which the serious study of 'religion' developed, that is, the modernizing and colonizing powers of the Western hemisphere, as it does about the phenomena such scholarship examines. Whilst such a claim needs the development and illustration which follows below, the point that needs to be made here, is that the emergence of

religion as a category abstracted from the rest of social life can be seen as an integral part of the broader process of change which created the modern United States of America. This begs the question of how we should conceptualize 'religion' with regard to discussing it in relation to American national identity.

Religion and Social Theory: Marx, Durkheim, and Weber

The triumvirate of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber were foundational figures in the development of both social theory and the serious study of religion. But what often goes unacknowledged now is not only how important the issue of religion was in shaping their respective ideas about society, but the context in which these men developed their ideas on religion: a Europe in the throes of modernization, organizing and dividing itself along national lines.

Marx's (1844: 39) oft quoted analysis of the relationship between religion on the one hand and a society's economic and political structures on the other, as 'the heart of a heartless world' and 'the opium of the people', was foundational to a life's work elaborating a general theory of *alienation*; a condition he regarded as 'a denial of man's potentiality for creative intelligence and the building of a truly humane society (Swingewood, 1975: 93). For Marx, alienation was something brought about by oppressive socio-economic conditions within capitalist society. Religion, within this account, functions as an important institutional component of an ideological 'superstructure' serving to maintain a 'false consciousness' within society which allows the unjust exploitation of workers (i.e. those who by their labour create and maintain the material 'base') to continue as if it were somehow natural, inevitable or God-given (Marx and Engels, 1924: 65-72). In that respect, he viewed religion as little more than an adjunct to the state which he also saw as serving the capitalist ruling class. For although Marx accepted that religious activity represents a genuine response to material reality, and, as such, ministers to people's authentic needs, he saw religion itself as misconstruing those needs. Thus, religion can do nothing to alleviate the oppressive social relations he saw as the root source of alienation.

Although Marx devoted only a little time and effort to his reflections on religion, his writings on the subject were, as Denys Turner (1991) and others point out, pivotal in the general development of his ideas.⁵ Marx's (1844: 39) call to 'abolish religion' as 'illusory happiness' was integral to the demand for freedom or 'real happiness'. Whilst he did believe that religion was to some extent promoted by the ruling classes to serve their interests, Marx also recognized the degree to which the 'illusions' of religion express real needs. Viewed in this way, then, religion is truthful because it reveals, in cryptic form, the real and oppressive nature of existing social relations. Hence, despite Marx's atheism, one might argue that positing the possibility of a more 'natural' unalienated way of life for humanity represents 'a call for the *realization* rather than the *abolition* of religion (Hoover and Venturelli, 1996: 255, emphases in original)'. Indeed, Hoover and Venturelli (1996: 256) suggest that in criticizing the way human freedom and labour were assimilated to the production and circulation of commodities within an 'entire system of estrangement and alienation from...a life of free, expressive productivity', Marx had, 'in effect identified the religious consciousness of modernity', as primarily articulated now, via 'the mystical powers of the market', and, of course, the mass media.

As intriguing and provocative as such a reading of Marx is within the broader discussion of media, religion, and culture, though, we need to remember the cultural and historical specificity of the religious situation Marx was actually addressing; Prussian state Protestantism in the mid-nineteenth century. While the polemical and pamphleteering vigour of Marx's prose suggests universal applicability, and the 'criticism of European institutional religion...still warrants serious attention', Trevor Ling (1980: 17-18) is surely correct to question whether Marx's view of religion 'can

⁵ At roughly the same time as Feuerbach was setting forth his epiphenomenal explanation of religion, that religion was a projection of humanity, Marx had developed a personal interest in the relationship between the state and religion because the Prussian authorities had, on theological grounds secured the dismissal of his friend Bruno Bauer from a teaching post at Bonn University. From criticising the use of religion by the state, a critique which led him to regard German Christianity as being protected by the state from the potential threat of recent philosophical developments, Marx was moved to ask why the state regarded this as acting in its own interest. Moreover, as Trevor Ling (1980: 11) points out, 'this question was part of a deeper one: what and whose interests *were* represented by the state?'

be applied to other types of religion and other cultural situations'. With regard to the concerns of this study, there is certainly plenty of evidence to support the view that Christianity, as it developed in America, has been an important ally to the dominant bourgeois social order (e.g. Moore, 1994). But is religion really as monolithic as Marx appeared to suggest? In America and elsewhere, churches and other religious formations have, at times, been instrumental in struggles challenging the hegemonic order, as, for example, during the civil rights campaigns of the fifties and sixties. Might not the pluralism of American religion be seen as encouraging the articulation of difference and dissent (Warner, 1993)?

Marx's ideas remind us that *all* religious activity exists in relation to an historically specific socio-political, economic and cultural environment, and that religion is by no means a neutral or necessarily benign force within the conflicts and struggles which are in varying degrees ever-present in all societies. Nevertheless, in positing religion as a form of 'false consciousness', Marx did not have to grapple with the possibility that however degraded religious institutions might become, their social authority depends in large measure on the efficacious provision of a framework of meaning through which human beings could come to terms with such painful, inescapable and universal facts of life as sickness, old age, bereavement and death. Is there really, as the Buddha also claimed, the possibility of a 'true' consciousness free from 'illusion'; a world beyond the contingencies of culture? Indeed, one might argue that the weakness of the epiphenomenal understanding of religion proposed by Marx is that it fails to consider the degree to which the mythologies and rituals associated with religion actually enable individuals to come together in shared attitudes and emotions, thereby creating the collective solidarity necessary for social action.

Marx's neglect of, as it were, the social benefits of religious practices was in many respects the starting point for Emile Durkheim's work on religion. In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1915), Durkheim set out a hugely influential and widely discussed theory of religion which laid great emphasis upon the role of

religion in the maintenance of a collective identity. In working towards a definition of religion, Durkheim argued that the mechanics of religious identification, that is, the beliefs and rituals through which identification is articulated, depended upon the recognition of boundaries between two distinct classes of things, be they real or ideal; the sacred and the profane. Hence his definition:

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church all those who adhere to them. (1915: 123)

Furthermore, while Durkheim identified the object or 'totem' of collective worship as nothing less than society itself, he was quite explicit in stressing the difference between his own theoretical position and that of Marx. Durkheim (1915: 152) thought it 'obvious that social life depends on its substratum and bears its marks', and argued that the 'ideal' was as fundamental a component of human 'reality' as was the 'material'. The moral force of religion, the '*mana*' or 'collective effervescence' created in ritual which affirms the social order, is above all, something *felt*.

Durkheim could, perhaps, be accused of having overstated his case at times, and of giving insufficient acknowledgement to the social impact of economics. Still, his insights do retain a relevance and force within the broader discussion of a nation as an imagined community:

a society is not simply constituted by a mass of individuals who compose it, by the territory they occupy, by the things they use and the actions they perform, but above all by the idea it has about itself. To be sure, it hesitates about the way it ought to see itself: it feels pulled in different directions. When these conflicts do break out, however, they do not take place between the ideal and the real but between different ideals. (1915: 152)

Yet, although Durkheim clearly saw that competing worldviews may well lead to conflict, there is, as a result of his understandable concentration on the '*conscience collectif*' and what he took to be religion in its primal form, no real attempt to account for religion within a pluralist society. Noting the background against which Durkheim was writing, moreover, a Europe drifting towards war, one might say that it is the

nation and its totem, the flag, which most resembles the theory of religion proposed by him (e.g. Marvin and Ingle, 1999).

For Durkheim, the attempt to understand religion was, in effect, a means of explaining society. Thus aside from its obvious applicability to the issue of national identity, Durkheim's schema works well as a starting point in explaining the importance of religious identities within America. As Brian Wilson (1982: 152) points out, in a nation which has developed with large numbers of immigrants and a high degree of mobility among its populace, 'churches have functioned as much more basic foci of community identity than has been their role in settled societies'. What is of concern here, though, is the status of a 'church', as Durkheim used the term, when members of that church are in routine contact with members of another church. Embracing pluralism cannot help but have an effect on the believer because the difference between a Jew and a Christian, or indeed a Methodist and a Baptist, is, by definition, a meaningful one. To illustrate and develop this notion of difference further, we might usefully add the third figure of our triumvirate to the discussion.

Max Weber's (1930) *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* was first published in 1904-5 as a two-part article. In it, Weber argued that capitalism, in its 'peculiar modern Western form' (1930: 24), was able to develop because of a special set of circumstances, wherein the right material conditions began to be exploited because of the existence of a particular 'ethos' (1930: 27) derived from Protestant, or even more specifically, Calvinist theology. This Puritan ethic derived from Martin Luther's notion of 'the Calling', positing

the fulfilment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume....[T]he only way of living acceptably to God was not to surpass worldly morality in monastic asceticism [the Catholic model], but solely through the fulfilment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world. (1930: 80)

John Calvin's theological 'twist' on this was to maintain that while redemption was predestined, there was no way of knowing whether one had been chosen by God or not. It simply made sense to act as if one were. Hence, Calvinists developed a

'worldly asceticism' combining a strong work ethic along with a fear of the corruptions of wealth, that is, 'the spontaneous enjoyment of possessions' (Weber, 1930: 171). It was this Weber dubbed 'the spirit of capitalism'. As he put it, 'when the limitation of consumption is combined with this release of acquisitive activity, the inevitable practical result is obvious: accumulation of capital through ascetic compulsion to save' (1930: 172).

Weber's argument in *the Protestant Ethic* turns on the particular differences between believers. Weber did not simply distinguish between Protestant and Catholic, but between Calvinist and Lutheran. For Weber, the theological differences between the sects of Protestantism were seen to be historically and sociologically important in so far as they *motivated* particular modes of behaviour. Some of these ways of living, he argued, were more favourable to the development of capitalism than others. Significantly though, Weber did not suggest that it was religion which caused capitalism. Within Weber's 'interpretative' methodology, 'there is no such thing...as unilateral determination of the whole of society by one element, whether this element be economic, political, or religious' (Aron, 1970: 205). Thus, while Weber may have been sympathetic to aspects of Marxist thought in seeing the rationalization of modern industrial capitalism as an 'iron cage' (1930: 181), he was in profound yet productive disagreement with both the methodology of, and the analysis derived from, Marx's historical materialism. Weber's conception of causality emphasizes the processual relations between aspects of reality and denies that any one element can determine 'other aspects of reality without being influenced by them in return' (Aron, 1970: 205). Hence, whether one buys into the specifics of Weber's argument in the *Protestant Ethic* or not, the basic point made is that capitalist society was not something inevitable or 'meant to be'. Rather, it developed in the way it did out of a complex and particular set of material *and* ideological circumstances.

Weber's thesis has obvious relevance to the broader examination of religion in America being pursued here, not least because of the importance scholars have traditionally attached to Puritanism as an influence upon American culture. Suffice to

say here, Weber's contention that crucial aspects of the ideological framework within which capitalist endeavour 'made sense' were religious in origin reminds us that embracing capitalism is more or less a non-negotiable aspect of American national identity. As Robert Bellah (1975) notes, there is no bigger taboo in America than socialism. Indeed, Weber himself not only lamented the way in which the religious meanings which had infused capitalist praxis with spiritual value had, in his estimation, become forgotten (1930: 53), but he also poured particular scorn, in this regard, on America (1930: 182). Yet, to what extent was Weber correct in his assessment that economic development in the United States was leading to 'disenchantment', and the dissolution of religious and spiritual frames of meaning? What explanation would he give for the persistence with which large numbers of Americans continue to identify themselves as 'believers'? Moreover, given the fervour with which national identities are embraced, both in America and beyond, was Weber's proclamation of disenchantment anything more than nostalgia? For, the basic assumption which informed the work of Weber, as well as Marx and Durkheim, and thus the basis upon which the sociology of religion is largely founded, is that what we recognize as religion, while important, would be rendered obsolete by the process of modernization.

Religion and Legitimation: 'The Sacred Canopy'

Written from a perspective heavily influenced by Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, and sharing their broad agreement view that religion was destined to fade as a social influence, Peter Berger's (1967) *The Sacred Canopy* theorizes the widespread historical importance of religion as *legitimation*; as a means of explaining and justifying, the 'inherently precarious...social order' (1967: 29). For Berger, religion is particularly effective in this regard because it relates the contingencies of the social world to an absolute or ultimate reality. Seeing religion as a social construction, however, Berger (1967: 45) indicates 'social-structural prerequisites', which demand continual maintenance and repair, if this legitimating function is to be fulfilled:

Worlds are socially constructed and socially maintained. Their continuing reality, both objective (as common, taken for granted facticity) and subjective (as facticity imposing itself on individual consciousness), depends upon *specific* social processes...that ongoingly reconstruct and maintain the particular worlds in question....[T]he interruption of these social processes threatens the (objective and subjective) reality of the worlds in question. Thus each world requires a social "base" for its continuing existence as a world that is real to actual human beings. This "base" may be called its plausibility structure .

Berger's notion of 'plausibility structures' is a useful route into the problems raised by the existence of religious pluralism; an issue fundamental to any discussion of religion in the American context. For, as Kevin Christiano (1987: 124) notes, 'one way to disrupt religious plausibility is to introduce religious pluralism (and the competition it engenders) to a society'.

Writing elsewhere, Berger along with Thomas Luckmann (1967: 81) draws a suggestive comparison between religious pluralism and the choices faced by the (post)modern shopper, thus pulling together some of the religious implications:

Religious pluralism...entails religious subjectivization....This change is already given in the reflective attitude that the consumer comes to take as he is presented with a multiplicity of products. He (sic.) must choose between them, is thereby forced to hesitate, to compare, to deliberately evaluate. In this process the traditional religious affirmations about the nature of reality lose their taken-for-granted quality. They cease to be objective truth and become matters of subjective choice, belief, preference....Strictly speaking, every religion in the pluralistic situation is a *heresy* - that is, a *hairesis*, or *choice* .

What Berger and Luckmann describe, has been described as the 'privatization' of religion (e.g. Berger *et al*, 1974; Bellah *et al*,1985): the reduction of religion to little more than the choices of a single conscience within the 'religious marketplace' (Hatch, 1989). In America, perhaps the supreme example of this free-market in religion, Berger's line of argument might lead one to expect the social order to collapse. Yet, this is clearly not the case. Instead, the moral force, legitimacy, and givenness of religion (as understood by Berger) would appear to have been appropriated by the nation(-state). For although Berger (1967: 107) is content to mention nationalism briefly as part of what he sees as the secularizing process of

modernization, judged by his own criteria the nation has indeed taken over many of the core social functions he ascribes to religion.

As if anticipating the subsequent scholarly discussion of national identity outlined above, Berger (1967: 40-41) stresses the social importance of collective memory in furnishing a necessary sense of continuity 'between the present moment and the societal tradition' which thus places 'the experiences of the individual and the various groups of the society in the context of a history (fictitious or not) that transcends them all'. Collective memory involves the ongoing construction of a narrative (or set of narratives) which makes sense of the past and our relationship to it. But while he is surely correct in asserting that 'through most of history, this memory has been a religious one' (1967: 41), this function has in modern times come to revolve around the myths, rituals, and institutions of nationhood (e.g. Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990; Anderson, 1991; Schlesinger, 1991). More fundamentally perhaps, Berger develops his thesis regarding religion and maintenance of the social world by arguing that 'the power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it' (1967: 51). On that basis, while faith orientations might remain important, it is the nation, and its capacity to inspire the willing sacrifice of life, which has increasingly come to command supreme social authority (Marvin and Ingle 1996, 1999). In such circumstances, what function do the practices and institutions we commonly describe as religious fulfil?

Geertz and Asad: 'Religion as a Cultural System'?

For anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973), religion is not to be explained in terms of its social functions but, rather, something to be interpreted. Propounding a methodological approach he dubs 'thick description' (1973: 3), as a means to interpret the meaning of cultural activities in relation to their social context, Geertz (1973: 90) famously defines 'religion' as

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

Emphasizing the active, creative, and expressive aspects of religious activities and phenomena, the Geertzian approach incorporates an aspiration to go beyond the mere reporting ('thin description') of religious phenomena in order to understand the meanings articulated by religions, 'as cultural systems' (1973: 87 *et passim*) on their own terms.

Geertz (1973: 92-93) notes that 'systems or complexes of symbols', or what he terms 'cultural patterns', are often conceived of as 'models'. What he stresses, however, is the 'intrinsic double aspect' to these models: cultural patterns are both models *of* "reality", and models *for* "reality" in that 'they give meaning, that is objective conceptual form, to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves (1973: 93). While the model *of* aspect is, as Marx argued, something epiphenomenal, a symbolic reflection of economic, political and social structures, it is the models *for* aspect of religion, the way religion shapes the social order, which Geertz (1973: 119), like Weber, emphasizes. What Geertz suggests is that although 'models *for*' exist throughout nature, like the genes that determine animal behaviour, these 'intrinsic sources of information' are too generalized in humans to do any more than loosely determine our behaviour. Hence the overwhelming importance of 'extrinsic' cultural 'sources of information' (1973: 92-94). Indeed, it is their capacity to fuse both *motivations* and *moods*, which gives religious symbols their particular cultural force as 'models *for*' (1973: 97). Geertz (1993: 126) writes,

religion is never merely metaphysics. For all peoples the forms, vehicles, and objects of worship are suffused with an aura of deep moral seriousness. The holy bears within it everywhere a sense of intrinsic obligation: it not only encourages devotion, it demands it; it not only induces intellectual assent, it enforces emotional commitment.

Further reiterating the double aspect of religion as a cultural system, however, he adds that 'religion is never merely ethics either'. Somewhat like Berger (1967), Geertz (1973: 126) argues that

the source of [religion's] moral vitality is conceived to lie in the fidelity with which it expresses the fundamental nature of reality. The powerfully coercive "ought" is felt to grow out of a comprehensive factual "is", and in such a way religion grounds the most specific requirements of human action in the most general contexts of human existence.

In this way, religious symbols synthesize a culture's "ethos",...the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood', with its members' "world view",...their picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society' (1973: 127).

Stressing the 'deep moral seriousness' suffusing religious activity, Geertz (1993: 113) avoids the tendency towards the analytical inclusivism implicit in Durkheim's understanding of religion, asserting that 'all cultural performances are not religious performances'. Indeed, he argues, that there is a limit to the number of religious symbols in any culture. In Geertz's (1973: 98) view, for something to be "religious" it must be 'symbolic of some transcendent truths'. Thus although he acknowledges the practical difficulty of drawing a line between the 'religious' on the one hand and the 'cultural' (or 'artistic' or 'political') on the other, noting that 'symbolic forms can serve multiple purposes' (1973: 113), Geertz regards the special authority of sacred symbols and the long term prospects for the practical vitality of any given religion as resting upon their capacity for dealing with 'chaos - a tumult of events which lack not just interpretations but *interpretability*'(1973: 100). Geertz sees the three sources of this chaos as 'bafflement, suffering, and a sense of intractable moral paradox' (1973: 100). A religion, if it is to be effective, must deal with these three problems, respectively: by providing explanations which fill the gaps at the limits of analytic capacity, especially in accounting for the "odd", the "strange" or the "uncanny"; by filling the gap at the limits of human endurance and allowing 'physical pain, personal loss, worldly defeat, or the helpless contemplation of others' agony' to

be 'something bearable, supportable,...sufferable' (1973: 100-1); by making sense of the world when 'one's moral insight is inadequate to one's moral experience'(1973: 106), as in dealing with the problem of evil. For Geertz, the maintenance of a religious attitude revolves around this tripartite 'Problem of Meaning'.

Clifford Geertz lays great emphasis upon the 'particularity of the impact of religious systems upon social systems' arguing that 'general assessments of the value of religion in either moral or functional terms [are] impossible' (1993: 122). Thus he rejects what he describes as 'the self-imposed limitations of the scientific perspective' (1993: 123). As has already been noted, the differences between different religions, churches or sects are by definition, and in varying degrees, significant. Religions are not 'all the same'. Hence, rather than looking for some narrowly defined 'essence' of religion à la Durkheim, Geertz is arguing for cultural analysis which is sensitive to these meaningful differences, seeing in the particular something worthy of discussion and celebration even. Nevertheless, in relation to the study at hand there are problems raised by understanding of 'religion as a cultural system'.

Geertz's standpoint with regard to religion reflects the concerns of anthropology (i.e a peculiarly western discipline) and its traditional orientation towards 'the other'. Recognition of this prompts several inter-related questions. Firstly, who is Geertz writing for? In recounting or translating 'other' cultures for an educated western audience, is he merely exercising and maintaining the power and privilege which attends his position as a senior academic within the most powerful nation in the world? Second, to what extent can Geertz's model of religion as a 'system' accommodate the dynamics of socio-cultural change? Although his method of 'thick description' demands active reading of cultural activity, Geertz seems unwilling to entirely abandon the notion that there is a central, irreducible (though, to the anthropologist, largely unknowable) core to a religion or culture; that, to borrow a phrase from Alberto Melucci (1989: 18), a particular religion is best addressed as 'a unified empirical datum'. Geertz's understanding of religious symbols appears to

suggest to that the range of meanings a symbol can carry is, in theory, limited, or at least bounded by the webs of signification which hold it within culture. So although Geertz recognizes that meaning creation is an active process, there is in his account an implicit division between 'correct' and 'incorrect' readings, and thus a denial of the inherent reflexivity of anthropological writing.

Even within a fairly closed society, differences such as age, gender, life experience, and social status, for example, will prompt a variety of orientations towards shared religious symbols. The scope for shifts or changes in the religious or cultural meanings conveyed by symbols, whether through rejection, misrecognition, changing material circumstances within a culture, or the unpredictable results of cross-cultural exchanges such as war, trade, migration, or indeed anthropology, is, one might argue, greater than Geertz cares to acknowledge. Hence the third, final, and, in terms of this thesis, most important question is this: how does one apply Geertz's semiotic conception of religion to the distinctively plural religious environment of his own backyard so to speak, that is, the United States, where the religious economy has been characterised by diversity, conflict, and innovation?

Clifford Geertz's eminence as an anthropologist makes his work a logical starting point for Talal Asad's (1993: 27-54) trenchant analysis of how western scholarship constructed religion as an anthropological category. Despite Geertz's denial of there being any generalizable shared core to religion, Asad (1993: 28) recognizes that the emergence of 'religion' as an '*analytically* available' (emphasis in original) category within Western scholarship necessarily implies an essentialist definition of religion 'as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon' (1993: 28). This view of religion, Asad (1993: 28) notes, fits neatly 'with the liberal demand in our time that [religion] be kept quite separate from politics, law, and science—spaces in which varieties of power and reason articulate our distinctively modern life'. Moreover, 'this separation of religion from power is a modern Western norm, the product of a unique post-Reformation history' (1993: 28). Thus, contra any essentialist or universalist notion of religion, Asad (1993: 29) argues 'that there

cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes'. For Asad (1993: 54), the scholarly abstraction of religion exemplified in Geertz's anthropology represents an index of 'a particular history of knowledge and power (including a particular understanding of our legitimate past and future) out of which the modern world has been constructed' (parentheses in original).

This history, of course, is the same history that has witnessed the emergence of the modern United States and, integral to it, the constitutional separation of religion from the exercise of government. The modern idea of the nation is central here. Surveying the broader scholarly paradigm which of which Geertz is an exemplar, Richard King (1999: 78) points out that it is based in a kind of "cultural isolationism"...that...presupposes an absolutistic and monolithic conception of cultures, strongly based upon the "nationalist" model'. The notion of a particular religion (entirely distinct from other religions in the terms proposed by Geertz) corresponds, therefore, with a broader intellectual strategy which classifies "cultures"...along geopolitical, continental, and nationalistic lines', and divides 'humanity into certain geocultural groupings called "nations"' (1999: 78). Hence, there is a sense in which the 'othering' implicit in the Geertzian understanding of religion tells us as much about the broad social context within which it was formulated as it does about religion.

Problematizing Geertz's definition of a 'symbol', Asad (1993: 31) suggests that instead of it being 'an object or event that serves to carry a meaning' a 'symbol' can more usefully be thought of as 'a set of relationships between objects or events uniquely brought together as complexes or as concepts, having at once an intellectual, instrumental, and emotional significance'. By addressing religious symbols in this way, Asad highlights the historical contingency of religious 'meanings' and the authority upon which those meanings depend by Geertz's (1973: 109) account. In proposing religion as a relatively discrete cultural 'system', more or less

distinguishable from the realm of the secular, and discussing religious symbols in terms of their being patterns 'of' and 'for' reality, Geertz is offering us a rather static model of religion in relation to the social world. Thus Asad (1993: 32) notes how Geertz's schema 'makes it difficult to understand how social change can ever occur'. As Susanne Langer (1942: 153), evidently an influence on Geertz, recognized, the 'emotional attitudes' which, in her account, form the raw materials of ritual, are always closely linked with the exigencies of current life, colored by immediate cares and desires, by specific memories and hopes'. Whatever one's social location, such 'exigencies' are always the product of temporally specific social, political, geographical, economic, and cultural determinations of circumstance and power relations. Looked at in this way, religion is anything but a 'system'; rather, a complex, expressive and, to some degree at least, open and unpredictable set of processes within life. The meanings of religious symbols and actions mutate along with the nominally secular context in which they are deployed. As Asad (1993: 53-54) puts it,

Religious symbols—whether one thinks of them in terms of communication or of cognition, of guiding action or of expressing emotion—cannot be understood independently of their historical relations with nonreligious symbols or of their articulations in and of social life, in which work and power are always crucial...[It] is not just that religious symbols are intimately linked to social life, (and so change with it), or that they usually support dominant political power (and occasionally oppose it). It is that different kinds of practice and discourse are intrinsic to the field in which religious representations (like any representation) acquire their identity and their truthfulness. From this it does not follow that the meanings of religious practices and utterances are to be sought in social phenomena, but only that their possibility and their authoritative status are to be explained as products of historically distinctive disciplines and forces.

Although Asad's historicized and power-conscious critique of religion, as an analytically available scholarly category, highlights the problems which arise when students of religion fail to account for the historically contingent nature of the academic context in which they themselves work, it also indicates the potential riches

available to an historicized cultural studies deploying the category of the 'religious' as a window onto the past.

For, as valuable as Asad's reading of Geertz and all that the latter represents is to the broad field of Religious Studies, the Geertzian emphasis on the communicative aspects of religious phenomena, on the attempt to understand the significance of religious actions or utterances with reference to their social context, remains relevant to the concerns of this study. If 'religion' in contemporary American society is indeed something defined by its exclusion from the formal exercise of power, what functions might we still ascribe to it? What impact upon public life do the activities conducted in the religious marketplace have? Geertz's widely cited understanding of religion may have developed in the particular context of American scholarship, and thus bears the imprint of the national model. But this does not in itself invalidate it as particular theory of what religion is. To be sure, Geertz's emphasis on the comprehensive, all-encompassing nature of the 'religious perspective' makes it difficult to apply to the pluralism of the American religious economy. Nevertheless, his discussion of 'religion as a cultural system' reflects a distinctively American view about religion, how it works and what it does: that religion as defined by the First Amendment is not only a 'native category' but, above all perhaps, a particular mode of expression, a privileged medium of communication.

Religion in America

As already acknowledged, the founding of the United States was marked by the formal separation of all religious organizations from the apparatus of federal government and, eventually, the nation-wide institutionalization of religious freedom. Far from marking the beginning of the end for religion and religious institutions in America, however, disestablishment would appear to have furnished the conditions for the development of a vibrant, diverse, and intensely competitive religious economy which has thus far confounded the widespread assumption that secularization (as the death of religion) would be one of the defining characteristics

of modernity. Indeed, the passion with which belief is held and expressed by many citizens remains integral to the pounding rhythms, complex harmonies, and striking counterpoints of American life. From the mythological significance invested in the landing of the Pilgrim Fathers at Plymouth Rock, through to the affirmation of faith on every dollar bill, American culture exudes an evangelical tang; an aesthetic, if you will, of righteousness, purpose, and hope, which, along with its immense economic, military, and political power, sets it apart from every other modern nation. How, then, might we theorize the apparent paradox between religious disestablishment on the one hand, and the fundamental importance of religion to the articulation of US national identity on the other?

Tocqueville: Religion as the Base of Civil Society

Less than fifty years after the revolution, and faced with the 'innumerable multitude of sects in the United States', Alexis de Tocqueville (1966 [1835]: 267; 273) 'wondered how...by diminishing the apparent power of religion one increased its real strength'. In what is probably one of the earliest discussions of national identity, Tocqueville (1966: 271-72) contrasted his native France, where he 'had seen the spirits of religion and of freedom almost always marching in opposite directions', with America, where he found these spirits 'intimately linked together in joint reign over the same land'. Certainly, the Protestant churches in America were not tainted by association with the *ancien régime*, hence the anti-clericalism which had informed political agitation in Europe never really existed in the United States. For Tocqueville, therefore, who saw religion as a fundamental aspect of human nature (i.e. a native category), it was the fact that religion was free from the vicissitudes of politics in America that was, in his estimation, the source of its lasting strength there (1966: 273-75).

With regard to the benefits of religion within American society, Tocqueville (1966: 267) argued that whilst 'each sect worships God in its own fashion...all the sects in the United States belong to the great unity of Christendom, and Christian

morality is everywhere the same'. The supposed provision of a common morality was crucial according to Tocqueville, in limiting and moderating the potential for social harm arising out of individualism and materialism. As he put it, 'the main business of religions is to purify, control, and restrain that excessive and exclusive taste for well-being which men (*sic*) acquire in times of equality' (1966: 413), and which, as Robert Bellah et al (1985: 223) affirm in the present, is 'so common among Americans'. In other words, religion was cast as a disciplinary force; a means of social control. Hence, Tocqueville (1966: 269) famously wrote that

while the law allows the American people to do everything, there are things which religion prevents them from imagining and forbids them to dare.

Religion, which never intervenes directly in the government of American society, should therefore be considered as the first of their political institutions, for although it did not give them the taste for liberty, it singularly facilitates their use thereof.

The inhabitants of the United States themselves consider religious beliefs from this angle. I do not know if all Americans have faith in their religion - for who can read the secrets of the heart? - but I am sure that they think it necessary to the maintenance of republican institutions. That is not the view of one class or party among the citizens, but of the whole nation; it is found in all ranks.

According to the Tocquevillean view of America, therefore, and despite a plurality of denominations, political legitimacy is conceived of within the national culture as something derived, ultimately, from God.

Religion and US National Identity: Bellah and the American Civil Religion

Tocqueville's analysis of how important religion was to the then young American nation has proved itself to be a remarkably prescient and influential one. In more recent times, this influence has manifested itself most clearly in the work of Robert Bellah, a sociologist of religion, whose widely cited and discussed work can be seen to represent a sustained, critical, but nonetheless, loving examination of American culture. Like Tocqueville, Bellah has consistently stressed the special importance of religion in American life. Crucially, moreover, Bellah (1976: 216-218) was one of the first scholars to challenge the assumptions drawn from modern European Christianity

which inform the construction of religion as an 'historically discrete cultural tradition'. Claiming that a focus on 'belief' as the defining characteristic of religion was a hindrance to an effective sociology of religion, Bellah rejected the secularization thesis and instead urged a practice-based reconceptualization of religion to include all the forms 'through which man comes to terms with the antinomies of his being' (1976: 227). In a sense, therefore, Bellah is a key precursor of the practice-oriented scholarship on media, religion, and culture this thesis addresses. With regard, moreover, to this study's efforts to promote considerations of national identity within the evolving paradigm, Bellah is especially important as he is closely associated with the idea of an 'American civil religion'.

Acknowledging a long-standing debate regarding the religious aspect to US nationhood (e.g. Lerner, 1937; Niebuhr, 1937; Herberg, 1960; Berger, 1961; Mead, 1963, 1967), Bellah (1967: 1) began a famous and widely cited article thus:

While some have argued that Christianity is the national faith, and others that church and synagogue celebrate only the generalized religion of "the American Way of Life," few have realized that there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America...[and] that this religion - or perhaps better, this religious dimension - has its own seriousness and integrity and requires the same care in understanding that any other religion does .

Taking up the notion of 'civil religion' proposed ahead of the French Revolution by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, within a theoretical perspective on religion drawn from Durkheim, Bellah argued that the separation of church and state enacted in the First Amendment did not, in fact, deny the political realm a religious dimension. Indeed, emphasizing how certain religious orientations, widely shared among Americans, influenced the development of American institutions, he suggested that the deployment of religious conceptions such as God during state ceremonies, particularly those associated with the Presidency was a means of reaffirming the legitimacy and authority of the nation's political order.

Evidence in support of this broad thesis came largely from the language used by presidents on public occasions such as inauguration addresses. Thus, Bellah began his article by discussing John F. Kennedy's inauguration address; its invocation of America's revolutionary past, its call to reaffirm a national sense of mission, and three places in the speech where the new president mentioned God.

Clearly, a cynic might say 'that religion has "only a ceremonial significance"' in as politicized a context as a presidential inauguration; 'an American president has to mention God or risk losing votes'. Yet, as Bellah (1967: 2) reminds us,

we know enough about the function of ceremonial and ritual in various societies to make us suspicious of dismissing something as unimportant because it is "only a ritual". What people say on solemn occasions need not be taken at face value, but it is often indicative of deep-seated values and commitments that are not made explicit in the course of everyday life.

What then, can we learn about American life, from this 'civil religion'?

Bellah (1967: 18) argued that the central concern of the American civil religion is 'not the worship of the American nation but an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality'. It is thus a specialized development of Tocqueville's view that religion is the *first* of America's political institutions:

Though the will of the people as expressed in majority vote is carefully institutionalized as the operative source of political authority, it is deprived of an ultimate significance. The will of the people is not itself the criterion of right and wrong. There is a higher criterion in terms of which this will can be judged; it is possible the people may be wrong. (Bellah, 1967: 4)

Hence, an oath being sworn before the people *and* God affirms that the president's obligation extends to this ultimate authority. Recognizing the despotic potential of this, however, Bellah (1967: 4) indicated the primacy of the individual citizen's conscience over the possible injunctions of the state, citing Kennedy's assertion that 'the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God'. These rights, moreover, are 'more basic than any political structure and provide a point of revolutionary leverage from which any state structure may be radically altered' (1967: 4).

For Bellah (1967: 5), Kennedy, the first Catholic elected to the White House, had restated a theme closely associated with Protestantism; one lying 'very deep in the American tradition, namely the obligation, both collective and individual, to carry out God's will on earth'. Indicating, moreover, how central this tradition is within the public life of the nation, Bellah traced it back as far as the Deism of key founding fathers such as Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, as well as the first President, George Washington. Again, sensitive to the possible charge that references to God', 'morality', 'the Almighty', 'Heaven', and 'Israel' might be dismissed of as mere 'empty formalism', Bellah (1967: 8) maintained that this 'civil religion was specific enough when it came to the topic of America', and that 'because of this...served as a genuine vehicle of national religious self-understanding' in the early days of the republic. However, the exemplar of this civil religion, according to Bellah (1967: 9-12), was, and remains, Abraham Lincoln, in whom were embodied 'the deepest questions of national meaning' raised by the Civil War. By Bellah's (1967: 9) account, the issue of slavery was, for Lincoln, transcended by the broader question of nationhood: 'his task was, first of all, to save the Union—not for America alone but for the meaning of America to the whole world'. Indeed, whilst Lincoln's public pronouncements drew on the Biblical archetypes undergirding the civil religion ('Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, Sacrificial Death and Rebirth' [1967: 18]), his religious authority probably surpassed that claimed by the churches. With regard to the Gettysburg Address, for example, Bellah (1967: 10) noted how the 'theme of 'death, sacrifice, and rebirth...("...those who here gave their lives, that that nation might live")', was derived from Christian symbolism, but expressed 'without having anything to do with the Christian church'. Of course, Lincoln's subsequent 'martyrdom' led somewhat inevitably to his symbolic equation with Jesus around the theme of sacrifice (1967: 10-11). Nevertheless, it is the 'genuinely American and genuinely new' (1967: 18) aspects of this civil religion Bellah sought to emphasize. Conscious of the theological crisis prompted by modernity where even 'the meaning of the word *God* is by no means so clear or so

obvious' (1967: 15) as it was to Franklin, Jefferson, and Washington, Bellah (1967: 12) used Lincoln to illustrate how a American civil religion 'at its best' might represent a source of religious insight beyond denominational sectionalism. Whilst plainly aware of how open to abuse this civil religion might be, Bellah's initial concern was with its positive possibilities. Responding to the upheavals which were transforming American society during the sixties, Bellah had invoked arguably the most revered figure in American history as a means to reflect upon the meaning of US nationhood in religious terms.

Although important, Bellah's short article on the American civil religion tends now to be cited rather than examined in any detail. It would, moreover, be foolish to deny the extensive criticism Bellah's paper has drawn, some of which will also be incorporated into the discussion below. The original essay does, however, furnish a still valuable point of entry into a discussion of how religion has informed the discourse of American national identity. It also establishes many of the ideas and themes to be addressed below in examining *The Birth of a Nation* and relations between religion and film in American culture; ideas and themes that Bellah himself developed. Ahead of any critical commentary on the notion of an American civil religion, therefore, it might be useful to trace how Bellah's work has continued to use the prism of religion as a means to understand America.

Reflecting, perhaps, the confusion of responses to his original article, as well as the widespread disillusionment experienced within America during the 1970s, Bellah's own view of the civil religion he described soon became a good deal less hopeful (e.g. Bellah 1973, 1975). In spite of this, or possibly even because, Bellah continued to insist on the importance of the religious dimension of US national life. In *The Broken Covenant* (1975), for example, he reviews 'America's Myth of Origin', and the attendant notion derived from Puritanism that America was a 'Chosen People' (1975: 1-60), as a way of addressing what he dubbed America's 'third time of trial' (1967: 421; 1975: 1); the problems facing American society in the wake of the

sixties.⁶ Whereas ‘biblical events and images, elaborated in the colonial experience,...came to provide a structure of mythic meaning for the great founding events of the republic’ (1975: 21), Bellah decries the lack of such a shared imaginative frame of reference in the national present.

In *Habits of the Heart*, Bellah *et al* (1985: 233 *et passim*), posit religion as a kind of ‘second language’ enabling Americans to engage in and commit to the life of the national community. In this later formulation, American culture is conceived of in terms based in Alasdair MacIntyre’s (1981: 206-07) notion of tradition as argument. Bellah *et al* (1985: 27) write that ‘so long as it is vital, the cultural tradition of a people—its symbols, ideals, and ways of feeling—is always an argument about the meaning of the destiny its members share’. Thus, while they recognize the significance of republicanism and liberalism as themes that have vied with Bible-based conceptions of the good and just society within American culture, the discourse of religion is nonetheless understood as being absolutely crucial to that argument and hence national self-understanding. To which one might respond; crucial to whom, and why?

Bellah’s enduring and somewhat prescriptive interest in the role religion plays in shaping a ‘common American culture’ (1998), is, as has already been indicated, rooted in Tocqueville’s essentially disciplinary notion that religion represents the first of America’s political institutions. Hence, Bellah’s work has consistently sought to engage with the inherent tension between, on the one side, republican ideals of active concerned citizenship, and, on the other, liberalism, especially the individualistic and economic aspects of liberalism. Whilst the influence of Enlightenment thought ensured the ideals of both republicanism and liberalism would be espoused within the constitution and subsequent development of the nation, Bellah (1980: 10) argues that ‘not only are these political ideas...different; they are

⁶ Bellah (1967: 421; 1975:1) understands the first two times of trial as, respectively, the revolutionary struggle to establish an independent republic, and the Civil War.

profoundly antithetical'. Developing the point in Tocquevillean style, he writes that Exclusive concern for self-interest is the very definition of the corruption of republican virtue. The tendency to emphasize the private, particularly the economic side of life in the liberal state, undermines the public participation essential to a republic. The wealth the liberal society generates is fatal to the basic political equality of a republic. (1980: 10)

The moral restraint associated with religion, therefore, is seen as the primary means to counter the corrupting individualism of liberalism and so sustain the more community oriented virtues of republicanism. Thus, Bellah (1980: 16) claims that the churches have been more important than the public school system in creating American citizens. Such an assertion is certainly contentious, but it does nonetheless reflect the historical importance of religion in establishing a distinctively American public sphere. For what Bellah is both invoking in terms of content and reflective of in terms of form, are those aspects of the American tradition and national identity commonly associated with Puritanism.

'Like a City Upon a Hill': The Puritan Legacy

As Daniel Walker Howe (1988: 1057) observes 'the Puritans of colonial America are among the most-studied people in all history'. The main reason for this, Howe (1988: 1057) suggests, 'is that scholars have an invincible sense that in studying Puritanism they are uncovering the roots of American culture, "the origins of the American self"'. At one level, this bears little relation to the fact that the early settlement and colonization of North America by Europeans took place in several locations and involved men, women, and children of various religious leanings, and was primarily motivated by economic considerations. Yet, as the work of Robert Bellah confirms, the knowledge of this has done little to undermine the status of the Puritans who settled New England in their exalted position as ancestors to the American nation nor the myth of origins summarized in Alexis de Tocqueville's (1966: 257) overstatement that 'the whole destiny of America is contained in the first Puritan who landed on these shores.' Why might this be so?

At a practical level, the Puritans certainly provided colonial America with intellectual leadership and direction. Education flourished in New England. The philosophical developments associated with the Enlightenment which would shape the constitution were widely discussed among the religious elite there, and religious debate, together with high levels of literacy, established a framework within which subsequent political developments could take place (e.g. Ahlstrom, 1972: 261-384; Marty, 1985: 107-37). Indeed, the so-called 'Great Awakening', a major evangelical revival inspired by the sermons of preachers such as Yale graduate Jonathan Edwards which swept through the colonies in the mid-eighteenth century, was crucial in articulating the growing sense of liberation from the old ways and collective identification with the New World being built at a popular level (Heimert, 1966). Practically and ideologically, theological debate brought forth political agitation (Hatch, 1977). Moreover, although 'the political goal of the Puritans was the dictatorship of God's elect' (Howe 1988: 1058), they were in various ways also responsible for many of the distinctive characteristics of the new republic: limited government, individualism, government by consent, a written constitution, the separation of church and state, and pluralism (e.g. Howe 1988: 1058-62). Yet as important as such contributions to the founding of the nation undoubtedly were, the reverence prompted by the Puritans is in part born out of an emotional identification with them and the symbolic framework they furnished for the later emergence of the nation.

In a seminal essay which discussed the Puritan settlements in New England as an *Errand into the Wilderness*, Perry Miller (1964: 4) acknowledged that among the motivating factors, 'the economic motive frankly figures'. But he went on to insist, nonetheless that the Massachusetts Bay Company 'was not just an organization of immigrants seeking advantage and opportunity. It had a positive sense of mission'. Right from the very beginning, the Puritans set about constructing a mythological framework which would give religious meaning to their project. Crossing the Atlantic aboard the *Arbella*, John Winthrop, the elected governor of the Massachusetts Bay

Company, set the tone for much of what was to follow with his sermon 'A Model of Christian Charity'. Addressing the four hundred people in his care, he reminded them that they had 'entered into covenant with [God] for this work' (1630: 90) and, referring to Matthew 5:14-15, urged them to 'consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us....'(1630: 91). For Bellah (1975: 13), citing Miller, Winthrop's sermon "'stands at the beginning of our [national] consciousness'", and his work is liberally peppered with references to Winthrop's sermon (e.g. 1973: 17-18; 1975 14-16; 1998: 618; Bellah *et al* 1985: 28 *et passim*). As the flood of Puritan writing which followed Winthrop would suggest, moreover, this need to make sense of their experience grew more intense over time. For Heimert and Delbanco (1985) the provincial defensiveness and self-justification which characterizes the literature of Puritan New England stems from a shared sense of separation; of being set apart, not only from England, but from the epochal events which took place there during the 1640s: the Civil War prompted a substantial number of New England men to return and fight with the New Model Army. As if to emphasize this separation from England, moreover, the beginning there of the Puritan dominated Long Parliament in 1643 marked the end of the Great Migration, by which time over twenty thousand people had made the crossing to Massachusetts (Ahlstrom, 1972: 144). Worse still was the sense of isolation brought about by the collapse of Cromwell's Protectorate and the subsequent restoration of the monarchy. From the public theology which emerged in response to such circumstances, came not only an ideology which translated separation into chosenness, but traditions and practices which would help build a nation or people from the other disparate human ingredients who would undergo the similar trial of an Atlantic crossing.

At the heart of Puritan public discourse was the jeremiad, a form of political sermon, delivered at every public occasion, used to denounce and castigate a sinful populace for straying from their 'errand' and threatening to betray their covenant with God. Arguing 'that the jeremiad has played a major role in fashioning the myth of America', Sacvan Bercovitch (1978: xi) describes it as 'a mode of public

exhortation,...a ritual designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal, public to private identity, the shifting 'signs of the times' to certain traditional metaphors, themes, and symbols'. For Bercovitch, the particular way this rhetorical form was deployed in New England, 'entailing a fusion of secular and sacred history' (1978: 9), was crucial in setting the terms within which American national identity would subsequently be articulated.

Originating in the pulpits of medieval Europe, where it 'pertained exclusively to mundane, social matters, to the city of man rather than the city of God,' its purpose was transformed by the Puritans in order 'to direct an imperiled people of God toward the fulfillment of their destiny, to guide them individually toward salvation, and collectively toward the American city of God' (1978: 9). For, although the jeremiad has often been seen as an essentially dark, pessimistic mode of address (e.g. Miller, 1964), what Bercovitch (1978: 6-7) is at pains to stress is the way such a lament was used to affirm a continued and unshakeable belief in the Puritan mission as it was adapted by the first native-born generation, which inherited the form from their settler fathers. The jeremiad may have articulated the conflicts within Puritan society by prophesying corruption, death and damnation as the consequences of vanity and weakness, but it did this in a constructive rather than destructive way. As Bercovitch (1978: 23) writes:

The American Puritan jeremiad was the ritual of a culture on an errand—which is to say, a culture based on a faith in process. Substituting teleology for hierarchy, it discarded the Old World ideal of stasis for New World vision of the future. Its function was to create a climate of anxiety that helped release the restless "progressivist" energies required for the success of the venture.

Indeed, for Bercovitch the Puritans were moderns in waiting, and the cultural and social utility of this specifically 'American jeremiad' within the process of national development derived from its capacity to reconcile the changes demanded by the developmental processes of Americanization and modernization with the religious values represented in the Puritan tradition. A critical commentary on the present made legitimate in the terms of a mytho-historical past, therefore, it represents 'a

vehicle of cultural continuity' (1978: 61), which subsequent 'Yankee Jeremiahs' (1978: 93) used to traverse the boundary between the sacred and the profane, between Biblical history and American experience, as they sought to justify often violent territorial expansion and limitless material improvement. As a mode of socialization, or 'ritual of consensus' in Bercovitch's (1978: 132-75) terms, serving the emerging social order dominated by an ever-expanding middle-class, the jeremiad came to mark the social limits to progress and change. Thus, it fulfilled a hegemonic function in the classic Gramscian sense (1978: xiii).

Civil Religion and its Discontents

By consistently addressing the problems of contemporary America through the prism of religion, the work of Robert Bellah is in many ways a further extension of the public theology which emerged from the Puritan tradition. As Edwin S. Gaustad (quoted in Hammond, 1980: 205 n.3) describes it, Bellah's (1975) *The Broken Covenant* is but a 'jeremiad with footnotes'. For Bellah (1980: 14), moreover, the idea of a civil religion can be distinguished from the much more substantial tradition of public theology. Responding to denials that the civil religion even exists, Bellah (1980: 11-12) acknowledges that the liberal ideals expressed in their highest form in the Constitution have indeed left the religious symbolism he used to justify his original proposal marginalized by the legal and constitutional order. From a republican point of view, however, and echoing Tocqueville again, Bellah (1980: 12) claims that 'religion is indispensable. A republic as an active political community of participating citizens must have a purpose and a set of values'. It is here, outwith any formal political structures, that the discourse of religion, including the churches, is seen as a crucial source of the raw materials needed to articulate a sense of national identity. Thus, although Bellah (1980: 14-15) acknowledges the 'ominous...self-intoxication' of symbolism such as "chosen people" or "God's new Israel" which characterized the public theology of the young republic, he contends that it was important nonetheless because it 'provided a sense of value and purpose without which the national

community and ultimately even the liberal state could not have survived', even though 'it was never entirely clear what that value and purpose was'. Indeed, Bellah (1980: 15) stresses both the utter centrality as well as profound ambivalence of this public theology in the life of the nation:

On the one hand it seemed to imply the full realization of the values laid down in the Declaration of Independence but certainly not fully implemented in a nation that among other things still legalized slavery. On the other hand it could imply a messianic mission of manifest destiny with respect to the rest of the continent....[M]ost of what is good and most of what is bad in [American] history is rooted in our public theology. Every movement to make America more fully realize its professed values has grown out of some form of public theology, from the abolitionists to the social gospel and the early socialist party to the civil rights movement under Martin Luther King and the farm worker's movement under Caesar Chavez. But so has every expansionist war and every form of oppression of racial minorities and immigrant groups.

Despite, or more accurately perhaps, because of, the constitutional prohibition of a religious establishment, the discourse of religion has remained a basic resource, both practical and symbolic, for those who would fashion America in their own interests.

That this is so is indicated by, among other things, the controversy and confusion spawned by Bellah's own proposal of an American civil religion, much of which has revolved around the question of definition.⁷ Introducing an anthology on the subject, Russell Richey and Donald Jones (1974: 14-17) identify five different ways that the notion of a civil religion has been advanced: (1) as 'folk religion', based in empirical studies of the values and practices of real people (e.g. Herberg 1960, Berger 1961); (2) as 'the transcendent universal religion of the nation', the category to which Robert Bellah's work belongs; (3) as 'religious nationalism', where the nation itself becomes the object of worship, but in a tribal, exclusive, non-universal way, as with the doctrine of manifest destiny (e.g. Cherry, 1971); (4) as 'democratic faith', a belief in democracy and associated ideals such as equality, freedom, and

⁷ For more discussion of the civil religion thesis see Richey and Jones (1974); Kelly (1984: 209-46); Jones (1988), and Hammond *et al* (1994).

justice without any necessary references to god or some other conception of transcendence (e.g. Dewey, 1934; Lippmann, 1937); and (5) as 'Protestant civic piety', the idea, that America is an inherently Protestant nation, a 'righteous empire' (Marty, 1977). For some commentators it is this last category which most corresponds with the historical and sociological facts. Thus, Amanda Porterfield (in Hammond *et al*, 1994: 9-10) identifies 'Bellah's concept of civil religion as a vestige of the de facto religious establishment of the nineteenth century'; as encouraging 'us to make presumptive religious judgements about what it means to be an American'. Indeed, while Richey's and Jones' typology serves to highlight the diverse conceptualizations which attend the civil religion debate, one might argue that this diversity is in itself revealing. For although Richey and Jones do acknowledge some overlapping of these categories, they ignore the possibility that the differences of conception regarding civil religion, and indeed 'religion', indicate different points of entry into a complex debate about the meaning and direction of the American nation.

In one of the most insightful critiques of the civil religion thesis, John Wilson (1979) highlights the way the debate serves to constitute the 'public religion' it purports to describe. Like Bellah, he cites Winthrop's 'city on a hill' in attending to the mythic construction of the national mission as exemplary; 'in terms of perfecting a society as a demonstration to the world at large' (1979: 30). Furthermore, although he notes how this has led the United States to, at times, isolate itself from global affairs, he recognizes that there has nevertheless been an equally important 'emissary' pattern to the national mission; a willingness to intervene in the affairs of others in order to, for example, 'Christianize', 'civilize', or 'make the world safe for democracy' (1979: 30-31). Yet, while he acknowledges the importance of 'manifestly religious' (1979: 40) symbols and myths in articulating such collective self-understandings, Wilson (1979: 117) locates them as components of 'an open set or cluster of meanings central to American culture', which elicit a broad consensus without ever removing the potential for conflict between different communities or sub-cultures within the nation as a whole. Thus he confronts Bellah's (1967: 1) claim that

a 'an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion' exists in America alongside the more orthodox denominations, and argues that evidence to support such an assertion is difficult to find outwith the elite discourse of official political culture. Rather, Wilson (1979: 174-75) suggests, such proposals represent a somewhat nostalgic attempt to distill and conserve 'the old political culture of the United States which was supported by a broadly Protestant establishment....even as it, and the associated establishment, is threatened from within and without'. Because the idea of an American civil religion is so rooted in a view of American history centred on the legacy of Puritanism and the subsequent cultural hegemony of mainline Protestantism, the inclusivity promised by such a notion is unattainable given the very different interpretations of the past which might come from black, hispanic, and native Americans (Long, 1974; Wilson, 1979: 171), not to mention women.

Regardless of the problems associated with its definition, the charge that the civil religion thesis is inherently elitist and backward-looking, that it is based on what Presidents say rather than what ordinary citizens do, is an issue which ought not to be ignored. Yet, that is precisely the value of it with regard to this study. For what Bellah describes is a distinctively American language of power. In drawing a line between church and state, the First Amendment enshrines the equation of religion with liberty, probably the most revered yet variously understood concept within the rhetoric of American nationhood (Bellah, 1980: 8; Wilson, 1979: 117). Indeed, Wilson may be guilty of looking in the wrong places for the social bases of Bellah's civil religion. If the twentieth century is to be seen as marking the end of the Puritan era of American history (Ahlstrom, 1972; Wilson, 1979), it might also be remembered as 'the Golden Age of Hollywood'; as a time when the mass media became an increasingly powerful vehicle of national self-understanding. Might we not find the myths and symbols of the American civil religion reproduced there? Could the American media industries have developed as national institutions without recourse to a public theology founded upon notions of 'redemption', 'chosenness', and 'national mission'? These questions inform the rest of this study. Ahead of

addressing them, however, there remains the problem of relating religion as it has traditionally been understood and practised by the American people following the First Amendment, that is, within denominations, to the national 'tradition' or 'civil religion' as it has been identified and, in many ways, constructed by scholars.

National Identity and Religious Difference

Despite the artifice of the civil religion proposal, the notion that American society is organized around a consensual view of reality, a shared 'picture of the way things in sheer actuality are' (Geertz, 1973: 127), is not entirely fanciful. Despite all the varieties of lifestyle that Americans continue to experiment with in the vast spaces available to them, many commentators, both from without and within, and of various political hues, have observed a widespread ideological conformity. Well over a century before Senator Joe McCarthy's infamous House Select Committee on Un-American activities, Alexis de Tocqueville (1966: 235) tempered his appraisal of the American cult of individual enterprise as something free from social and political constraints and obligations, by writing that he knew 'no country in which...there is less independence of mind and real freedom of discussion than in America'. Things may have changed since then, but the sense of a powerful cultural logic at work in 'the land of the free and the home of the brave' persists. Thus, Marxist political analysts Ira Katznelson and Mark Kesselman (1987: 29) argue that the 'dominant ideology' of America is so powerful 'that existing economic and political arrangements frequently appear not merely as the best possible arrangements but as the only possible ones'. Nevertheless, they would probably agree with those of a more conservative outlook as to the kind of values they were in conversation with; values Samuel Huntington (1981: 14) summarizes as 'liberty, equality, individualism, democracy and the rule of law under a constitution'. As historian Richard Hofstadter (quoted in Kohn and Walden, 1970: 11) observed of his country, 'it has been our fate as a nation, not to have ideologies but to be one'. Hence, there is a substantial body of literature which has sought to address the 'collective singular' (Fender, 1993: 3-5)

invoked by the constitutional sovereignty of 'we the people'. More to the point perhaps, this 'identity' has found institutional expression in a political and economic order as powerful globally as any that have ever existed. If an American civil religion serves to legitimate that order by imbuing it with meaning, how do we understand the role of more concrete denominational or, more accurately perhaps, 'congregational' (Warner, 1993: 1066-67) religious activities within that broader framework?

In an article oft cited by Stewart Hoover and others working in the field of media, religion, and culture, R. Stephen Warner (1993) argues for the adoption of a 'new paradigm' within the sociology of American religion. Rejecting an 'old paradigm' articulated around traditional notions of secularization (e.g. Berger, 1967), largely based upon the history of religion in Europe, in which 'religion, like politics', is conceived of as a property of the whole society', Warner (1993: 1046-47) emphasizes the degree to which 'religion in the United States has typically expressed not the culture of the society as a whole but the subcultures of its many constituents'. Considered within the terms of the old paradigm, the growth in church membership which accompanied modernization and national development in America appears anomalous, and has led sometimes to the dismissal of American religion as somehow not authentically religious. For Warner (1993: 1050), however, the key to understanding American religion within the new paradigm lies in disestablishment 'and the rise of an open market for religion' in the period between the Revolution and the Civil War. In the work of historians Nathan Hatch (1989) and Jon Butler (1990), whom Warner (1993: 1050 *et passim*) cites, the loosening of religious authority from the elites of the colonial period is shown to have precipitated aggressive and widespread competition in the business of 'saving souls' and 'Christianizing' America, and the development of a democratic and eclectic 'religious marketplace'. It is in this period that the distinctive cultural framework within which American religious

institutions operate was largely established.⁸

During the early years of the republic, 'a dozen or so denominations of mostly white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants' were differentiated on the basis of three main demographic factors: 'region, social class, and urbanism' (1993: 1058). By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, multicultural factors of 'race, ethnicity, and national origin' had complicated the picture, helping to increase 'the sociological salience of religious identity itself'. Warner (1993: 1058-59), moreover, is at pains to stress the degree to which 'religion itself is recognized in American society...as a fundamental category of identity and association,...thereby capable of grounding both solidarities and identities'. From the Puritans onward, religion has been constitutive of many American sub-cultures, and remains an important form of association for what has historically been a highly mobile population. What needs to be stressed here, though, is the importance of religion as a 'free social space' (Evans and Boyte, quoted in Warner, 1993: 1060), in which particular cultural traditions such as those associated with immigrants have found a legitimate refuge, enabling participation in the life of the broader social body on, to some extent, their own terms (Warner, 1993: 1059-63).

As a consequence of this pattern of historical development, Warner (1993: 1058-60) contends, religion in the United States has come to represent an important, 'social space for cultural pluralism', and 'remains the preeminent voluntary associational form in [American] society'. Whereas the political economy of America tends to promote a crude consensus, characterized increasingly by voter apathy,

⁸ As has already been discussed, the religion of Abraham Lincoln is central to Bellah's conception of a 'civil religion' harking back to the Puritan foundations of American nationhood. Although Jon Butler (1990: 293-95) is keen to loosen the hold of Puritanism on the historiography of American religion, he nonetheless acknowledges the impossibility of discussing Lincoln 'apart from religion' but writes of him that 'Lincoln's religious sentiments also reflected the spiritual heterodoxy common to America since colonization'. Whilst 'he understood much of Christianity's appeal', Lincoln, facing 'innumerable religious choices', nonetheless, 'eschewed church membership and resisted practices and doctrines that distinguished contemporary Christianity.' On that basis, however, Butler concludes that Lincoln was more representative of religious behaviour in the American past than that which was to come, in which, 'despite ceaseless warnings about secularization and decline, Americans increasingly turned to Christian congregations and church membership as a means of formulating and rationalizing their own religious convictions amid the vagaries of modern life.'

religion in America, dependent as it is upon active participation, reflects the diversity of the sub-cultures of which the nation is comprised. Self-selective, adaptable, and sensitive to the vital needs of minorities within a political context where minority political representation tends to be stifled, these religious institutions can, in theory, serve to empower groups and individuals who understand themselves to be disadvantaged (Warner, 1993: 1068-1074). Obvious examples here are the theologically conservative black churches which have nonetheless been important resources for social change (Lincoln and Mamiya, 1990; Ellison, 1991; Warner, 1993: 1070).

Warner's 'new paradigm' sets out a sociological vision of what religion *is* in America ('disestablished', 'culturally pluralistic', 'structurally adaptable', and 'empowering') which can be distinguished from the implicit *ought* carried in the work of Robert Bellah, for instance. Indeed, Warner (1993: 1076) criticizes Bellah *et al* (1985) for lamenting the degree to which Americans now choose their own religious and group identities, and indicates the 'considerable evidence that religious switchers are morally serious'. Nevertheless, in affirming religion as 'an accepted mode both of establishing distinct identity and of intercommunal negotiation' (Williams, cited Warner 1993: 1062), Warner's view of religion in America is by no means incompatible with that of Bellah *et al* (1985), and the latter's stress upon the importance of religion as a 'second language' within the 'argument' which comprises the national 'tradition'. For, as insightful as Warner's essay is in reminding us of the specificity of the American religious scene, he might be accused of taking for granted that which undergirds his thesis: the issue of national identity. By calling for scholars of religion to 'focus more on the building of religious institutions and the role of religion in social mobilization and relatively less on the erection and maintenance of plausibility structures' Warner (1993: 1081) is in effect diverting us away from attending to those aspects of 'secular' American culture (e.g. political rhetoric, education, the media), which serve to frame and maintain religion as a popular and vital social space within, and, by definition, subordinated to, the larger national

community.⁹ Whilst we can agree that religion 'constitutes a central institutional sphere of US society' (1993: 1081), religious 'empowerment' takes place within the terms of a pre-existing framework of authority, both symbolic and social, which has been established by white Anglo-Saxon Protestant elites. In as much as such groups not only helped determine the constitution of the nation, but have remained the main beneficiaries of its economy and protagonists of its political process, the religious framework used to legitimate social claims not only serves to limit the scope for change but recuperates such change as an affirmation of 'the American way'. Viewed in this way, whatever else religion might be or do, in the context of US nationhood, participation in religious activities needs also to be understood as a vital expression of Gramscian 'spontaneous consent'.

Conclusion

Addressing the concerns set out in the previous two chapters with regard to the scholarly examination of media, religion, and culture, and the discussion of film within that 'evolving paradigm', this chapter has argued for the recognition that the issue of national identity needs to be placed at the heart of such considerations. Whilst the observation that religion has been fundamental to the articulation of American national identity has been shown to be neither new nor especially controversial, it has been taken for granted somewhat within studies of media such as film, even where the scope of such work has been broadened to incorporate an interest in religion. Indeed, rather than merely reiterate the importance of religious ideas, imagery, institutions, and myths as influences upon US national identity, this chapter has sought to reverse the terms within which the interrelationship between religion and nationhood are conventionally understood. Far from being a native category, a cultural universal pre-dating the broad historical process of modernization, religion, as set apart and enshrined in the First Amendment, is itself a product of modernity,

⁹ See also, Catherine Albanese's (1992) discussion of the 'manyness of religions' and the 'oneness of religion' in the American context.

and the same history whence emerged the nation-state. Seen in this way, the evident vitality of religion in the United States is not some sociological anomaly, but a consequence of the way 'religion' has not only helped build the American nation, but also, in turn, been constructed by and within the discourse of US nationhood.

Such an approach, this study contends, has considerable implications for the study of media, religion, and culture in the American context, not least the need to place the issue of national identity at the heart of future theoretical development. In pursuit of that end, Robert Bellah's notion of an American civil religion, whilst flawed and prescriptive, does provide a useful starting point in so far as it elaborates many of the key themes found within American narratives of identity and national self-understanding. What the discussion prompted by Bellah has lacked, however, is a serious historical examination of how the media have taken up these themes and, in turn, reproduced or even transformed the discourse of religion in the process of 'flagging' (Billig, 1995) the nation. The following case study of *The Birth of a Nation* seeks to address this lack, as a means to highlight why such a line of enquiry might be of considerable interest; even to those who might with some justification dismiss Bellah's work as rooted in the elitist presuppositions of the Puritan tradition. For, whilst we might acknowledge discussion of globalization and 'postnationalism' as part of the intellectual hinterland which informs the present study, such changes as may be taking place have done little to threaten the position of the United States as the preeminent world power. Redolent of both the exemplary and emissary aspects to U.S. national identity, the global hegemony of American media and popular culture represents an extension of a particular national culture in which tensions and conflicts rooted in issues like economics, gender, race, region, sexuality and social class, played out amidst the historical transformations and upheavals wrought by modernity, have often been articulated in religious terms. The civil religion thesis offers students of media, religion, and culture, a means to address such issues in historical terms.

PART II

Religion and Film in American Culture:

The Birth of a Nation

CHAPTER FOUR

‘An Uneasy Presence’:

Revisiting *The Birth of a Nation*

Introduction

The first part of this thesis furnished an extended discussion of the scholarly context the following case study of *The Birth of a Nation* seeks to address; specifically, the growing body of work examining relations between religion, media, and culture. Whilst acknowledging the potential value of this evolving paradigm as a means of deepening our understanding of contemporary culture and society, Chapter One argued that it has not afforded enough attention thus far to the history of these relations. This is especially so with regard to the cinema and its pivotal role in the evolution of a twentieth-century media culture both centered upon and dominated by America. Indeed, the issues pertaining to the particular national context within which many of the developments concerning scholars within the evolving paradigm have taken place would appear to have been taken for granted somewhat. Taking up these themes, Chapter Two presented an overview of the existing study of religion and film in the American context. Although there is some interesting work which indicates religion as a significant influence upon the form, content, and social influence of the movies in America, most writing on religion and film has been motivated by theological concerns. Hence this burgeoning literature is still characterized by somewhat ahistorical text-centered approaches to the medium which tend to leave the socio-historical contexts within which films are made and consumed underexamined. As a result, mainstream film scholarship has, by and large, found it easy to ignore the discussion of religion as a social force.

This is something to be regretted. For, as the third and final chapter of Part I demonstrated, the issue of religion is one that still lies at the heart of debates regarding culture and national identity in the United States. The notion of an American civil religion may be a contested one, but it serves to remind us that regardless of the supposed separation of church and state codified in the First Amendment, religion, like film, has been an important resource, both practical and symbolic, within American society. Religion has not only been a key element in constructing a distinct national identity, but it has also furnished an important 'second language' or alternative 'public sphere' through which to express difference and press dissenting or sectional claims within the broader national process (e.g. Bellah *et al*, 1985; Wuthnow, 1989; Albanese, 1992; Warner, 1993). Given the commonplace scholarly acknowledgement of film as a similarly influential medium in the development of an American imagined community (e.g. Sklar, 1975; Burgoyne, 1997), therefore, it is especially disappointing to find little scholarly interest regarding the interrelationship between religion and cinema within the United States. What follows is an attempt to demonstrate the value and analytic potential of just such an approach through a critical, interpretive, historical, sociological, and cultural, case-study of one of the most famous and important films ever made, D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*.

In terms of methodology, the case-study makes no claim to furnish 'new' evidence with regard to the film itself. Rather, it offers a reconfiguration, a re-telling if you will, from a new and original point of view, of previously available material with regard to the movie, the historical context whence it emerged, and reactions to it. Whilst this means that the case-study is to a considerable extent reliant on ideas, information and insights which might be found elsewhere, it is believed that the narrative constructed by drawing this material together has much to offer scholars interested in the interrelationship between religion, media, and culture. With regard to the position set out previously, therefore, it argues that as self-evidently important as *The Birth of a Nation* was, both as a film and a cultural event, a re-examination of

its quite deliberate address to the religious bases of American national identity brings to light other somewhat neglected aspects of the picture's long term cultural legacy. In particular, it highlights the way *Birth* took up the discourse of civil religion and placed it at the heart of the American cinema. Motion pictures may have emerged as a product of those same broader forces of modernization widely assumed to be antithetical to traditional religion. But that does not mean that religious ideas, institutions, practices, stories and symbols did not shape the medium's development and its subsequent influence within US society, a society in which notions of religion and religious meaning are still vital components. Indeed, the persistence of the 'religious' in contemporary American culture, in defiance of traditional notions of secularization, is the key problematic brought to bear on this review of an event already widely discussed by scholars of film and culture. To what extent did the medium of film help to preserve the religious bases of American culture? Whilst an answer to this lies beyond the scope of the current study, it is this question above all others which motivates the strategic re-telling of the history of *The Birth of a Nation* presented below.

Opening up the discussion, this first chapter of the case study has two main objectives. Firstly, it seeks to justify the decision to devote a major part of this thesis to *Birth* by stressing its importance as an event in the history of American film and culture. Put simply, it argues that the impact and significance of *The Birth of a Nation* is such that it represents an obvious point of entry into the historical dimension of the relationship between religion and film within American culture. To that end, it offers a basic re-introduction to the film and the events surrounding it. Secondly, it serves to indicate the themes which are to be addressed and developed in subsequent chapters by outlining the main features of the extensive critical debate prompted by the film since its release in 1915. As with film studies in general, religious aspects to the picture have received only sporadic attention. Hence, aside from recovering some of the more useful observations made by other scholars, what this review

highlights are those issues which might be illuminated by examining the film from a vantage which incorporates a serious consideration of religion and its role in the articulation of American national identity. Specifically, it contends that the issue of race around which the discussion of *The Birth of a Nation* continues to revolve, has tended to prejudice any assessment of the cultural and religious attitudes which informed it, has thus come to limit our understanding of the picture's impact on American life.

‘Like Writing History with Lightning’: A Beginner’s Guide to *The Birth of a Nation*

From the portents invoked by the decision to start shooting on Independence Day 1914, it is clear that David Wark Griffith fully intended his film adaptation of the Reverend Thomas M. Dixon’s best-selling novel and stage-play, *The Clansman* (respectively, 1905 and 1906), to be an historic undertaking. In industrial terms, the picture was to be more costly in terms of time, money, and materials than any American-made motion picture prior to it. Before 1914, movie budgets rarely extended beyond a few thousand dollars. Even Griffith, the best known and most successful director of the day, struggled to get the \$40,000 Biograph eventually spent on his *Judith of Bethulia* (1914). Yet the final production cost of what would eventually be called *The Birth of a Nation* was an hitherto unheard of \$110,000. Indeed, along with the logistical challenge presented by the scale of the production, raising the necessary funds was a complex drama in its own right (Aitken and Nelson, 1965; Schickel, 1984: 212 *et passim*). For example, many members of the company were prepared to work in lieu of payment, even invest in the film themselves, such was their commitment and belief in the director (Bitzer, 1973: 111; Gish and Pinchot, 1969: 142-45) Similarly, at a time when most movies were still routinely produced in a matter of days, shooting on the Californian sets of *The Clansman* lasted 4 months, finishing on 31 October 1914 (Lang, 1994a: 30), and was followed by around two months of editing (Schickel, 1984: 242). As significant as

such an unprecedented investment of money and time in the making of a motion picture was though, it is not just for these reasons that Griffith's epic tale of the American Civil War and the Reconstruction period remains one of *the* great media events of the twentieth century.

Certainly, the tales of excess which emerged from the set fuelled speculation and interest across the entire movie industry well before its first public exhibition. Right from its first official screening as *The Clansman* at Clune's Auditorium in Los Angeles on February 8, 1915 the picture was discussed and promoted in passionate terms.¹ Karl Brown (1973: 94-95), assistant cameraman on *Birth*, writes that at the end of the initial screening at Clune's 'the audience didn't just sit there and applaud, but they stood up and cheered and yelled and stamped feet until Griffith finally made an appearance'. After its 'World Premiere' in New York on March 3, moreover, *The Birth of a Nation* continued to generate widespread critical and public acclaim as an artistic breakthrough for the still relatively novel medium of motion pictures. Publicity materials and reviews spoke of 'The World's Biggest Picture' (Griffith, 1915a), 'the last word in picturemaking' (Vance, 1915: 173), 'the splendor and magnificence of its spectacles' (Bush, 1915: 176), and 'The Supreme Picture of All Time' (poster reproduced in Taylor, 1991: 16). To a large extent, the hype was justified. On screen for almost three hours, Griffith's achievement was unprecedented in terms of its overall scope and technique, and demonstrated once and for all how a long and complex film narrative could engage and hold the attention of a mass audience.

Significant as this achievement was, though, it is probably the case that *Birth* is remembered today as much for the way the film engendered a fierce and sometimes violent public controversy over its treatment of relations between blacks and whites in the post-Civil War American South. As we shall see below, the race controversy prompted by *The Birth of a Nation* reverberates still, and continues to

¹ Although Joseph Henabery doubts that the secret of Griffith's film could have been kept for over a month, the film had been previewed prior to the Clune's screening at the Loring Opera House, Riverside, California, on January 1, 1914. (Editor's note in Henabery and Slide 1997: 82).

shape discussion both of the film itself and D.W. Griffith's contribution to the development of the medium. For although his home state of Kentucky did not secede and would eventually join the Union side during the Civil War, Griffith's family had been slave-owners prior to the war, and his father, 'Roaring Jake', served as a Colonel in the Confederate Army. Given a copy of *The Clansman* by Frank Woods, who received a credit as co-writer on the film, Griffith was inspired to use the novel as the basis of a picture which would retell the story of the civil war and its aftermath from a Southern perspective (Gish and Pinchot, 1969: 131). Although the story recounted in Dixon's book dealt only with the role of the Ku Klux Klan in the so-called 'Reconstruction' period following the defeat of the Confederacy, Griffith saw fit to add a lengthy section devoted to the war. Despite such departures from the original source material, however, the director did little to temper the racist white supremacist perspective articulated by Dixon, and the film depicted African-Americans as unfit for full citizenship. Nevertheless, Griffith (1915, b, c, d; 1916a) appears to have been both surprised and dismayed, when he, along with the more overtly racist Dixon, was accused in some quarters of 'race calumny' (*The Crisis*, 1915: 33).

'The Birth of a Nation': A Brief Description

By way of demonstrating how 'obvious' (Sorlin, 1980: 30; Staiger, 1992a: 152) the racism of *Birth* is, and to establish some of the main features of the film early on in this case-study, it is worth reminding ourselves, however briefly, of the story depicted in it. Whatever qualities *The Birth of a Nation* may have as a movie, within the context of this thesis the film is primarily a springboard for arguments which, it is hoped, are relevant and worthwhile regardless of whether one has seen the picture or not. Moreover, the fierce controversy spawned by *The Birth of a Nation* obscures the fact that there was actually very little disagreement about what was depicted in it. As the review of writing about *Birth* presented in Chapter Five indicates, the dispute surrounding the movie revolves around the issue of its *value*; aesthetic, cultural, moral, political or otherwise. Still, what is in the film does matter. Although it may be

impossible to watch the film in some 'pure' or 'innocent' way (e.g. Kuhn, 1985: 2-3), refreshing our memory of the story in it is a necessary step if one is to regain some perspective on its place in cultural history and the important debates it has engendered. As Janet Staiger (1992a: 152) writes, the fierce passions aroused by the film over the past eighty-odd years have left an "encrustation" which 'prevents a clear perception of what was once, and is still, at stake in the evaluation of the movie.' Hence there follows a brief description of *Birth* in terms of its narrative structure. Whilst such a synopsis cannot hope to do justice to the complexity of the film nor its 'staggering visual momentum' (O'Dell, 1970: 12), in tandem with the longer though no less 'thin' description contained in the Appendix, this relatively neutral account of the story depicted by Griffith is designed to tie the abstract theoretical concerns which inform this case-study to the specifics of *The Birth of a Nation* itself.²

The film itself is divided into two main parts with Part One devoted to the Civil War. This begins with a prologue which, following on from a inter-title demanding that 'the art of the motion picture' be afforded the same freedom 'conceded to the art

² Whilst this research is as much about previous writing on *Birth* as it is the film itself, it has involved numerous viewings of the film, in a variety of circumstances, with slight variations in the film itself. The descriptions of *The Birth of a Nation* presented here and in the appendix are based on a tinted print of the 1921 reissue restored in 1993 by Kevin Brownlow and David Gill for Photoplay Productions, and subsequently released by Argos Films and the British Film Institute as a Connoisseur Video. As 'objective' as these 'thin descriptions' are intended to be, there are several other 'neutral' descriptive accounts of *Birth* available. Theodore Huff (1961) provides a shot analysis of the film. Silva (1970: 169-73) offers a brief plot synopsis and content outline, whilst Lang (1994a: 43-156) furnishes a continuity script based on the 16mm circulation print held by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. However, the most comprehensive account is to be found in John Cuniberti's (1979) 'formal shot-by-shot analysis' of the picture, the introduction to which includes a useful discussion of the differences between surviving prints (1979: 15-27). Cuniberti (1979: 22) writes that at least 31 shots or titles are known to have been lost. Indeed, Eileen Bowser notes that 'the problem that confronts archivists and scholars who hope to find complete original versions of films is insurmountable where Griffith's major work is concerned'. The director's practice of cutting even after a picture had begun to be commercially exhibited means that 'Griffith's films were not likely to be the same at the end of a run as they had been on opening night' (Barry and Bowser, 1965: 48) Thus, as Lang (1994a: 37) summarizes, 'we shall never know exactly the composition of the film in its original exhibited state, for not only was Griffith bent on improving his film after every subsequent screening he attended...but official censorship, Epoch's [i.e. the production company's] careless preservation of the negative and primitive methods of assembling release prints, and inexpert on-the-spot repairing done by film projectionists after film breakage during projection in theatres make it impossible to identify something that could be called a "true print" of *The Birth of a Nation*. In general terms, this ambiguity does not really change our understanding of the basic story and structure of Griffith's film. Where scenes not in the version used as the basis for this research are discussed these will be clearly indicated and referenced accordingly.

of the written word', asserts that the origins of American national disunity began with the introduction of Africans to America.³ A 'Puritan' (Bush 1915: 176) minister is shown blessing a manacled slave, prior to the depiction of the subsequent campaign for abolition and a preacher presenting a group of young black children to 'a typical Northern congregation' (Bush, 1915: 176). Thereafter, the conflict prompted by the abolitionists is portrayed as something which disrupts not only the white Southern way of life, but the friendship and developing romantic bonds between two white families, the Camerons from the South (South Carolina) and the Stonemans from the North: Ben and Margaret Cameron becoming involved with Elsie and Phil Stoneman respectively. Further linking the familial drama to the national one, the head of the Stoneman family, Austin (a character modelled on Thaddeus Stevens), is leader of the house and a powerful proponent of the Northern cause. Both families suffer losses in battle, with the two youngest sons from each family dying in each others embrace, as well as Wade, the second Cameron son. Despite the heroic defiance of the South as embodied by the 'little Colonel', Ben Cameron, who is wounded in a brave but futile charge at Petersburg, Part One concludes with the defeat of the Confederacy, the assassination of Lincoln, and Austin Stoneman gaining effective power.

In the second part of the film dealing with the so-called 'Reconstruction' of the former Confederacy, the policies of Stoneman are shown to result in the imposition of black misrule on the South. As a result of the disenfranchisement, humiliations and privations suffered by 'his people', Ben covertly forms the Ku Klux Klan. However, the new freedom enjoyed by blacks results in the death of the youngest Cameron daughter, Flora, who leaps from a cliff-top after being chased by Gus, a former slave, who seeks her hand in marriage. In response to this latest loss, Ben and other members of the Ku Klux Klan seek out, capture and summarily execute Gus. This draws a reaction from Silas Lynch, Stoneman's Lieutenant Governor, who calls out

³ Unless otherwise referenced, all quotations here refer to the film's inter-titles.

the black militia. Defending 'their Aryan birthright', the Klan rise *en masse* and succeed in restoring order, white rule, and romantic harmony. The film concludes with a double wedding in which Ben marries Elsie and Phil marries Margaret, followed by a vision of Christ and a title proclaiming 'Liberty and union, one and inseparable, now and forever!'

'The Birth of a Nation' as Cultural Event

Although the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was quick to recognise the racist content of the film and began a campaign which sought the banning of the picture immediately after the first screenings on the West Coast, the controversy merely emphasized the film's stature as an 'event' (Silva, 1970: 4). As Richard Schickel (1984: 271) comments, the NAACP had entered 'upon an unequal struggle, since the producers, though they were still hard pressed financially, were already beginning to mount a publicity campaign as unprecedented in its way as the product being publicized'. For the New York run, posters for the film featured the night riders of the Klan in full white-sheeted regalia. These spread well beyond the confines of Manhattan and the five boroughs to appear 'throughout the suburbs; appealing to an audience that did not think of them as cultural events comparable to a Broadway play' (Schickel, 1984: 271). Even more startling was the sight of hired horsemen garbed in Klan robes galloping through the streets in order to further publicize the picture. That this ploy 'occasioned no more than amusement among those who witnessed the spectacle' gives some indication of then contemporary popular attitudes in regard to race (Schickel, 1984: 271).

In what was probably the key event of the publicity campaign, Thomas Dixon arranged a screening at the White House on February 18 for his old friend, Woodrow Wilson and members of the President's staff and cabinet, possibly the first time a movie had ever been shown at the White House (Schickel, 1984: 269). Griffith had actually cited Wilson's *History of the American People* in the film's inter-titles, most notably in justifying 'by a mere instinct of self-preservation' the rising of

the Ku Klux Klan. After the screening, Wilson, the first Southerner elected President since the Civil War, was reported as having been sufficiently impressed to remark, 'it is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true' (quoted in Schickel, 1984: 270).⁴ With this, Dixon had secured the highly quotable endorsement of the nation's chief executive, a 'Protestant Pope' who would himself lead the country through the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Civil War. Moreover, Wilson's approval came just two days before an important screening in New York for members of the National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures. Despite persistent lobbying by the NAACP, this private agency, set up by film producers in a bid to give the industry respectability, eventually passed *The Birth of a Nation* for its New York opening barring a few cuts (Cripps, 1963: 114-16). When NAACP objectors sought the intervention of city Mayor John P. Mitchell he 'told them that he had no statutory powers over the film' (Cripps, 1963: 117).

Similar outcomes accompanied the controversy elsewhere, most notably in Boston, once the hub of the abolitionist movement, and a city rich in the Puritan tradition at the heart of national self-understanding. Boston 'witnessed the most intense and sustained instance of anti-*The Birth of a Nation* agitation' (Silva, 1970: 4). Yet, despite a riot at a screening in that city on April 17 at the Tremont theatre (Merritt, 1972), and the NAACP's success in helping to create, in a matter of weeks, the Massachusetts Board of Censors, that same body duly 'ignored a petition of six thousand names and permitted the Tremont to continue showing *Birth of a Nation*' (Cripps, 1963: 122). Discomforted by the rancour in Boston and the damage being done to his political credentials, President Wilson eventually issued a denial of any

⁴ Wilson's famous comment was first quoted in the *New York Post*, March 4, 1915 (Merritt, 1972: 28). An other telling indication of how embedded racism was in the American polity of the time comes from Dixon's account of a meeting with Chief Justice Edward D. White on the same visit to Washington. White claimed he had never seen a motion picture before but informed that the heroes of the piece were the Ku Klux Klan, White 'leaned toward [Dixon] and said in low tones: "I was a member of the Klan, sir. Through many a dark night I walked a sentinel's beat through the ugliest streets of New Orleans with a rifle on my shoulder. You've told the true story of that uprising of outraged manhood?" Assured by Dixon as to the favourable portrayal of the Klan, White promised to attend a screening on February 19, and brought several judicial colleagues with him to it (quoted in Schickel, 1984: 270)

'approbation' of the film (*The Crisis*, 1915: 72). But, as Thomas Cripps (1963: 121-22) notes, 'the damage had been done, for Dixon had been able to use the president's name for commercial purposes for the better part of three months'. Except in a few instances, the most prominent being Mayor Thompson's refusal to license the picture in Chicago, the distributors of *Birth of a Nation* could, by the summer of 1915, exhibit the film almost anywhere they wanted (*The Crisis*, 1915: 73; Cripps, 1963: 122). All that was asked of those with an interest in exploiting *Birth* was that they 'endure...an almost ritual process of protest and quasi-judicial proceedings, generally resulting in small cuts and large publicity (Schickel, 1984: 293).

It is worth acknowledging the extent to which the film itself came to bear the marks of its impact as an event. As with much of his other output, Griffith filmed *The Clansman* without the aid of a shooting script and then supervised the editing (Barry and Bowser, 1965: 48). Not content with this level of control, however, and even after its openings in Los Angeles and New York, the director would use the editing shears to further refine the picture. In part, this was the result of the pressures to censor the film (Schickel, 1984: 236). But it was also in reaction to the responses of the audience (Barry and Bowser, 1965: 48). Sometime between the first official screening at Clune's and the world premiere in New York, Griffith, probably at Dixon's suggestion, changed the film's title to *The Birth of a Nation*.⁵ And, like a preacher working his (national) congregation, the director himself accompanied the film to its various openings in the major centres, 'adjusting the prints in each city' (Barry and Bowser, 1965: 48) according to local circumstances.

Griffith's most direct response to the film's troubled entry into the mainstream of American culture came in New York on March 12. Screening *Birth* again for the

⁵ As with so much else to do with *Birth*, there is no definitive account of the decision to change the name of the picture. Acknowledging the uncertainty, Richard Schickel (1984: 268) speculates that the suggestion may have come after Dixon's first viewing at an early preview in New York. Roy Aitken, however, claims that Dixon's suggestion came immediately after the triumphant first screening at Clune's (Aitken and Nelson, 1965: 46).

National Board of Censorship, Griffith cut a love scene between Austin Stoneman and Lydia, his mulatto mistress, as well as a scene of a black and a white fighting.

He had, though, added a new title to the opening credits:

A PLEA FOR THE ART OF THE MOTION PICTURE

We do not fear censorship, for we have no wish to offend with improprieties or obscenities, but we do demand, as a right, the liberty to show the dark side of wrong, that we may illuminate the bright side of virtue—the same liberty that is conceded to the art of the written word—the art to which we owe the Bible and the works of Shakespeare.

Swayed or not by this appeal, the Board officially approved the picture three days later. But Griffith's high-mindedness, his insistence on the sincerity of his art, the association of his picture 'with the cause of free speech and a free press' was to be the 'essence of [his] strategy in dealing with his critics' (Schickel, 1984: 282). For example, media friendly clergymen were quickly enlisted by the producers to lend public support to the movie.⁶ However, the newly added title also revealed the degree to which Griffith was seeking to address broader suspicions regarding the cultural worth of the medium.

Despite a growing audience for the movies among the middle classes attracted by the longer, more ambitious, 'quality' films imported from Europe, the movie industry in the United States in the early 1910s was still overwhelmingly dependent upon the patronage of the urban working classes. Prior to 1915, few commentators perceived films as being anything other than morally dubious 'cheap amusements', and certainly not an art form worthy of the same kind of serious attention afforded literature, painting, or even the theatre. Yet, right from his first efforts as a director in 1908 with *The Adventures of Dolly*, Griffith, previously a failed actor and playwright, showed a remarkable talent for using and extending the narrative capabilities and scope of motion pictures (e.g. Schickel, 1984; Gunning, 1991; Simmon, 1993). Desire for recognition as an artist in this respect fuelled

⁶ See, for example, the 'unqualified approval' of the Reverend Dr. Charles H. Parkhurst (1915) which appeared as part of the publicity for the film in various newspapers across America, and Schickel (1984: 277-78) for the approbation of self-described Universalist minister Thomas B. Gregory, 'a regular contributor to the Hearst press'.

Griffith's ambition to change change public perceptions of the medium at a time when the industry too was seeking to attract a wider, more prosperous clientele (Schickel, 1984). Issues relating to the cultural context out of which *Birth* are explored more fully in Chapter Five. Nonetheless, it is worth noting early on in the discussion that while Griffith may have been taken aback by the reaction to his depiction of race in *The Birth of a Nation*, the controversy served his ambitions to transform the movie business. For, not only did *Birth* furnish Griffith with a public platform from which to extol the potential of a medium he had been proclaimed master of (e.g. Griffith 1915a, 1915e), it also established the movies as a subject worthy of serious attention from those 'respectable' classes which had hitherto been largely content to ignore them.

At the box-office, the picture's combination of artistry, spectacle, and controversy, and the publicity that ensued, proved an irresistible attraction despite an unusually high price of admission. Even before the film's explosive entry into American public life, the production company Epoch had decided to set a first-run admission price of \$2. While some attempts to charge as much as this for imported feature films had been made by as early as 1911 (Balio, 1985: 112), the \$2 charge set Griffith's epic aside from the competition at a time when even the most expensive cinema seats on Broadway were only a dollar each (Balio, 1985: 114), and gave a clear indication of the kind of prosperous audience the picture was designed to attract. Marketed as something exclusive and unique, the film proved to be a 'must-see', even for conservative citizens wary of the new-fangled medium of film. For example, Everett Carter (1960: 133) 'conservatively' estimates that over three million people had seen *The Birth of a Nation* by January 1916 in New York City alone. There was a similar story outside of the major cities, where twelve roadshow companies run by J.J. McCarthy not only did great business with *Birth* but also attracted many Americans who had never seen a movie before. In terms of fulfilling Griffith's and the industry's ambitions for the medium, therefore, *The Birth of a Nation* was a huge success. It is no exaggeration, moreover, to say that the film became the

first genuinely national event of the American cinema, enjoying great, and perhaps for a long time, unparalleled, commercial success over several decades, whilst generating vast sums of money.⁷ For would-be producers such as Louis B. Mayer, for example, who secured distribution rights for the picture in New England, *Birth* provided the capital needed to establish their own studios (e.g. Schickel, 1984: 274). Indeed, by demonstrating the sorts of profits movies could accrue, *The Birth of a Nation* marked a new stage in the evolution of the American film industry. Many filmmakers and critics came to affirm Griffith's picture as 'the film that started it all' (Herman G. Weinberg quoted in Geduld, 1971: 8).

Assessing the Political Impact of 'The Birth of a Nation'

In his survey of American political movies, Terry Christensen (1987: 20) describes *Birth* as 'the first important American political film not only because it reshaped the image of the South but also because it influenced the way Americans thought about politics'. Yet, as inflammatory as the racism of *The Birth of a Nation* was and remains, assessing the political impact of the film is by no means as straightforward as it might first appear. Even leaving aside, temporarily at least, the impact of the film on the development of the American movie industry the wide range of responses to the film might still surprise the unwary.

Certainly, there is some evidence to support the view that the film did indeed help revive the Ku Klux Klan in 1915 (Simcovitch, 1972). Griffith (quoted in Simcovitch, 1972: 46) would argue that he could not have anticipated that the

⁷ Estimates vary as to the popularity and profitability of *The Birth of a Nation*. According to Roy Aitken, who with his brother Harry held the controlling interest in the Epoch Producing Company for whom Griffith directed the picture, between 1915 and 1926 over 100,000,000 American moviegoers paid an estimated gross of \$60,000,000 (Aitken and Nelson, 1965: 5). Schickel (1984: 281), however, suggests that the widespread underreporting of receipts by the theatres and distributors probably means that \$60 million 'and perhaps more' might have been generated in the first-run (i.e. up to the end 1917) alone. Moreover, the coming of sound saw further successful revivals of *Birth* in a version with accompanying soundtrack. Commenting during the early seventies (i.e. pre-*Star Wars*) on the notoriously 'chaotic' accounts for the film, however, Henderson (1972: 159) noted 'that *Variety*....refuses to list this film in its all-time list of money-making films, although it grants that it may have grossed more money than any other film ever made'.

picture's release in the South in late 1915 would coincide with and spur on efforts to re-launch the Klan. Nevertheless, the ideas articulated in *Birth* paralleled those prompting the new Klan and the movie proved to be an invaluable recruiting aid. Under the auspices of 'Imperial Wizard' and former Methodist preacher William Joseph Simmons, who admitted in interview that '*The Birth of a Nation* helped the Klan tremendously' (quoted in Simcovitch, 1972: 46), the reborn Klan expanded its list of enemies beyond the African American 'to include Jews, Catholics, bootleggers, adulterers, atheists, and others who offended against the Klan's vision of a racially and morally pure America' (Parrish, 1992: 115). Preaching 'native, white, Protestant supremacy' (e.g. Norton *et al*, 1994: 737), the Klan had expanded by 1924 to just under 4 million members (Parrish, 1992: 116), and had become a significant political force, even in states like Oregon and Colorado, well beyond the boundaries of the old Confederacy. Stressing the national rather than regional implications of the film, Charles C. Alexander's (1965: 18) history of the Klan in the Southwest United States suggests that the screening and re-screening of *The Birth of a Nation* into the 1920s 'in practically every town...helped perpetuate the tradition of direct action, not only for Southerners, but for Americans throughout the country'.

That the film was in itself damaging to racial harmony was further confirmed in the 1930s by researchers for the Payne Fund Studies, the first major research project to look at the influence of film on social attitudes. Showing *Birth* to students in the all-white Illinois town of Crystal Lake, Ruth Peterson and L.L. Thurstone (1933: 35) found that not only did the picture encourage less favourable attitudes 'toward the Negro' but that five months after the initial study, subjects' attitudes remained less favourable than they were before exposure to the film.

That this would be the case was of course recognized immediately upon the release of the film by the NAACP. The problem was a tricky one for them, however, as was recognized by W.E.B. DuBois, editor of NAACP journal *The Crisis*. For while the NAACP understood their organizational aims in terms of 'liberty...particularly liberty in artistic expression', *Birth of a Nation* was seen as something of 'a special

case'. Justifying the decision to seek censorship as a necessary evil, DuBois wrote that 'a new art was used deliberately to slander and vilify a race. There was no chance to reply. We had neither the money nor the influence...what were we to do?' (quoted in Fleener-Marzac, 1980: 8). With the philosophical basis of subsequent arguments thus established, the film became something of a *cause célèbre*, and Nickieann Fleener-Marzac (1980) estimates that the film was to be involved in at least 120 separate censorship controversies prior to 1973.⁸ As far as legal arguments regarding censorship of the film went though, objections to the insulting portrayal of African-Americans in *Birth* were deemed unconstitutional and attempts to suppress the picture came instead to revolve around the film as a possible threat to public order.

As malign as *Birth* was in its representation of race relations, the film did not unite the black community in self-defence but, rather, emphasized splits within its upper echelons. Where the Northern and predominately urban NAACP sought the full and constitutionally protected assimilation of African-Americans into the mainstream of US society, the so-called Tuskegee group led by Booker T. Washington, based in the rural and segregated south, believed in self-help and that black interests were best served in separation from white society. Thus while Washington *et al* certainly disliked the film their support of the NAACP campaign was a good deal less than than whole-hearted. Tracing the black reaction to *The Birth of a Nation*, Cripps (1963:123) notes how the response of 'the Negro press, too, ranged from unconcern to dutiful worry'. This disharmony, Cripps (1963: 118) suggests, has 'often marked the Negroes' efforts to unify against the bigotry that existed in the United States. Even where the range of black opinion was less polarized, moreover, the controversy surrounding the film still prompted a variety of positions. In his study of cinema exhibition in Lexington, Kentucky, by no means a hot-bed of NAACP activism, Gregory Waller (1995: 153-54) highlights the somewhat

⁸ Interestingly, Fleener-Marzac's (1980) study of the film in relation to the First Amendment ignores the issue of religious freedom entirely.

differing positions regarding the screening of the film taken by for example, supporters of Booker T. Washington, a Christianizing school teacher, and the editor of the local black *Weekly News*. Yet, as Waller (1995: 155) acknowledges, the controversy prompted by *Birth* 'was one of the few instances in which Lexington newspapers recorded African-Americans' discussion of motion pictures'. Hence we might infer that just as the controversy surrounding *The Birth of a Nation* had turned Griffith into a national figure, so the damage done to the black community by the picture, was in some measure redeemed by the public platform it furnished some of its more prominent members.

In Cripps' (1963) account of the black reaction to *The Birth of a Nation*, the campaign to suppress the picture is presented as a failure. Indeed, while Griffith's film led both the NAACP and the Tuskegee group to a recognition of how powerful cinema was, their failure to halt its exhibition was merely underscored when their joint effort to produce a film which might respond to Griffith's movie by portraying blacks in a more positive way ended in unhappy compromise and a box-office flop. *The Birth of a Race* (1918, d. John W. Noble), was first hampered by financial constraints, only to be co-opted as government propaganda once America had entered the First World War (Cripps, 1996).⁹ The largely unfulfilled potential of the movie industry to redress the damage widely supposed to have been done by *Birth* was noted by Andrew Sarris (1969). According to him, the controversy prompted by the film served only to drive racism underground making it harder to confront. For example, the supposed threat of social disorder associated with Griffith's picture enabled exhibitors in the South to exercise a long-standing veto over films with even a hint of miscegenation. This effectively stifled any opportunity for the studios, had they been willing, to portray African Americans in a more dignified way, or indeed to confront the taboos surrounding inter-racial sex (1969: 109). Nevertheless, as

⁹ From the perspective of this study as a whole, it is interesting to note that much of *The Birth of a Race* revolved around stories drawn from The Bible. However, as Thomas Cripps (1996: 48) points out portraying Pharaoh's army as black Africans and centring the movie on Christianity (i.e. 'an eventually European religion) did nothing but continue the tradition of rendering 'Africans as outsiders'.

negative as such assessments are of the political impact of *The Birth a Nation* we would do well to understand the battles over the film as part of a wider, long term struggle to define the nature and direction of American society; what Francis Couvares (1996a:12) describes as 'a complex and continuing social drama in which the parties in conflict engage, albeit in different ways, fundamental questions about how to live in a modern, capitalist, democratic, and plural society'. Thus Cripps (1977: 69) would eventually revise his assessment of the campaign to suppress *Birth* and claim it as 'the dawn of a new day' in so far as 'it provided the first occasion on which black men, long organized into local groups, stretched their muscles across the nation'.

Broadening our perspective in this way lends support to Richard Schickel's (1984: 299-300) more subtle reassessment of the film's political legacy. Schickel (1984: 299) admits that the picture 'fitted comfortably with the unacknowledged, virtually unconscious racism of its white audiences, and was in no way morally disquieting to the majority of its viewers'. Yet, although he might be guilty of forgetting the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan when he asserts that there was 'no visible upsurge of *conscious* racism in the film's wake', he makes the point that for the minority consciously opposed to racism at the time, the film presented an opportunity 'to place before thinking people...a criticism that had long been wanting'. Indeed, Schickel (1984: 200) argues that *The Birth of a Nation* 'was something close to a godsend' for the NAACP, the pre-eminent organization in the struggle for black civil rights in the United States for the rest of the twentieth-century. For one thing, the popularity of the film indicated the pressing need for a more militant stance against the racism of both individuals such as Thomas Dixon and American society in general. As far as the NAACP was to fulfil that remit, moreover, Griffith's film proved 'the need for its own existence to its own people' (1984: 299). Stressing this paradoxical aspect to the picture, Schickel (1984: 299-300) contends that *Birth* presented the NAACP with an issue just when it needed one, an occasion to get its name in the papers on a subject that commanded mass interest

far more readily than,...say, voting rights in the Deep South....As such, it actually did Dixon's benighted cause incalculable harm.

This point is developed by African-American scholar Clyde Taylor (1991: 32) who writes that the campaign against the film mounted by 'Black libertarians and their progressive White allies represented an unprecedented new force of resistance that demonstrated an altered historical terrain in which racial Radicalism was removed further from the center and placed on the defensive'. Thus as reprehensible as the racism of *The Birth of a Nation* still is, any assessment of it as a cultural event needs to be placed within a wider frame of reference. As with religious texts such as The Bible, the social meaning of the film lies not so much in the film itself but in the values ascribed to it and the uses to which it has been put by different communities of interpretation (e.g. Fish, 1980; Radway, 1984; Lindlof, 1988, 1996; Jensen, 1995).¹⁰ Sitting comfortably with many of the issues raised within the evolving paradigm regarding the use of media artifacts to generate deep meaning (e.g. Clark, 1996; Hoover, 1998a&b) this basic point underpins the rest of the present study.

Critical Perspectives on *The Birth of a Nation*

Over the last eighty-six years, the landmark status of *The Birth of a Nation* has both resulted in and, been sustained by, a substantial flow of writing on the movie. The conjunction of technical achievement, social impact, and profitability centered on *Birth* has led many students of film to comment on its importance in so far as it prefigured, and, to some extent, established a frame of reference for, the classical Hollywood cinema which would soon emerge. For example, Wagenknacht and Slide (1975: 58) write that '*The Birth of a Nation* was an aesthetic achievement, a monument, and a cultural and sociological phenomenon; there is no other film of which such a statement can be made with equal truth and force'. In a similar vein,

¹⁰ Discussing the history of American film reception, Janet Staiger (1992a) uses *The Birth of a Nation* in order to highlight the complex and contradictory social meanings capable of being generated by a film. Noting that the picture 'is encrusted with a history of responses and debates which make it a symbol of more than racist propaganda' she goes on to describe how 'diatribes against it and defenses of its director play out major political battles in leftist politics as well as important debates in the history of film scholarship' (1992a: 139).

Philip French (quoted in Robinson, 1993) has described the film as ‘the incontestable keystone movie in the history of American cinema’, and it is this particular national aspect to the film which makes it so useful here. For while *Birth* is probably the single most important, influential, and widely discussed movie ever made, and remains one of the great landmarks of world cinema, the story depicted by the film mattered most to an American audience. The national impact achieved by Griffith’s picture may have exceeded expectations but it was by no means entirely an accident. Rather, this case-study contends, it was something prefigured by the film in explicitly religious terms.

Any argument regarding the cultural significance of *The Birth of a Nation* cannot, however, avoid the issue of race: the picture’s derisory treatment of African Americans was in no small measure responsible for the film’s unprecedented impact. Revered for its cinematic qualities whilst reviled for its racism, moreover, *Birth* remains what Fred Silva (1971: 1-2) has described as ‘an uneasy presence in American film history’. Indeed, therein lies much of its value with regard to the broader aims of the present study. Available on video, still screened at universities, repertory cinemas, film clubs, and sometimes even shown on television (late at night, with a presenter contextualizing the film’s overt racism for unwary viewers!), *The Birth of a Nation* continues to function as a primary source for teaching, analysis and debate on a wide range of issues. Yet although the unease still prompted by *Birth* helps to explain a continued interest in the picture, the prior reputation of the film history poses problems for scholars in the present. For, whatever one’s personal opinion of it as a motion picture alongside countless others, discussion of *Birth* is less a case of examining the film as a film, and rather more an engagement with its legendary status as an historic, social, political, economic, and cultural event. *The Birth of a Nation* could never be described as ‘just a movie’, and the picture’s extraordinary place in twentieth century cultural history has tended to set the terms for interest in it.

Bearing this in mind, it becomes hard to establish where the reception of the film ends and critical discussion of it begins. As this survey of the extensive literature regarding *Birth* seeks to make clear, it is hard to think of another film which has prompted such a wide-ranging and passionate debate. Even when ostensibly 'neutral', and concerned with technical aspects of the film, reviewers have inevitably revealed much about their own ideological positioning. And, like the film itself, critical responses to it have often articulated or advanced a particular perspective with regard to wider society. Acknowledging this ongoing, productive, aspect to the life of this extraordinary movie then, we need to ask whether the impact of *Birth* could have been matched by another less violent or less racist movie? As we shall see, Griffith's denials of racist intent have been largely dismissed by most recent commentators on the film. But has condemnation led us any closer to understanding the motives behind the film or the forces unleashed by it? What sense are we to make of the still visible scars left by the most famous film of the American silent cinema?

Establishing foundations upon which subsequent discussion can build, then, the following review of the extensive literature spawned by Griffith's film reiterates some of the key issues raised over eighty-six years of analysis and debate regarding the film. However, while the decision to focus this thesis around *The Birth of a Nation* offers further testimony to the fascination and power of Griffith's legendary flawed masterpiece, there is a sense in which discussion of *Birth*, focused on the issue of race, has become increasingly predictable. Addressing this staleness, it is the intention of this study to go beyond the existing literature by discussing both the picture and its reception from a vantage based in the evolving paradigm of research into religion, media, and culture. To that end, therefore, this review seeks to highlight areas of concern where a serious engagement with the religious images and ideas utilised in the movies, and the religious context which informed the film's production and reception, might usefully extend our understanding of the picture's multi-faceted cultural significance, particularly its overt appeal to American national sentiment in racial terms.

A Racist Masterpiece?

Until fairly recently, writing about *The Birth of a Nation* tended to follow what Janet Staiger (1992a: 142) describes as a “‘form/content’ split’ derived from nineteenth century aesthetics, and routinely reproduced in contemporary reviews of the film. In effect, this meant separating the film’s style and ‘uniformly praised’ narrative techniques, from the subject matter of the movie, i.e. the ends to which those techniques were put. For example, Francis Hackett (1915: 163), an early reviewer of the picture who was both sensitive and hostile to the racism he recognized in it, and who described the film as ‘spiritual assassination’ conceded, nonetheless, that ‘as a spectacle’ *The Birth of a Nation* was ‘stupendous’ (1915: 161). Similarly, *Variety* reviewer Mark Vance (1915: 173) predicted of *Birth* that ‘its enormity and elaborateness made such an impression’ that ‘it will take a long time before [another film] will come along that can top it in terms of production, acting, photography, and direction.’ Thus, despite some recognition that the picture might well be subject to censorship, Vance (1915: 175) points to its ‘universal appeal’ and, noting its success at the box office, concludes that ‘it’s great for pictures and it’s great for the name and fame of David Wark Griffith.’ As will be discussed below, more recent analyses of the film have sought to interrogate this split. Nevertheless, the kinds of points made in the wake of the film’s original release established the basis of debates which have raged over the last eighty five years.

In the (white) South, the celebration of the movie was, unsurprisingly, passionate and unequivocal. For *The Atlanta Journal*, Ward Greene (1915: 179) described *The Birth of a Nation* as ‘the awakener of every feeling’, and wrote that ‘it swept the audience...like a tidal wave.’ Greene, (1915: 179) moreover, was belligerent in his response to the criticisms already being levelled at the picture :

Race prejudice? Injustice? Suppression?... none but a man with a spirit too picayunish (*sic*) and warped for word would pick such flaws in a specatcle so great and whole-hearted as this....the picture does every credit to the negro race, lauds those faithful old black people whose fealty to their masters led them to dare the anger of mistaken fanatics, shows the

true progress they have since made in industry and education. This picture is too big a thing to be bothered by such a gnat's sting of criticism.

Whilst a little extreme in his defence of the film, Green's position was hardly untypical. Indeed, many such disavowals of the more problematic and offensive aspects of *Birth* were to follow as the serious study of film began to develop over subsequent decades. What, though, of Greene's 'gnat's sting'?

In her study of the film's reception, Staiger (1992a: 143) delineates five major themes within the negative criticisms levelled at Griffith's picture upon its initial release. 'Most obvious' was the film's distortion and consequent falsification of the history of the Reconstruction period; 'the facts were inaccurate or the examples were not representative'. Related to this line of attack, was the second theme: 'the assertion that the film misrepresented the character of blacks both as individual people and as a race'. Hence, an editorial in *The Crisis* (1915: 33) complained that the picture saw 'the Negro represented either as an ignorant fool, a vicious rapist, a venal and unscrupulous politician or a faithful but doddering idiot'. Third, the film was seen as glorifying crime, especially lynching. While 'pictures showing murder and robbery were routinely censored' and 'whites were willing to suppress by law boxing pictures in which blacks beat whites,...they would not stop the exhibition of *The Birth of a Nation*' (Staiger, 1992a: 143). Fourthly, opponents accused the filmmakers of inciting prejudice against blacks, arguing that the film was immoral and a threat to public peace. Finally, the picture was seen as promoting 'the doctrine that African Americans should be removed from the United States, a doctrine undemocratic, unchristian, and unlawful'.

Responding to such criticisms, both Griffith (1915b, c, d, & e; 1916a) and Dixon (1915a&b) mounted vigorous public defences of the film, especially the accuracy of its representation of Reconstruction history. They denied that they had been unfair in their depiction of blacks, or that they sought to incite race hatred. Nevertheless, asserting 'one reason only' behind moves to suppress *The Birth of a Nation*, Dixon (1915b: 91) was unapologetic, and admitted that the film 'opposes the

marriage of blacks to whites'. Indeed, while Griffith (1915b, c, d; 1916a) tended to stress how the attacks on the film represented a threat to freedom of speech as protected under the First Amendment, claiming that its artistic and dramatic qualities alone justified exhibition, he too recognized that 'the attack of the organized opponents to this picture is centred upon that feature of it which they deem might become an influence against the intermarriage of blacks and whites' (1915b: 169). In time, Griffith would revise his view of the film.¹¹ Yet, for all the furore generated by the movie, and the director's own involvement in the controversy surrounding it, *Birth* did little in the short term but enhance and give broader currency to Griffith's reputation as an innovative and technically accomplished film-maker, 'the first artist of the movies' (Williams, 1980).

A good example of the way the Griffith's formal achievements in *Birth* were lauded over any problems associated with the film's content is to be found in Lewis Jacob's (1939) 'classic' history *The Rise of the American Film*. There, Jacobs (1939: 177) refers to 'Griffith's Southern upbringing' and acknowledged that 'the film was a passionate and persuasive avowal of the inferiority of the Negro', and 'narrow, and prejudiced' in its viewpoint. Having noted how the uproar prompted by the film's racism 'awakened the nation to the social import of moving pictures', however, Jacobs wrote (1939: 178) that 'this realization was overshadowed by the great acclaim for the picture's artistry, its rich imagery and powerful construction. So advanced was the film structurally that even today it stands as an accomplishment of great stature.' Celebrating Griffith's 'unerring command of the medium', Jacobs (1939: 179) wrote that

¹¹ According to Barnet Bravermann who died before completing a biography of Griffith, by 1941 even the director was prepared to admit that 'if *The Birth of a Nation* were done again, it would have to be made much clearer. Although the picture was made with no intention of embarrassing the Negro, as it stands today, it should be seen solely by film people and film students. The Negro race has had enough trouble, more than enough of its share of injustice, oppression, tragedy, suffering, and sorrow. And because of the social progress which Negroes have achieved in the face of these handicaps, it is best that *The Birth of a Nation* in its present form be withheld from public exhibition.' (quoted in Silva, 1971: 8)

The Birth of a Nation pulsates; it is life itself. From the very beginning, shots are merged into a flux. Either the actions within the shots have some kind of movement or the duration of the shots is so timed that the effect is one of continuous motion. This motion creates a “beat” which accents the relationships of the separate elements of the film and produces a single powerful effect.

How far any film can be said to produce ‘a single powerful effect’ is highly debatable. As we have seen already, even black responses to the film were divided. What Jacobs’ comments do indicate, though, is how the picture’s importance as a harbinger of the Hollywood method, led many writers interested in the medium to downplay the long term significance of the complex social meanings generated by the film.

Part of the problem in this respect derives from Griffith’s legendary status as a director; ‘the man who invented Hollywood’ (Griffith and Hart, 1972). Certainly, the impact of *Birth* boosted D.W. Griffith’s public reputation for technical innovation. For some time, he was commonly thought to have introduced to the medium elements such as the use of artificial lighting, the close-up, the iris-in, the fade-out, parallel editing moving the action across time and space, location photography, careful casting, and a more restrained ‘natural’ acting style. To some extent, this reputation no longer stands up to scrutiny (e.g. Bowser, 1990). As Harry Geduld (1971: 6) writes for instance, ‘examination of the films of earlier filmmakers...reveal many of these “innovations” in movies that were made before Griffith set foot inside a movie studio’. What Geduld does stress, however, is that ‘Griffith’s major technical “innovation” was in using the discoveries of others for intelligent *dramatic* purposes’ (emphasis in original). Thus, David Bordwell (1985b: 80) indicates the importance of Griffith’s achievement with *Birth* in ‘synthesiz[ing] many contemporary but sporadic and partial forms into a coherent narrational process’. Like the American movie industry he helped develop, Griffith’s movies were story-driven, and it was this concern above all others which determined the director’s decision-making with regard to the deployment of technique. However, the full implications of this aspect

of Griffith's work were for a long time largely avoided by commentators when it came to dealing with *The Birth of a Nation*.

James Agee (1958: 17), among other things, a noted screen-writer himself, saw Griffith as 'a great primitive poet, a man capable, as only great and primitive artists can be, of intuitively perceiving and perfecting the tremendous magical images that underlie the memory and imagination of entire peoples'. By Agee's (1958: 16-18) account, *The Birth of a Nation*, 'the one great epic, tragic film' represented the pinnacle of Griffith's artistry, and he described the battle scene in the film as 'beyond realism...a perfect realization of a collective dream of what the Civil War was like, as veterans might remember it fifty years later, or as children, fifty years later might imagine it'. For Agee (1958: 17), 'a dreamlike absoluteness...cradles and suffuses the whole film.' Yet, although he doubted whether Griffith really understood what was 'good' or 'bad' or 'original' in his work (1958: 20), and disagrees with Griffith's depiction of Reconstruction in some respects, Agee (1958: 17), also a Southerner, was prepared to defend the director against charges of racism:

Griffith went to almost preposterous lengths to be fair to the Negroes as he understood them, and he understood them as a good type of Southerner does...Griffith's absolute desire to be fair, and understandable, is written all over the picture; so are degrees of understanding, honesty and compassion far beyond the capacity of his accusers. So, of course, are the salient facts of the so-called Reconstruction years.

In fact, understandings of Reconstruction history have changed somewhat since Griffith and Agee (e.g. Weisberger, 1959; Franklin 1961; Foner, 1988; Litwack, 1995), as have critical perspectives on the relationship between form and content in the film. As Clyde Taylor (1991: 19) notes, however, Agee's comments are significant because they can be attributed to one of the 'founding heroes' of 'canonical film studies'.

For Taylor (1991: 16), the importance of *Birth* as the first movie worthy of 'serious' attention from critics and scholars makes it 'almost a myth of origin' for cinema studies. Indeed, the formula wherein *Birth* was lauded as an aesthetic achievement with little more than an apologetic acknowledgement of the picture's

racist content remained a staple of film studies as it began to attain academic respectability from the 1960s onwards. Thus, for instance, A.R Fulton (1960: 75-115) used the climactic ride of the Klan as an illustration of especially skillful film editing. For Fulton (1960: 98), Griffith's meticulous combination of techniques established a pattern which 'gives the film its rhythm'. Despite a suggestion that formal characteristics such as editing of the picture gain their meaning in structuring content (1960: 100), and an acknowledgement of 'the unfortunate bias in Griffith's interpretation of history', Fulton (1960: 103) maintained that '*The Birth of a Nation* is an exciting film to watch' which 'one can enjoy the film for its immensity of scope, the construction of its narrative, and its spectacular scenes'.

Over half a century after the release of *Birth*, Paul O'Dell (1970: 38) also described it as 'a textbook of cinematic technique and dramatic application', writing that the film marked 'the beginning of the cinema's adulthood'. Again, whilst O'Dell (1970: 11) recognized 'that the forcefulness of the film impresses upon the viewer the idea that the Negro race is an inferior one', he nonetheless opined that although the issue of racism was one 'which the film raises with the infinitely more liberal viewer of the Seventies', it was merely a distraction 'from the broader issues with which Griffith's film is more importantly concerned'. Thus, while O'Dell was surely right in pointing out that attitudes had changed in the period since 1915, the widespread civil unrest centered on race relations in America during the 1960s makes one wonder what 'important' issues O'Dell had in mind when he described the racism of the film as a 'distraction'. Similarly, one might enquire how Wagenacht and Slide (1975: 60) sought to square their argument that an 'intelligent spectator' should understand 'that even the worst of the blacks in the picture behave as they might be expected to behave in view of their conditioning, not because they are Negroes but because they have been exploited and underprivileged human beings', with the film's solution to

the problem of race relations; black disenfranchisement?¹²

Racist Content, Racist Form?

As pervasive as the form/content dichotomy was in discussions of *The Birth of a Nation* prior to 1970, the issue of the picture's and/or Griffith's racism remained a live one. From its explosive entry into American culture onwards, many writers have addressed and condemned the representations of race in the picture (e.g. Cobleigh, 1915; Hackett, 1915; Noble, 1948; Carter, 1960; Sarris, 1969; Bogle, 1973: 10-18; Franklin, 1979; Rogin, 1987; Tyler, 1988; Robinson, 1997). Nevertheless, as necessary as this attention to race clearly was and remains, the form/content dichotomy remained largely intact in discussions of the film for over half a century. For example, one of the most trenchant 'old school' critiques of *Birth* came from Peter Noble (1948) who described 'its extraordinarily vicious anti-Negro bias' (1948: 125) in some depth. Yet, despite his piece emerging from a long term and quite vituperative political debate among leftist cultural commentators regarding the film (Staiger 1992a: 146-53), and attacks on Noble from Griffith scholar Seymour Stern (1948), who saw condemnation of the director and his film as thinly veiled 'communist propaganda', Noble (1948: 125) still drew a line between his concern with the racism of the picture and 'its admittedly considerable artistic merit'.

With the politicized theoretical developments which began to transform film studies from the late-sixties onwards, however, it was inevitable that this form/content dichotomy would come under increasing scrutiny. Perhaps because there was little that appeared to need saying about the technical achievements consolidated in *The Birth of a Nation* and Griffith's contribution to the development of the medium, or possibly reflecting a revisionist understanding of film history in which Griffith's importance was to be downplayed, discussion of the picture became

¹² Some writers have indicated that some early versions of the film contained an even more drastic solution, supposedly proposed by Lincoln, to the race issue: mass deportation (see Bush 1915: 178; Stern, 1965: 159).

increasingly socio-political in its orientation. Moreover, not only was *Birth* increasingly subject to attack as bad history and/or racist propaganda (e.g. Franklin, 1979; Gallagher, 1982; Robinson, 1997) or invoked as a key event within broader historical discussions of race in American film and media (e.g. Bogle, 1973; Cripps, 1977; Tyler, 1988; Miller, 1993; Rhodes, 1993; Robinson, 1997), but it was also examined in ways which sought to relate its hitherto lauded formal qualities to its somewhat less celebrated content (e.g. Armour, 1981; White, 1981/1982; Rogin, 1987; Taylor, 1991; Lang, 1994b; Dyer, 1996).

To some extent, this shift had been anticipated in an important essay on Griffith by Soviet film-maker and film theorist Sergei Eisenstein (1949). In it, Eisenstein highlighted Griffith's indebtedness to Charles Dickens with regard to both the content of his films, melodramatic as well as atmospheric, and the director's mastery of cinematic form, particularly with regard to editing and his characteristic use of parallel montage; that is, cross-cutting between two or more geographically separate but usually simultaneous lines of action. Understanding the ideological basis of this debt to Dickens in relation to the 'organic unity' (1949: 235) of Griffith's highly rhythmic filmmaking demands, Eisenstein (1949: 198) argued, that we 'visualize an America made up of more than visions of speeding automobiles, streamlined trains, racing ticker tape, inexorable conveyor-belts. One is obliged to comprehend [a] second side of America—the traditional, the patriarchal, the provincial'. Eisenstein's insight is an important one here. Not only does it remind us of the apparent contradiction wherein Griffith's work in *The Birth of a Nation* has been described by commentators as both 'profoundly reactionary' and 'profoundly forward-looking' (Combs, 1979: 105). But it grounds that contradiction in a broader tension within American life; between, on the one hand, the relentless modernization which has so brought the US such material prosperity, and, on the other, the essential conservatism of American socio-political arrangements. As was argued in Chapter Three, it is this tension, along with the need of Americans to address and make sense of it, which has lent American religion much of its distinctive character and

importance in the articulation and maintenance of national identity. To what extent might this explain another aspect of Griffith's work; the mobilization of religious elements in films like *The Birth of a Nation*?

As Chapter Five will elaborate, a few scholars like Scott Simmon (1993) have drawn attention to the religious dimension of both the technique and the content of Griffith's film-making, with Lary May (1983: 60-95) in particular, drawing special attention to the director's Methodist upbringing. This interest in the issue of religion has also been evident, albeit to a limited degree, in work which has sought to examine the relationship between form and content in *Birth* with regard to its broader cultural significance. However, the understandable distaste for the racism of *The Birth of a Nation* among commentators has often prompted somewhat predictable and unbalanced accounts of the cultural bases which undergird the picture.

An early example of this tendency is found in Everett Carter's (1960) examination of how Griffith's film mounted a nostalgic defence of what Carter (1960: 136) describes as the 'Southern' or 'Plantation' Illusion'; 'a whole set of irrational cultural assumptions...based primarily upon a belief in a golden age of the antebellum South, an age in which feudal agrarianism provided the good life for wealthy, leisured, kindly, aristocratic owner and loyal, happy, obedient slave'. Anticipating many of the themes that film scholars would come to engage with a decade or so later, Carter (1960: 138) notes 'the sexual terms into which this picture translated the violation of the Southern illusion by the North', and indicates how 'the film incorporates one of the most vital of the forces underlying the illusion—the obscure, bewildering complex of sexual guilt and fear which the ideal never overtly admits, but which are...deeply interwoven into the Southern sensibility'. Certainly, Carter (1960: 139) is correct to point out the falsifications of both Dixon and Griffith when the film not only posits the mulatto as 'the evil force in the picture' (Stoneman's mistress, Lydia, and Silas Lynch) but seeks to blame freed black men rather than the former white slave owners for their existence in the first place. The motive for such an historically absurd formulation, which led James Baldwin (1976: 45) to describe

the plot of *The Birth of a Nation* as 'an elaborate justification of mass murder....labyrinthine and preposterous', is, for Carter (1960: 139), derived from 'the deep convictions of the Protestant South about the nature of sin', and a desire to destroy the 'living, visible evidence...of the burden of guilt the white must bear in the record of sexual aggression against the negro'. In describing *Birth* as a 'record of a cultural illusion...without equal' (1960: 139), however, and 'pseudoart—giving people a reflection of their own prejudices...and a restatement of their easy explanations of the terrible complexities of their history as Americans' (1960: 141), Carter might himself be guilty of demonizing Griffith, Dixon, and the South as the source of all American evil. To some extent every society seeks to protect itself from unpalatable truths regarding their own history. Thus, his dismissal of *Birth* as 'an attack upon cultural and moral unity...a false myth' (1960: 142) as opposed to 'the controlled and ordering images of an art based on a set of beliefs to which an entire people subscribe', leads us away from any consideration of the picture as an honest and heart-felt expression of Southern sentiment, or why the film engendered such a positive response from large numbers of Northern whites.

In a similar vein, Mimi White (1981/1982) argues that the picture's use of 'history' and historiographical referents such as Woodrow Wilson's *History of the American People* and various 'historical facsimiles' is intended to be something more than just a way of authorizing the particular political viewpoint articulated within it. Rather, White highlights the way the historical drama is subordinated to a familial one. For instance, 'the Civil War becomes a secondary issue' when Ben Cameron, about to be executed as a traitor, is granted a pardon after his mother makes a personal appeal to Lincoln (1981/1982: 221). Griffith's melodramatic structure is not without its problems when viewed from a contemporary vantage, however, and White (1981/1982: 222-23) develops the observations made by Carter (1960) by indicating incestual and homoerotic implications within the narrative: Flora must die because she represents a threat to the union of Ben and Elsie; the youngest sons of both families die in each others embrace. White suggests, moreover, that the history

elaborated in *Birth* is destabilized both by the artifice necessary to place the central characters at the heart of the national drama and the ahistorical, supposedly universal, divinely sanctioned, 'family' values the film espouses. Noting the film's emphasis on the 'ritual nature of events', White (1981/1982: 223) describes how, within this schema, 'the Civil War and its impact can be conceived as a rite of purgation, eliminating propensities or drives that upset the symmetry and balance of the traditional family structure'. Thus, she comments on the closing images showing Christ ushering in the Kingdom of God, and argues that they 'strongly suggest...a Paradise lost and regained, Edenic union which can only be restored through divine intervention' (1981/1982: 223).

That such an analysis is especially relevant to this study's concerns with the religious bases of US national identity, and Bellah's (1967: 18) notion of an American civil religion as 'an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality', is made clear in White's (1981/1982: 224) summation:

the historical events [depicted in the film]...are precisely (and only) the occasion for examining universal values gone awry. In relation to the overriding narrative scheme of the film, these events are only a moment in a history of far broader scope, as the lineage of world history is conceived in relation to racial and familial groups. These groups must inevitably encounter and pass through particular social and national events, at least until the apocalyptic vision is fulfilled. But their value and meaning are measured against an absolute standard which is divine in origin and expresses itself outside the domain of political interests (in the limited sense) or government institutions and practices. Thus any particular social-historical reality is subsumed under and transcended by divine, ahistorical ideals, a process and relation which is mirrored in the structure and trajectory of the film itself.

From the perspective outlined previously, this is a suggestive observation given the historical importance of the picture. However, in a way replicated in most other writing on *Birth* where the issue of religion is raised, the wider implications of this aspect to the film are left unexplored. Presumably content to accept racism as an explanation, White does not attempt to relate her conclusion back to the specific social-historical circumstances which spawned *The Birth of a Nation*.

At times, the lack of attention afforded religion by scholars has served only to undermine otherwise useful points made in their discussions of *Birth*. A prime example here, is the extensive psycho-historical examination of the picture furnished by Michael Rogin (1987). Justifying his deployment of a psycho-analytic perspective with regard to the picture, Rogin (1987: 251) is direct in addressing the form/content divide and the obfuscatory strategies routinely deployed in dealing with *Birth of a Nation* as one of the great monuments of world cinema:

Celebrants of *Birth's* formal achievement, with few exceptions, either minimize the film's racist content or separate its aesthetic power from its negrophobia. Against the evidence before their eyes, they split Griffith's "gift for making powerful emotional connections" from "Thomas Dixon's racial message." They imitate Griffith's split between good and evil, white and black, by blaming Dixon for the perversions in Griffith's movie. Griffith and his audience, in that view, did not share Dixon's propagandistic purposes; they were the victims of "unconscious racism."

Yet, precisely because 'that unconsciousness is visible on the screen in *Birth*', he argues, 'it invites us not to avert our eyes from the movie's racism but to investigate its meaning' (1987: 251).

With that as his starting point, Rogin (1987: 251) highlights the way in which the picture brought about a powerful conjunction of 'three Southerners who moved north at the end of the nineteenth century, Griffith, Dixon, and Thomas Woodrow Wilson'. Whilst he acknowledges differences of opinion between the three regarding the meaning both of the film and the history depicted in it, Rogin (1987: 252) writes that 'they shared a common project' in as much as 'they offered *The Birth of a Nation* as the screen memory, in both meanings of that term, through which Americans were to understand their collective past and enact their future'. In short, *Birth* would not only depict a highly partial view of American history but also act as an agent within that history.

In his psycho-history of *Birth*, Rogin places inevitable emphasis upon Griffith's relationship with his father, a charismatic but improvident ex-Confederate cavalry officer, native of Virginia, and sometime farmer, gambler, and politician. Thus he

takes up Schickel's (1984: 229) suggestion, that '*The Birth of a Nation* answered a...need on Griffith's part...to cast himself in the heroic mold of his father', and argues that the director made the film as a means of honouring and redeeming the memory of what was in actuality a defeated and dissolute father. As Griffith (1916b: 13) himself said, 'the first thing I remember was my father's sword', and he acknowledged that the heroic terms in which he remembered 'Roaring Jake' were an important influence on *Birth*: 'I think that that picture owes more to my father than it does to me. The stories told of my father, particularly by veterans who had fought under his command, were burned right into my memory. (Griffith and Hart, 1972: 26). Indeed, Griffith would write that 'the only person I ever really loved was my father' (quoted in Rogin, 1987: 276). As he recalled it, his father's sword was the 'law' for the young David, representing 'reason, man's sacrifice for an ideal, for love, a whole world that enters the chaos, reduces it organizes it' (quoted in May, 1983: 68). It is the symbolic power of Roaring Jake's sword within the mind of the great director which is taken up by Rogin.

Among other things, Rogin is especially keen to draw our attention to is a sequence supposedly removed soon after its opening at Clune's which, according to Seymour Stern (1965: 123), depicted the castration of the black renegade, Gus, with the same sword used by Ben Cameron, the Little Colonel, in the Civil War sequence.¹³ This, for Rogin (1987: 277), 'takes us to the heart of Griffith's project'; that is, to prevent inter-racial sex and thereby maintain the integrity of the white race. Certainly, Dixon (quoted in Rogin, 1987: 279) admitted that one intention behind *Birth* 'was to create a feeling of abhorrence in white people, especially white women, against colored men', and Griffith (1915b: 169) would himself defend the film in these same terms. Rogin (1987: 279), moreover, extends his argument to address the way in which the film responded to the changing role of women in early twentieth century America (see Chapter Five), and Griffith's own personal frustrations, by portraying

¹³ As Robert Lang (1994a: 275, n. 65) points out, however, there is now no evidence to support such a speculation.

women as innocent and defenceless in the face of the black threat: while the violence of the Klan was understood to protect white women, concern regarding the potential for miscegenation reflected an 'anxiety about the freedom not simply of blacks but of women'. In this way, Griffith reneged on the sympathetic stance towards the so-called 'New Woman' articulated in his previous work (Rogin, 1987: 260-66; Simmon, 1993: 68-103). Rogin (1987: 282) suggests that in the face of economic and socio-political changes that seemed to threaten the traditional patriarchal order, changes embodied in the New Woman, Griffith sought to distinguish and re-valorize a system that is 'white, male, and hierarchic' against one which is 'black, female, and democratic'. With a brief nod in the direction of René Girard (1979), and that writer's understanding of sacrificial violence as the basis of religion and, indeed, culture and society, Rogin posits the killing of Gus and the subsequent, and brilliantly realized, ride of the Klan as sacrificial acts intended to give rise to a regenerate order, symbolized in the double wedding and vision of Christ at the end. Rogin (1987: 282-86) notes, however, that some aspects of Griffith's representational strategy, particularly his use of white actors in blackface, actually undermined these intentions. For example, a brief image of 'white spies disguised' towards the end of the film, serves only to draw attention to the fact that all the other principal black characters are also whites in blackface. Thus he writes, 'the obviousness of blackface, which fails to disguise, reveals that the Klansmen were chasing their own shadow sides' (1987: 283).

As compelling and informative as Rogin's discussion of *Birth* is though, from the perspective of the present study, his failure to address the issue of religion outwith the brief and undeveloped reference to Girard is problematic. That this is so is signalled by two significant and interconnected absences within it: Griffith's own mother, and the culture of the South in which Griffith's, Dixon's, and Wilson's sensibilities were shaped. Whilst interest in the colourful character of 'Roaring Jake' is understandable, there is a danger of over-emphasizing this paternal influence at the expense of the more routine, day-to-day, influence of the director's mother, Mary.

Michael Allen (1999: 21) has recently sought to explore the ramifications of Griffith's 'strange, confused, intimate, distant and sensuous' relationship with his mother in regard to the melodramatic form of his pictures. Yet the point need not be made in overly theoretical terms: for, as much of a legend as D.W. made of Jacob Griffith in the course of his own reminiscences, the fact remains that his father died when he was only ten. Furthermore, given Jake's status in his final years as 'something of a drinker, gambler, and braggart' (Lang, 1994c), and the traditional cultural assumptions placing child-rearing duties almost entirely within the province of the mother, one might reasonably infer that the biggest single influence on young David's overall cultural orientation was actually his mother. Information on the director's mother may be scant, but Rogin's failure to address her influence indicates a lack of balance in his account which is typical of most contemporary analyses of the picture. The point will be developed further in Chapter Five, but, ignoring the experience of Mary Griffith, i.e. suffering, loss, enforced hardship, and dislocation made comprehensible by a religious worldview, really means neglecting much of the human dimension to the experience of the South during and after the Civil War. Indeed, Rogin personalizes the racism in *Birth* without fully engaging with its social bases. As fundamental as the colour divide was (and to some extent remains) to the economy and culture of the South, ignoring, say, the religious component of a white Southern identity serves only to reduce our understanding of how that identity came to inform *The Birth of a Nation*. For all the theoretical sophistication Rogin brings to bear on the film, does his analysis of the relationship between its form and its racist content deepen our understanding of why large numbers of white Americans across the nation responded so enthusiastically to it?

Richard Dyer's (1996) exploration of the 'whiteness' articulated by the picture concentrates on the lighting techniques deployed by Griffith. As a discourse on racial purity, Dyer argues, the film is abetted by some of the fundamental characteristics of the medium (i.e. ones not dependent on special lighting techniques), most notably with the ride of the Klan:

All film takes place on a white background (the screen); to fill the screen with white costume is to increase the radiation of the light reflected off the screen. To have it swirl as, the Klan costumes do, especially when riding and rearing up on horseback, heightens the primary spectacle of film as light. This is the moment at which white men are whitest - but of course we cannot see their flesh. (1996: 173)

This disjunction between the absolute whiteness of 'the soul embodied in the white sheet' (Michaels, 1988: 190) and the actual bodies of the Klansmen is in part due to the film's coding of masculine physical drives as dark. Indeed, it might even serve to indicate the instability of the racial categories the narrative revolves around. What Dyer stresses, however, is the way *The Birth of a Nation* counters this threat by constructing white women as symbols of racial and moral purity. This was achieved by Griffith's selective use of highly stylized lighting techniques which served to emphasize the whiteness of the female characters in the film, particularly Ben Cameron's Northern bride-to-be Elsie, played by Lillian Gish. Developed initially in the theatre and middle-class portrait photography, visual techniques such as an aura or halo of light around the head and shoulders were only just beginning to be adopted by filmmakers, but would become staple elements of the Hollywood star system. Dyer's (1996: 165) point is that these 'embryonic cinematic elements...have strongly northern connotations', being rooted in traditions associated with northern European painters such as Vermeer and Rembrandt. Such representational codes fitted well with 'ideas of Aryanism' in which 'the cold, high North was repeatedly held to have created the strong, vigorous and pure character of the white race' (1996: 174). Thus, despite Ben Cameron's invocation of a Scottish heritage as the Klan is formed, and the film's articulation of a Southern white supremacist understanding of American identity, *Birth*, according to Dyer (1996: 175), 'betrays a feeling that the South is, after all, not quite white enough to give birth to the new white nation'.

As suggestive as Dyer's analysis is though, his discussion does not touch upon the fairly obvious religious or spiritual connotations of light. Nor does it explore the association of light with Christian theology and in relation to the missive aspects of the Puritan tradition. Light, in this religious sense, also carries strong northern

connotations, but is not simply a signifier of white supremacism. Thus, in spite of citing Walter Benn Michaels (1988) discussion of how the notion of racial difference promoted by Thomas Dixon was basic to literary and other aesthetic efforts (including *The Birth of a Nation*) to construct a 'truly American' identity, and Michaels' (1988: 190) recognition that 'identity in *The Clansman* is always fundamentally spiritual', these aspects of the picture are not developed by Dyer.

Literary and Cultural Influences

A similar disregard of the religious dimension to *Birth* and, by extension, the persistent importance of religion within American life, is evident in writing which examines the picture in relation to other aspects of the culture whence it emerged. Thus, for example, James Chandler (1990) takes issue with Eisenstein's (1949) insistence on Dickens as the key literary influence on Griffith and points out the importance of Sir Walter Scott's romantic fiction in shaping a white Southern identity and its articulation within the work of both Thomas Dixon and Griffith. Aside from citing Mark Twain's attack on Scott, as having set the South back 'in love with dreams and phantoms; with decayed and swinish forms of religion; with decayed and degraded systems of government', however, Chandler (1990: 244) makes no attempt to relate this to the upheavals in religion brought on by the Enlightenment, or to the influence of the churches in the South. From the perspective of this study, this is something of a shame, as it elides a consideration of how romantic fiction might relate to the religious dimension of American national identity. For, drawing on Georg Lukács (1962: 19-47) account of the historical novel, Chandler suggests that where Dixon's use of Scott was akin to the reactionary aspect described by Twain, what Griffith derived from Scott was a more forward-looking sense of letting an relatively ordinary character such as Ben Cameron be defined by the conflicts whence a new nation might emerge.

Issues relevant to the concerns of this study are also thrown up by pieces which discuss the influence upon Griffith's picture of theatrical melodrama, a form

defined above all by the way in which moral issues are made legible in familial terms (Brooks, 1976). Of particular concern here is the ideological pattern within *Birth*, whereby a common identity is forged by establishing 'equivalences between race, culture, family, and nation' (Gaines, 1996: 182)

For Linda Williams (1996), *The Birth of a Nation* was descended from the theatrical versions of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly* (1852) which, Williams (1996: 111) writes, 'seem to have occupied a similar position of importance in the history of the melodramatic theatre that *The Birth of a Nation* certainly does in the history of cinema. Indeed, she argues 'that melodrama is not so much a specific genre as a fundamental *mode* of American cinema; not a deviation or excess of a more classical realist narrative, but *the* dominant mode of popular moving pictures (1996: 112). Although Williams (1996: 112) is at pains to resist a 'shamelessly melodramatic' formulation in which 'a process of moving audiences towards a recognition of national guilt about slavery' begun by Stowe's novel was set into reverse by the success of *Birth* over sixty years later, she notes that Thomas Dixon had clearly learnt much from these 'Tom' shows as they became known. Both the novel and the stage play of *The Clansman*, as well as the film based upon them,¹⁴ were 'structurally similar' in many respects to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but enacted a moral reversal of the 'interracial configurations' set out in the latter (1996: 132). In that respect, Griffith's racist film, which as Williams (1996: 134) reminds us, 'has engendered greater artistic legitimacy within its cinematic terms than Stowe's attempts to counter racism', is merely the flip-side of the 'same melodramatic coin' (1996: 135).

The melodramatic form of cinema Griffith helped develop was not necessarily a racist one, as Jane Gaines (1996) reminds us in comparing Griffith's *Birth* to *Within Our Gates* (1919), directed by African-American director Oscar Micheaux; a rather

14 In his study of the relationship between Dixon's theatrical melodrama and Griffith's picture, Jeffrey Martin (1990: 93) argues that the main reason for many of the choices made by Griffith in his adaptation stem from 'a desire for the maximum dramatic impact', and the dramatic values the director learned in his previous career as an actor and playwright.

different, but nonetheless melodramatic, family-centred, response to the question of who or what is an American. What Gaines (1996: 182) recognizes however, is that 'so effective is Griffith's melodramatic technique at mounting its emotional case that viewers of *The Birth of a Nation* often lose sight of the cause espoused beneath the surge of feeling'. Thus, 'viewers often say that they *feel* they want the Night Riders to rescue the white community against the black threat, whether they would rationally want this outcome in the abstract or not' (1996: 182).

In so far as all melodramas carry some sort of moral lesson or redemptive message (Lang, 1994b: 8), the suggestion of an almost ritual force to the film, capable of side-stepping rational objections to its content, serves to remind us that the melodramatic form relies rather more on emotional impact than it does intellectual clarity, in getting any message across. Indeed, discussion of the melodramatic form of Griffith's work has been heavily influenced by Peter Brooks' (1976: 15) understanding of melodrama as 'the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a *post-sacred* era' (emphasis added). Where the starting point for Brooks' widely cited analysis lies with the cultural and religious upheavals associated with the French Revolution, however, the assumption of secularization articulated by him is less convincing when applied to the American context, where a widespread, though not necessarily unified, belief in a divinely ordained order has, if anything, revived during the twentieth century. Certainly, and as the following chapter argues, *The Birth of a Nation* emerged from a period of American history heavily inflected by a widespread sense of religious crisis among the mainstream denominations. Despite this background, though, Griffith had no qualms invoking Christ at the conclusion of *Birth* as a symbol of the good society to which national unity was a prerequisite. For Robert Lang (1994b: 24), another commentator interested in the melodramatic form adopted by Griffith, the apocalyptic ending to the picture represents 'a tremendous, hysterical effort' to assert that, though a great deal has been lost, something even greater has been gained' and thereby resolve '*The Birth of a Nation's* inherent narrative

contradictions'. Yet as ludicrous, or even camp (Simmon, 1993: 152), as Griffith's 'vision' might appear to some of us now, it was hardly aberrant in terms of its cultural context. We might even raise the possibility that the cultural industry *Birth* helped to anchor at the heart of American life came itself to function as a highly profitable bolster to faith.

That *The Birth of a Nation* was indeed a response to the upheavals of American culture which took place in the early part of the Twentieth century is indicated by Stanley Corkin (1996). He locates *Birth* in relation to the so-called 'Progressive Era', an historiographically convenient term which refers to the crucial transitional period during the first decade and a half or so of the Twentieth century during which time the United States underwent modernization on a huge scale. Describing the Progressive era in terms of 'economic and cultural reorganization...from the top down', Corkin (1996: 4) grounds the director's aesthetic sensibility in 'the reigning impulses of Progressivism' (1996: 4). He argues that Progressivism furnished 'the prevailing worldview of the realist text, both literary and cinematic' and 'that realism and its derivative, naturalism, and naturalism's derivative, modernism, all aimed intrinsically at furthering a definition of being generalized from the same assumptions and intentions that produced Progressivism' (1996: 4). Specifically, Corkin (1996: 136) argues, 'realism was employed as a strategy for containing disruption'. On this basis Corkin (1996: 133-60) develops an analysis of the film which sees its argument regarding the supposed inferiority of blacks as a form of positivist history based in 'ideas of history-as-science and science-as-progress' (1996: 159). He asserts that Griffith relied 'on his audience's predisposition to believe in the reality of the image, on their dominant belief in the positivist dogma of the time, and above all their willingness to have their racism verified as fact' (1996: 159).

Corkin may have a point as far as some of Griffith's intentions go. But his somewhat overstated account of its effect tends both to elide the contradictions carried within the film and simplify the complex social reality to which it was

addressed. Avoiding consideration of the film as a melodramatic appeal to national sentiment, for instance, means that Corkin does not have to address those aspects of the picture, such as the use of white actors blacked-up, which actually undermine the positivist method supposedly deployed in it. Is, moreover, an affirmation of racism enough to restore order? In a way which typifies the broader ignorance with regard to religion and its importance in America among some cultural commentators, Corkin displays no interest in the apocalyptic vision to which the film's treatment of race is oriented. The issue of nationhood is simply taken for granted. Thus, the ontological aspect of his argument aside, Corkin's materialist analysis simply ignores the religious dimension of the Progressive Era.

The Dark Soul of White America

Interestingly, some of the most direct references to the religious aspects of *The Birth of a Nation* are to be found in African-American accounts of the picture's deleterious impact on understandings of race within U.S. culture. Particularly useful in this respect is a piece by Clyde Taylor (1991) which examines the legacy of separating the picture's 'aesthetic' qualities from the values it represents within film studies. Taylor (1991: 19) states that 'if *The Birth of a Nation* is an epic, it is an epic of white supremacy'. Bracketing the issue of racism in the film, he contends, effectively avoids 'the real issue—White supremacy.' Indeed, Taylor's (1991: 34) basic concern is with the Eurocentric 'art-culture system that has deterred recognition of *The Birth of a Nation* as one of the most accomplished articulations of fascism, of twentieth century evil'. He locates discussions of this picture within a broader context in which 'vast social, political, and economic interests have accumulated around the aesthetic as an institutionalized discursive history, much of it around the site of the established art-culture system'. By 'denying the political resonance of cultural works', Taylor (1991: 33) argues, this discourse of 'art' protects the political interests it serves as a means 'to protect its own authority'.

With regard to the film itself, though, he notes that in terms of narrative structure, *Birth* 'accomplished the significant feat of transposing the national myth of the South into terms congruent with the mythology of White American nationalism'. The film 'rehearses Christian eschatology in national terms. Its basic narrative rhythm is this: Eden established, lost, restored' (1991: 20). Pointing out, moreover, the numerous 'Christlike martyrs' in the film, 'the soldiers who fall on the battlefield, Lincoln, little Flora Cameron, and the ravaged South itself', Taylor (1991: 21) recognizes that the final vision of Christ, 'often derided as a gratuitous, unrealistic intrusion into the text, is in fact perfectly consistent with the mythic fabric of the tale'. Summarizing the nature of *The Birth of a Nation's* epic appeal to white nationalist sentiment, he writes that Griffith's film invites a white viewer

to perceive the essential scene of national development as the South instead of colonial New England or the Western frontier. It also asks this spectator to shift the core nationalizing experience from the land, and the taming thereof, to miscegenation, to Blacks, and the taming thereof. (1991: 21)

It is this project, Taylor contends, to which Griffith's aesthetic strategy is oriented.

Taylor's overview is both provocative and valuable as an indication of how fundamental the religious elements of the film are. Yet, because his interest in *Birth* revolves around a concern with the political implications of critical and cultural practices which emphasize aesthetic interpretations at the expense of moral ones, Taylor does not really develop his discussion of it in this direction. Consequently, there is little enquiry into those aspects of white Southern culture and experience which might explain just why and how Griffith's picture addressed the religious bases of American national identity. Knowledge of a Southern myth is simply assumed. Furthermore, although Taylor (1991: 35) concedes that 'most if not all cultures cling to a hierarchy of values that confer identity, and perhaps also distinction', his characterization of *Birth* as 'a radical and evil work' (1991: 33) tends toward the same manicheanism he ascribes to Griffith. Is 'othering' and racial hatred really as much an aberration as Taylor appears to assume? Thus, as justifiable as his hostility

towards the film's 'extraordinary fusion of the two basic rituals of the post-bellum South—the minstrel show and the lynching' (1991: 27) might be, Taylor is perhaps guilty of neglecting the human dimension to the mix of religion, racism, and sexual repression at the heart of white southern culture.¹⁵ This neglect, it might be argued, reduces our understanding of *Birth*. Was the mass appeal of the film merely a product of white supremacist ideology allied to Griffith's mastery of the medium?

A similar line of attack to Taylor's is articulated by Cedric Robinson (1997). Addressing the historical roots of the white supremacist standpoint articulated in *The Birth of a Nation*, Robinson (1997: 163) takes earlier commentators like Thomas Cripps (1963) to task for overemphasizing the regional origins of white racism in twentieth century America, and highlights the role of 'Northern as well as Southern and even European racist intellectuals...in the formation of American national culture, academic life, medicine, art, and popular culture'.¹⁶ Within Robinson's discussion of *The Birth of a Nation*, the historical importance of the film stems from its collusion with the interests behind the economic and political transformation of America into a global power at the beginnings of the twentieth century. He argues that the movie's depiction of national redemption in terms of race 'established cinematic protocols and racial icons' (Robinson 1997: 161) which, in turn, helped naturalize the arrangements of 'a robust industrial society voraciously appropriating a vast but disparate labour force which required cultural discipline, social habituation, and political regulation' (1997: 163). Describing, moreover, the apocalyptic climax to *Birth*, Robinson (1997: 172) writes that it 'fuses whiteness and a race theodicy, patriarchy and filopietty, historical destiny and Christian consciousness on the mass consciousness'. As

15 Indeed, Taylor (1991: 18-22) is particularly harsh in his criticism of Gerald Mast's commentary on the film which highlights Griffith's 'human focus', arguing 'that all virtually all of the film's formal achievements...are deployed in the cause of aestheticizing and sentimentalizing the principal characters as White people'.

16 Melvyn Stokes (1996: 71) describes three main streams of thought which coincided in the racism of *Birth*: the first derived from Gobineau and his work on the inequality of races; the second from Charles Darwin's ideas on evolutionary progress; and the third, an 'Anglo-Saxonism' which 'drew attention to the vitality of the cultures it supposedly produced' but feared 'that the intermixture of races would bring about the regression of the dominant stock'.

eloquent as this conception of the film's 'message' is however, does it really tell us how the film achieved this? Does such a top-down view of the film and its cultural impact really advance our understanding of the racism articulated by it?

Russell Merritt (1990: 218) recognizes that the key question contemporary critics need to raise in addressing *The Birth of a Nation* is this: 'How can a work remain so effective when so much of its content is repugnant'? While he welcomes the shift within discussions of *Birth* which has seen examination of its formal characteristics subordinated to socio-political studies of its content as a useful 'corrective to too many analyses that dismissed the bigotry as understandable...or unconscious', Merritt (1990: 217) nonetheless reminds us that 'the danger in dwelling exclusively on the film's racial themes is that in belaboring the obvious such analyses miss too much and through omission distort and over simplify the complexity of the film's narrative'. As he puts it, 'the sociological reading assumes that all pleasures of *Birth's* text are necessarily guilty pleasures, so offensive is the film's racial theme' (1990: 217).

In a previous attempt to address the enigma of the film's effectiveness, Merritt (1972) argued that Dixon's sources provided Griffith with the opportunity to turn 'familiar legends about the Old South, the Civil War, and Reconstruction into a grandiose populist parable for a nation on the brink of war, creating a cautionary tale for a country in the throes of assimilating blacks and immigrants' (1990: 218). Aspects of this early argument based on the content of the picture are taken up below. However, Merritt's (1990: 218) dissatisfaction with it as yet another 'example of the naive form/content split' discussed earlier which 'rather too neatly historicizes the film's racial venom' brought him back to the picture with more formal concerns. Illustrated by a detailed re-examination of the pivotal sequence where Flora Cameron jumps to her death after being chased by black freedman Gus, Merritt (1990: 219), citing an evocative phrase from Peter Lehman, suggests 'that at its most interesting points the film becomes formally ungovernable, even incoherent, and that "by letting into his film more than he can handle"...Griffith gets back into stylistic corners that

reveal important tears and fissures'. Indeed, he argues that such 'spasmodic bursts of uncontrollability are at the center of what keeps *Birth* such a resilient text that defies the banalities and offenses of its source material' (1990: 219).

In terms of function and narrative structure, Flora's death is important because it prompts and justifies an all out crusade of vengeance by the Klan. Indeed, the Klan's spectacular ride to rescue both Elsie and the Cameron household is intended to redeem the failed rescue of Flora which precedes it. Thus, Merritt (1990: 220) starts by drawing our attention to the sequence's illustration of 'Griffith's meticulous sense of design'. With regard to the use of props, for example, Merritt (1990: 225-26) traces the signifying trail which leads from Flora pledging herself to silence upon a miniature Confederate flag after discovering Ben's membership of the Klan, through her wearing of the flag as a belt, which allows Ben's use of it to wipe blood from her mouth as she lies dying in her brother's arms naming Gus as her pursuer. It is this handkerchief that is later 'used to sacramentalize Flora's death' (1990: 225) as both she and the South are resurrected. As Merritt (1990: 227) puts it, 'soaked up by a flag and the flag of the Cause, her blood becomes communion blood. Her death is transformed into the new-found cause for a new Southern Crusade'.

What Merritt (1990: 228) goes on to indicate, however, is the way the trajectory of the film is in some ways subverted by the scene being 'structured to include the possibility of a tragic misunderstanding': in terms of the evidence presented to us by Griffith, Gus is innocent. Indeed, Merritt (1990: 228) reminds us that actor Walter Long plays Gus as being unusually 'hesitant' and 'tentative' for a supposed villain in the sequence which leads to Flora's death. So although other scenes show him as one of the brutal minions of black rule, the ambiguous status of Gus as the perpetrator of an outrage which begets Old Testament style vengeance and mass murder leads Merritt (1990: 228) to describe Griffith as 'constantly tearing at the fabric of his narrative with provocative nuances that suggest possibilities the director only dimly perceives and is unwilling or unable to pursue'. It is not,

moreover, textual crudity or 'aesthetic failure' which explains the presence of 'discordant elements, overtones out of control, that fight the dominant themes'. Rather, it is the case, Merritt (1990: 233) suggests citing Lehman again, that 'incongruity may also point to a kind of daring.' At one level, Dixon's revenge formula is undermined in the film by the realism of the medium and the heightened sense of taboo surrounding the representation of rape (1990: 234). As Merritt (1990: 235) writes, 'from first to last the scene works to put a veil over the events it purports to bring out in the open'. Nevertheless, as odd as Griffith's decision to base his first epic on a rape story would appear, the rape theme itself lends the film considerable psychological power (1990: 233-34).¹⁷ What is necessary for the film to work, Merritt appears to be saying, is the tribal complicity of the audience.

That there is a perverse kind of honesty at work in Griffith's film is also argued by William Rothman (1988: 16), who describes Henry Walthall's performance as Ben Cameron holding his dead sister thus:

Realizing what has happened, he stares into the camera, his face an expressionless mask....

In his anguish and despair, he dedicates himself to vengeance....His look to the camera calls upon us to acknowledge his guilt, not his innocence, for he knows in his heart that he has no right to condemn Gus – because he himself at this moment, with the camera as witness, guiltily embraces the dark, monstrous forces within himself.

What follows from this, Rothman suggests, actually subverts the possibility of national redemption supposedly enacted in the film's climax. What the ride of the Klan reminds us 'is that America was born with blood on its hands. Its soul remains to be saved' (1988: 16-17). Perhaps so, but why should this acknowledgement of collective guilt have proved so resonant and popular among white Americans at the time?

¹⁷ Here Merritt (1990: 233) cites Frances Ferguson's argument 'that the centrality of rape in the birth of the novel was hardly fortuitous....Rape, she argues, is the crime par excellence that requires investigation of the mental states of both the accused and the victim. The crime...becomes differentiated from the noncriminal act of seduction only on the level of frame of mind'.

Blinded by the Light?

Pierre Sorlin (1980: 30) writes that while 'it is easy to say that *The Birth of a Nation* is a racist film which condones lynching and violence...it is far too obvious a comment to serve any purpose'. Understanding the racism of the picture and its relationship to American culture, he argues, demands a somewhat deeper analysis of the film itself and its impact. Highlighting the ends to which the historical argument presented in it was put, Sorlin (1980: 83-115) casts *Birth* as a clarion call to national unity in response to a sense of domestic crisis which had come to afflict America at the time. Moreover, although 'the film provoked a scandal', he comments, it was 'a limited one' (1980: 108-09). *Birth* presented 'obvious points – military pride, fear of the immigrants, fear of seeing the black problem arise again, the dream of a pre-industrial America – in such a narrow way that no crisis c[ould] result from it'. On this basis, Sorlin (1980: 109) hypothesizes, the film may in fact have 'channelled potentially explosive fears or desires' which, at the time, threatened to consume American society. The notion of a 'black problem' indicates a degree of complacency in Sorlin's understanding of the 'scandal' generated by *The Birth of a Nation*. But his suggestion of at least a degree of social utility to the film should not be overlooked. Despite the controversy which attended *Birth* as soon as it had been screened in public, there were many citizens, no doubt, who would have echoed the recommendation of social reformer and columnist Dorothea Dix to 'go see it for it will make a better American of you' (quoted in Campbell, 1981: 58). Thus, as reprehensible as the racism of *Birth* might appear to us now, therefore, we would do well to temper our condemnation of it if we are to gain a fuller sense of how important *The Birth of a Nation* was as a cultural event. As the film itself attests, it is the discourse of nationhood, the particularity of American history and culture, which has framed the issue of race around which discussion of *Birth* now revolves. Thus, as necessary and as warranted as the denunciations of *The Birth of a Nation* have been over the years, the increasingly predictable nature of the criticisms levelled at Griffith and his picture in recent times has distracted us from examining what else was at

stake in 1915. Given, among other things, the level of financial risk involved in producing the most ambitious movie hitherto made in America, why did Griffith choose such inflammatory source material as Dixon's *The Clansman*?

In stark contrast to Thomas Dixon's hopes for the film as an emblem of white supremacy, *The Birth of a Nation* has, over time, become a readily available vehicle for cultural criticism which would address the legacy of racism within American society. The problem of treating *Birth* in near-pathological terms, however, is that it tends to inhibit our sense of Griffith's film as one of the great achievements of world cinema. The further we get from the initial context in which it was widely hailed as the greatest film ever made, and the more scorn is poured on the picture's racist message, the more difficult it becomes to comprehend its long-term popular appeal and influence within American culture.

This is especially apparent in the way discussions of *Birth* treat the particular Southern perspective shared by Griffith and Dixon. The culture of the South mythologized by Griffith in *The Birth of a Nation* is rarely treated by commentators on the film in anything other than the most superficial, condescending or patronizing way: as backward and self-deceiving; as the symbol and sometime source of all America's ills (e.g. Carter, 1960; Merritt, 1972; Rogin, 1987; Taylor, 1991; Lang, 1994b). Indeed, the suggestion by Cedric Robinson (1997) that *Birth* articulated a racism which was (and remains) more or less endemic to the national culture might lead us to believe that the film's Southern point of view is almost incidental to its central concerns. This would be a mistake. For one thing, Robinson's analysis elides crucial differences of degree. Unlike the situation in the North, discrimination between white and black lay at the heart of the South's economy and culture prior to the Civil war. By 1865 that way of life had been sacrificed on the altar of progress and national unity. This may not elicit much sympathy in comparison with the fates suffered elsewhere as a result of modernization and colonial expansion. Nevertheless, in terms of the current discussion, there is a need to gain some

understanding of the human dimensions of the colossal and humiliating defeat suffered by the white South.

The longstanding furore engendered by *The Birth of a Nation*, and the necessary condemnation of its racism which has emanated from various quarters has, in recent times, overridden the recognition and/or consideration of the film as a sincere expression of the trauma experienced within the American South as a result of defeat in the Civil War. As Jack Spears (1977: 116) contends in comparing Griffith's picture with Hollywood's 'caricatured and cliché ridden' portrayals of the Old South, '*The Birth of a Nation*' comes closest to abandoning the morass of false notions about Southerners of the Civil War era, and attempts to show them in intelligent and understanding, if not always admirable terms'. Thus, although Fred Silva (1971: 7) notes that D.W. Griffith shared 'with many Southern writers and apologists a failure to confront the race issue honestly', he argues that 'without excusing the obviously racist sentiments of *The Birth of a Nation*, the viewer must recognize that Griffith presented the values of a conquered people who viewed the rubble of what they had conceived as a civilized, moral way of life'. When examined at all, this cultural orientation, commonly known as the 'Lost Cause', is usually derided by commentators as one of many clichés via which the Civil War is remembered in America 'not as history but as legend' (Lang, 1994: 3). Yet, as Chapter Five will argue, the Lost Cause was an important manifestation of the fervent religiosity which came to define the South as America's 'Bible Belt'.

This aspect of the southern perspective set out in *Birth*, the deeper, religious, significance attached to the Lost Cause as the South came to terms with defeat and humiliation, has been largely ignored in writing about the film. The religious culture of the South, if dealt with at all, is treated as a mere symptom of a deeper malaise. Hence, little serious attention has been afforded those aspects of southern culture which might explain in anything other than personal or racial terms, Griffith's motives for adapting Dixon's incendiary materials for the screen, or why the film which ensued should have captured the imagination of so many Americans. Indeed, the

director's own denials of racist intent may be disingenuous, but they should not be dismissed out of hand. This is not to deny or excuse the racism at the heart of the picture. Rather, it is to suggest that in terms of the film, Griffith's racism, conscious or not, was a function of his own ambitions for the medium of motion pictures. If, as is widely taken to be the case, *The Birth of a Nation* represented an effort to reform American national sentiment at a time of crisis, then, viewed from the perspective set out previously, such a project would necessarily have addressed the nation in religious terms derived from and consonant with the Protestant tradition. As the following chapter argues, the Lost Cause furnished the materials to do just that.

Conclusion:

The Birth of a Nation and the Evolving Paradigm

The Birth of a Nation used to be described as 'the world's greatest motion picture' (Ramsaye, 1926: 642). More recent appraisals of it would have us remember it as one of film history's 'sorest embarrassments' (Combs 1979: 105); a racist relic. While this might be welcomed as a sign of social progress, the altered status of *Birth* also reflects a shift of emphasis within film studies, particularly with regard to the so-called silent era. The growth of research into all aspects of early cinema over the last few decades has been characterized by a rejection of the more traditional 'kings and battles' view of film history, and an increased willingness to look beyond D.W. Griffith as 'the man who started it all' and the supposedly over-arching significance of *The Birth of a Nation*. Eileen Bowser (1990), for example, demonstrates that the Hollywood paradigm emerged from the countless small scale innovations and efforts of numerous, often obscure individuals right across the industry. So although she admits that her history of American cinema between 1907 and 1915 refers to 'Griffith or *The Birth of a Nation*...in almost every chapter' (1990: xi-xii), her primary concern lies with the gradual development and transformation of practices throughout the film industry, a process which Griffith's epic merely crystallized, albeit in spectacular fashion. Furthermore, a number of scholars have sought to remind us of the

richness and variety of pre-Hollywood American cinema (e.g. Brownlow, 1990; Burch, 1990; Ross, 1998). Thus, even Scott Simmon (1993: 132), a celebrant of Griffith's work himself, argues that the singular status of *The Birth of a Nation* as a supposed breakthrough in film art 'continues to keep contemporary audiences from seeing what does remain vital in silent film'. Given that the discussion of *Birth* and its cultural impact presented above restates much that is common knowledge among scholars of American cinema, how does one justify devoting a doctoral thesis to a film which has already had so much attention? *The Birth of a Nation* was very much a product of its time, and although it stands out it should not be set apart.

Yet, although one needs to be wary of making extravagant claims on the basis of this one film, the colossal and unparalleled impact of the movie does, nonetheless, suggest it to be the culmination of something bigger. Indeed, acknowledging *Birth's* unique combination of professional ambition, artistic genius, regionalism, racism, piety, nationalism, public controversy, and unprecedented box-office success, etc., leads one to ask how far the particularity of Griffith's achievement transcended and, in turn, transformed the broader industrial and cultural developments of which it was an expression? In what ways did the impact of the picture *determine* the future course of American culture? As an event which established motion pictures, once and for all, at the heart of modern American culture, *The Birth of a Nation* demonstrated the growing power of the film industry not only to attract, entertain and excite large numbers of people and, in the process, garner vast profits, but also to reshape society. Thus, it is precisely the discomfiting prominence of Griffith's picture which prompts this case study and its re-examination of the film's appeal to national sentiment and notions of 'Americanness'. If, as has been previously suggested, secularization might be thought of as 'a transformation in religious - not extra-religious - consciousness', something which effectively relocates the category of 'the religious' within the realm of 'the secular', especially the mass media (Hoover and Venturelli, 1996: 255), then a media event as important as *The Birth of a Nation* demands attention if we are to gain a better understanding of this

broad transformation of religious consciousness. The combination of the film's impact upon the life of the American nation, its explicit (and implicit) religiosity, and the extensive critical discussions the film has engendered, makes *The Birth of a Nation* an obvious starting point for a study which would open out the historical dimensions of the 'evolving paradigm' of scholarship at the intersection of media, religion, and culture.

As we have seen, the existing literature on *Birth* does contain some indications as to the importance of religious concerns within the film (White, 1981/1982; Taylor, 1991). Similarly, some writing does address the religious dimensions of D.W. Griffith's film-making (May, 1983; Simmon, 1993), and this is elaborated in more detail in Chapter Five. Overall, though, the treatment of religion and its relation to the picture has been of a piece with the general neglect of the issue within mainstream film studies: that is to say, it is somewhat cursory and coloured by an implicit acceptance of 'secularization' as the more or less inevitable death of religion; something which ignores the well documented persistence of religion, both institutional and otherwise, as an important aspect of American national life. With regard to our understanding of the picture, what this means is that the religious elements in *The Birth of a Nation* are usually dismissed as being entirely subordinate to the picture's racism. White supremacy, it is held, forms the basis of the film's appeal to national sentiment. As convincing as this formula is, though, it leads away from any need to recognise or indeed engage with the attractive or positive elements within the southern perspective articulated within *Birth*, the myth of the Lost Cause. While a process of 'othering' may be fundamental to the articulation of a collective identity, a group thus formed might also need to believe it stands *for* something, 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness', for instance, if it is to be successfully maintained (Melucci, 1989; Schlesinger, 1991). Neglecting this aspect of the film limits our understanding of its long term legacy. What Chapter Five suggests, is that it is the rubric of civil religion, inflected from a white Southern perspective, to which the racism of *The Birth of a Nation* is oriented.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Birth of a Nation:

An Event in American Religious History

Introduction

The previous chapter highlighted the singular importance of *The Birth of a Nation* within the history of American cinema and culture. Whilst both the race controversy prompted by Griffith's picture and developments in film history have led, in recent times, to a partial eclipse of its long-standing prominence as the most important movie of the silent era, it was nonetheless argued that the unique status of *Birth* made it an obvious and valuable point of entry into the historical dimension of the relationship between religion and film in American culture. Following on, this chapter takes up some of the suggestive but largely undeveloped observations already made with regard to the religious aspects of the picture, and argues that looking at the film in the context of American religious history gives us a deeper understanding of both the film itself and its long term cultural significance. It suggests, specifically, that the film's highly problematic representation of African-Americans needs to be located within the traditions of a civil religion whereby the United States is imagined by its citizens to be a uniquely favoured instrument of providence.

Pursuing this argument does not entail a claim that *The Birth of a Nation* was in and of itself a religious phenomenon. As Chapter Three indicated, religion is not a native category but a contested term subject to the vicissitudes of history: the notion of religion is rarely a case of simple description but is often invoked in a strategic

way, as a resource of power. It is this aspect of the term, addressed in the previous discussion of American civil religion, which is utilized below. Despite the First Amendment, religion remains a privileged discourse in American culture: not only has religion been key in the articulation of American national identity, it has also served as a 'second language' used to legitimate differing and often competing conceptions of what America is and should be in the public life of the nation. What this chapter seeks to examine, therefore, is why, how, and to what effect *Birth* engaged with this discourse.

The chapter itself has four main sections. The first of these discusses the cultural context from which the picture emerged, the United States during the Progressive Era, and how this inflected the development of the American film industry. In particular, it argues that this period was characterized by a crisis within the American Protestantism which had hitherto underpinned the national tradition. This leads into the second section which highlights the cultural and religious factors which led D.W. Griffith, already an important figure within the movie industry, to use such apparently contentious material as the southern myth of the Lost Cause as the basis for a film which the director hoped would fulfil his ambitions both for himself and the medium of motion pictures. The third section presents an analysis of how the film set translated the white South's sense of itself as the conscience of America. Drawing on ideas based in the work of René Girard regarding the social significance of sacrifice, it suggests that the picture's appeal to white supremacist national sentiment was structured, fundamentally, around the sacrifices made by whites, not the denigration of African-Americans. The chapter concludes by discussing the continuing legacy of *Birth* as not only a key moment in the history of American cinema, but an event which, in effect, transformed the American civil religion.

Modernization, Morals, and Motion Pictures: Progressive America and the Growth of Cinema

In the United States, the emergence of cinema as an important and popular mass medium took place during a time described by historians as the 'Progressive era'. Running from around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and ending some time between America's entry into the First World War and the election of Republican Warren G. Harding as President in 1920, the Progressive era is an historiographically convenient term which refers to a crucial transitional period which saw the United States undergo modernization on a huge scale. During this time, the orientation of American society shifted decisively from production to consumption. No longer a nation whose economic backbone was farming, with cultural ideals, norms, and mores derived from the community orientated values of rural and small town Protestantism, America had, by 1920, become a restless, industrialized, largely urban society, whose make-up had been transformed by the largest wave of immigration in human history, and where both economics and politics were dominated by the interests of big business.¹

Despite the economic benefits of technological progress, however, the unprecedented and profoundly unsettling transformations being wrought by immigration, industrialization, and urbanization, not to mention the growing intellectual authority of science, led to a reaction from those sections of society who felt most threatened by the apparent chaos of change; the respectable middle classes. Across the nation, their anxieties prompted 'a series of movements, each aimed in one way or another at renovating or restoring American society, its values, and its institutions' (Norton *et al*, 1994: 626). This impulse to reform lent the Progressive era much of its distinctive character.

¹ Two statistical examples serve to illustrate the society-wide nature of the transformation under discussion. Whereas seven out of ten Americans in the 1890s still lived on farms or in small towns, the federal census of 1920 showed, for the first time, a majority of the population (51.4%) living in urban areas of 2,500 or more (Norton *et al*, 1994: 728). In 1900, advertising expenditure in the US was \$95 million. By 1919, this figure had grown to \$500 million (Tallack, 1991: 15-16).

The scope of progressive endeavour included campaigns to reform city, state, and federal government; urban planning; efforts to improve the condition of the urban poor; the imposition of standards on the food and drugs industries; regulations to protect the public from unscrupulous businessmen; legislation which sought to limit the potential abuses of wealth and power by the giant corporations; and, most crucially here, cultural reform. It climaxed, in 1917, with President Woodrow Wilson leading the nation out of isolation into the 'war to end all wars' in order to make the world 'safe for democracy'. Although the end of the First World War effectively signalled the dissolution of the loose coalition of progressive forces in Congress, the swansong of progressivism came in 1919 with the passing of the 18th and 19th Amendments; respectively, Prohibition and women gaining the right to vote.

Given its status as both a product and a symbol of those same forces of modernization which had prompted progressivism, it is no surprise to find that the reformers exerted significant pressures on the development of the film industry. This influence will be explored in more depth below. In deepening our understanding of the period, however, it is necessary first to highlight the degree to which modernization unsettled the religious economy of the nation, and placed religious considerations at the heart of progressive attempts to reform American society. What needs to be emphasized here is how progressivism marks a crucial turning point in the history of American religion: the disestablishment of a *de facto* Protestant civil religion.

American Protestantism in Crisis

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw American Protestantism undergo 'monumental changes' (Hammond, 1983: 282). Up to this period, 'Protestantism presented an almost unbroken front in its defense of the social status quo' (May, 1949: 91). Despite the failure of 'pre-revolutionary legal efforts to make America a "Christian nation"', and the subsequent constitutional separation of church and state enshrined in the First Amendment, the principle of voluntarism had worked

to ensure that the United States was ‘nonetheless a “Protestant nation”’ (Hammond, 1983: 283). From around 1880 onwards, however, a broad front of social forces transforming America began to undermine the hegemonic influence Protestant denominations had hitherto enjoyed. As Phillip E. Hammond (1983: 282) writes, the Civil War had called nationhood into question. Immigrants, many of whom were not Protestant, were coming in droves. Factories were being built, and millions were moving out of rural settings into cities. America was becoming a world power. Public schools were distributing the products of the Enlightenment to more and more people, as evolution and textual analysis became part of everyday intellectual baggage, and higher education grew increasingly secular. Labor was organizing, and the vicissitudes of a capitalist economy were becoming evermore apparent.

Such phenomena effected a significant decline in the position, influence, and authority of the Protestant churches, especially in the north of the country where modernization was most advanced.

In sociological terms, the process of secularization thus described reflected the demise of the pre-industrial rural community. Written during the 1920s, *Middletown*, Robert and Helen Lynd’s (1929) famous case-study of Muncie, Indiana, documented the changes being experienced by Americans in the face of industrialization. By way of comparison, the Lynds used Muncie residents’ recollections to reconstruct a nineteenth century way of life that was once typical but had by then largely disappeared. The world evoked was one in which economic activity was largely based in the land, time was not yet standardized, socializing took the form of all-day family visits, word of mouth was the main source of news, and the church lay at the centre of a largely self sufficient community based on face to face contact (1929: 11-13). Modernization and agricultural decline changed all that, however. Railroads, the telegraph, and the newspaper altered the balance of power in the relationship between the local and the national, while the emergence of a highly competitive global market for produce served only to undermine the status and independence of farmers, the traditional bedrock of the American social order. Thus, historian Robert Wiebe (1967: 44) writes that ‘the great casualty of America’s

turmoil late in the [nineteenth]-century was the island community': while many Americans continued to live in relatively small towns for some time yet, 'the society that had been premised upon the community's effective sovereignty, upon its capacity to manage affairs within its boundaries, no longer functioned'.

This fundamental change weakened American Protestantism at its roots, not least because it denied the clergy their position at the hub of the social world. The economic, political, and cultural developments that mattered were now taking place in the cities, and countryfolk began to be characterized as backward, as 'hicks'. In the South, where modernization was not so advanced, religion remained well supported and retained considerable social power. But across the rest of the nation, the churches found themselves increasingly marginalized by developments they had little influence over.

Indeed, there is a sense in which 'religion' itself had changed. For feminist cultural historian Ann Douglas (1988), the apparent cultural supremacy of Protestantism in mid-nineteenth century enacted a 'feminization of American culture' which saw the churches abandon the prophetic role Bellah (1967) regards as the core function of any authentic civil religion. Excluded from the exercise of tangible power as the harsh 'masculine' processes of laissez-faire economics, industrialization, and rationalization began their transformation of America, mainline Protestant ministers and the churches' most numerous and hence influential patrons, middle class women, formed an informal literary alliance, a subculture, which sought to take advantage of the emergence of print as a mass medium. Through 'poetry, fiction, memoirs, sermons, and magazine pieces of every kind' they would 'exert "influence," which they eulogized as a religious force' (Douglas 1988: 8-9), and thereby preserve the softer, more feminine, communal values largely confined to the domestic sphere. The best known product of this popular literary subculture was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which, as we have seen, was indeed famous for the 'influence' it exerted on an antebellum America moving toward civil war. For Douglas (1988: 6), however, the self-justification and anti-intellectual

sentimentalism which characterized the now largely forgotten literary products of this alliance would extend a profoundly conservative influence on twentieth century America:

between 1820 and 1875, in the midst of the transformation of the American economy into the most powerfully aggressive capitalist system in the world, American culture seemed bent on establishing a perpetual Mother's Day. As the secular activities of American life were demonstrating their utter supremacy, religion became the message of America's official and conventional cultural life.

American Protestantism came to be defined 'in terms of family morals, civic responsibility, and above all, in terms of the social function of church going'. As Douglas (1988: 7) puts it 'nothing could show better the late nineteenth-century Protestant church's altered identity as an eager participant in the emerging consumer society than its obsession with popularity and its increasing disregard of intellectual issues'.

For Douglas, the emasculation of American Protestantism and the sentimental association of virtue with the domestic sphere was, in effect, an abandonment of the Puritan tradition in all but outward appearance. It ensured that the economic and social developments associated with modernization in the United States would proceed unhindered by any serious theological objections:

'Feminization' inevitably guaranteed, not simply the loss of the finest values contained in Calvinism, but the continuation of male hegemony in different guises. The triumph of the 'feminizing,' sentimental forces that would generate mass culture redefined and perhaps limited the possibilities for change in American society. (1988: 13)

Despite reflecting some recognition of the moral issues at stake as America modernized, moreover, sentimentalism prefigured progressive attempts at social reform in so far as they failed to confront the root causes of the problems they addressed. Yet, although feminization set the cultural and aesthetic tone for much of what was to follow, including Griffith's persistent interest in the domestic melodrama, what alternative did the churches and their allies have but accommodation?

The character of American society in the twentieth-century was, in large measure, predicated upon the unresolved (and, in a political sense, largely unaddressed) tension between, on the one hand, the principles of rationalization identified by Weber, 'knowledge, predictability, calculability' (Tallack, 1991: 13), and a discourse of morality based in an apparently widespread belief in Judaeo-Christian notions of the supernatural on the other. Commenting on the deeper significance of the railroads in America, a national system which was more or less complete by 1890, Douglas Tallack (1991: 13) writes that

these physical links ought to be understood as the basis for a prevailing cast of mind: only if the elements in a system are connected can they be counted (upon) and this, in turn, is the basis for rational behaviour within the system.

As the tracks linked buyers and sellers so they underlined the impersonality of the system, much as the flow-charts of Frederick Taylor constituted individual workers as interchangeable units, lacking in autonomy.

Yet, despite this erosion of autonomy at the level of both the individual and the community, and all the other environmental changes accompanying modernization which emphasized the systematic over the human in US society (factories, skyscrapers, etc.) it appears that Americans never really abandoned their faith in notions of moral autonomy derived from Protestantism. Perhaps the material abundance generated by the application of rational principles was taken as further indication of the nation's chosenness. Whatever the explanation, from a vantage based in a theoretical reconsideration of what the category of the 'religious' means within postmodern society, the paradoxical relationship between economic rationalization and a morality based in the faith-based traditions of denominational Protestantism is profoundly suggestive of the key dynamic within a theology of American-style consumer capitalism. This paradox lay at the heart of public life in the America of the Progressive era, and the emerging American film industry would be profoundly influenced by what Uricchio and Pearson (1994) describe as 'competing discourses of morality and rationalization'.

The Quest for Order: 'Disestablishment', Revival, and the Progressive Babel.

Echoing Marx's (1844: 39) view of religion as 'the heart of a heartless world', Bellah *et al* (1985: 223) draw upon Douglas' notion of 'feminization' to note that 'by the middle of the nineteenth century...religion, like the family, was a place of love and acceptance in an otherwise harsh and competitive society'. The retreat of religion thus described, its 'privatization' as it were, would be one of the key aspects of the multi-faceted secularization of American society, the eventual outcome of which was, by 1920, a break in the 'link between mainline denominations and the exercise of power in American society' (Hammond, 1983: 281). This 'second dis-establishment', as Robert Handy (quoted in Hammond, 1983: 283) describes it, did not go unopposed however. And it is this struggle, the public reaction of Protestant America to the situation with which it was confronted, which found wider expression in the social criticism and reform movements of the Progressive era.

It would be misleading to explain the complexities of the Progressive era as little more than the result of a crisis within American Protestantism. The scale and multi-faceted nature of the historical forces which were transforming the United States at the time, defy such simplifications. Nevertheless, in transforming people's experience and understanding of the world and their place in it, modernization did bring with it a whole new set of moral and religious challenges. As concerned as the reformers were about the effects of modernization, progressivism was, in cultural terms, very much a product of, and legitimated with reference to, the American Protestant tradition. Leading churchmen such as Josiah Strong, Walter Rauschenbusch, and William Jennings Bryan, not to mention the Presbyterian President Wilson, the so-called 'Protestant Pope', were all prominent within the various reform movements. Jane Addams, the most famous of the female reformers, and the leading light of the settlement house movement may have been criticized by clergy 'for turning humanitarianism into a religion' (Marty, 1986: 83), but, along with a reputation for agnosticism, her emphasis on social and moral connection was less a rejection of her religious background and Quaker upbringing than a pragmatic

development of it. Thus, while secular aims may have prompted the rhetoric of 'Christian principles', 'confessions of faith', 'crusades', and 'social purity', routinely deployed in progressive jeremiads, the quest for reform came to resemble a nationwide religious revival; a 'Third Great Awakening' (McLoughlin, 1978). Attempting to renew the nation's sense of mission the reform movements of the Progressive era were, in a sense, fighting to save the soul of the nation.

In fact, the Evangelical flavour of the reform period helps to disguise the fact that at no time was there an especially unified or coherent 'progressive' programme. With regard to the religious economy, the conflicts which would explode in the 1920s, were already visible (Marty 1985: 337-71). For the Reverend Josiah Strong, a best-selling writer heavily influenced by Social Darwinist Herbert Spencer, the changes brought by modernization, particularly immigration, threatened the integrity and unity of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant empire he and many others envisaged America to be. This was the nature of the 'crisis' which prompted his call to reform. Strong may have argued that 'God's methods are scientific, and if we are to be intelligent helpers of God, our methods also must be scientific' (quoted in Marty, 1986: 23. But such an ostensibly modern attitude belied an illiberal intolerance of 'manyness', the pluralism which characterized the cities. More liberal Protestants like Rauschenbusch touted a 'Social Gospel'. They sought to build the Kingdom of God on earth by working to alleviate urban squalor, often among the very people Strong saw as undermining the quality and integrity of the nation. Opposed to such modernizing tendencies, however, were the more traditionalist evangelical forces who maintained that the role of the churches was saving souls, not social welfare. Deliberately rejecting the historical-critical methods of Biblical exegesis developed by German scholars in the nineteenth century, as well as the influence of evolutionary theory, some conservative Protestants restated their belief in the literal inerrancy of the Bible with the publication, beginning in 1909, of a series of tracts entitled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*. In a time of change, there were those who, understandably perhaps, sought moral certainty and continuity with the past. Yet, as

the divisions emerging within American Protestantism indicate, there was by no means any agreement among progressives as to what, exactly, the future would require.

Aside from a short-lived political party led by Theodore Roosevelt which split the Republican vote in 1912, progressivism was never a genuine movement. Nor was it founded upon any sustained critique of American society. Rather, as United States' society grew more complex, as well as more powerful and prosperous, it might be held to have represented, a collective 'search for order' (Wiebe, 1967). As with religion, however, different groups viewed the national situation in different ways. For example, there were those who saw the growth of giant corporations as the root of the America's problems. Some blamed the influx of immigrants. Others believed that temperance was the answer. This diversity in terms of both origins and tendencies, the lack of a common cause save the nation, meant that as morally strident as progressive rhetoric was it could only partially disguise the era's ambiguities, contradictions and paradoxes. Instead, progressive invocations of the 'old-time religion' support Richard M. Abrams' (1971: 209) assertion that the problem the reformers sought to solve was the problem of *progress*; that is, 'how American society was to continue to enjoy the fruits of material progress without the accompanying assault upon human dignity and the erosion of the conventional values and moral assumptions on which the social order appeared to rest'. Despite their concerns, progressives did not recognize any need to challenge the basic principles of American society.

Acknowledging, the somewhat confusing but essentially conservative and nostalgic ideological orientation of the reformers, Richard Hofstadter (1962: 5) suggests progressivism represented an

effort to restore a type of economic individualism and political democracy that was widely believed to have existed earlier in America and to have been destroyed by the great corporation and the corrupt political machine; and with that restoration to bring back a kind of morality and civic purity that was also believed to have been lost.

As is often the case, the process of social, economic, and cultural change engendered a widespread desire to build a future in the image of an idealized past. Yet mindful, no doubt, of the growing material abundance of American society, progressives appeared less than willing to engage in any sustained or genuinely radical critique of American society. Rather, they sought to reconstitute the crumbling Protestant empire in a radically new set of circumstances. *The Birth of a Nation* would articulate this desire in startling form.

Progressivism as Accommodation to Change

Progressives' somewhat sentimental yearning for the passing traditions of rural America, traditional locus of Protestant values and republican ideals, appears at first glance to have been at odds with the realities of rapid modernization. Yet, progressivism was less a rejection of modernization than a more subtle hegemonic process of accommodation to it. As Bercovitch (1978: xi, 9) recognizes, in America, the jeremiad became 'a mode of public exhortation,...a ritual designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal, public to private identity, the shifting "signs of the times" to certain traditional metaphors, themes, and symbols'. Similarly, the utility of progressive denunciations of the evils associated with the city and the corporation derived from their effecting an apparent reconciliation of the changes demanded by modernization on the one hand, with the transcendental values upon which the social and cultural order was held to have been founded on the other.

Insight in this regard is provided by T.J. Jackson Lears' (1981) analysis of the way 'antimodern' esoteric pursuits such as mysticism, occultism, militarism, and the arts and crafts movement were adopted by some members of the elite, northeastern, old stock Protestant sections of American society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Lears suggests that, like reform, antimodernism represented a response to secularization and the crumbling, feminized, culture of Victorian Protestantism. As with reform, moreover, antimodernism was by no means a retreat from modernization but, rather, an accommodation to it. Lears (1981: xv)

argues that the wide-ranging quest for more authentic modes of existence marked a subtle but nonetheless important 'shift from a Protestant to a therapeutic world view', among the dominant classes of American society. Of course, traditional denominational religion was not about to disappear overnight. Nevertheless, by promoting an attitude of 'self-fulfillment in *this* world' over 'a Protestant ethos of salvation through self-denial' (1981: xiv) antimodernism helped to ease the transition into the consumption based culture of corporate capitalism that was just emerging. Furthermore, whilst this can be seen to anticipate the increasingly self-orientated practices of the contemporary religious and spiritual marketplace, what Lears, drawing on Gramsci (1971), comes to stress is that antimodernism, somewhat unintentionally, helped ensure the continued cultural hegemony of the traditional northern white Anglo-Saxon Protestant bourgeoisie. The Puritan tradition at the heart of the nation was not dying but, rather, adapting, in various ways, so that it might survive the changes associated with modernization.

As we have seen, the transformation of America into a global economic powerhouse during the nineteenth century was met by an attitude of accommodation among the mainline Protestant denominations (Douglas, 1988). In the northern churches especially, the clergy tended to eschew any prophetic vantage on the broader social process, and ministered instead 'to the affluent members who could build bigger churches' (Marty, 1977: 149). Commenting, Martin Marty (1977: 150-51) suggests that the 'gospel of wealth...preached by clerics and industrialists like Andrew Carnegie' was in many respects a logical extension of an 'older evangelical ethic' which might have been 'deprived of the old backdrop of eternal rewards and punishments' but continued to feature notions of 'Providence, election, working out one's salvation, proving God's favor', and 'sharing his benefits'. What was new, however, about the 'decorous worldliness' (J.B. Harrison quoted in Marty, 1977: 154) of mainstream American religion in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, was the way in which such tenets of Puritanism were revalued in the purportedly scientific terms of 'progress' and 'Social Darwinism'. Indeed, the emergence of a

liberal mainstream within American Protestantism during this period was accompanied by the development of a 'New Theology' which sought to conserve Christian values whilst accommodating the intellectual challenges of science and higher biblical criticism (e.g. Munger, 1883). Yet, although this new theology would influence the development of the social gospel touted by some Progressive reformers, it also legitimated belief in competition, individualism, and the 'survival of the fittest'. Thus, few clergy beyond Walter Rauschenbusch challenged the assumptions undergirding the American *status quo*. As Marty (1977: 206) recognizes, even the social gospel movement had particular blindspots with regard to issues of race and imperialism. Furthermore, the conviction held by liberal Protestants 'that Christ preached a practical social message relevant to modern America' did little more than lend religious sanction to reforms which were in the main consistent with best commercial practice (Moore, 1994: 209). If there were to be objections to a social order based in consumption and hierarchies of wealth, they would not come from the mainline denominations.

Despite the rhetoric of 'modernization' the Progressive era represented 'the triumph of conservatism' in America (Kolko, 1985). Within the context of American history, the most radical aspect of progressivism was perhaps the extent to which government intervention was sought in promoting social ideals and the 'public interest', especially the attempts to limit the power of corporations via anti-trust legislation. Yet, for all the anti-trust laws and public denunciations of corporate evils, links between government and business were actually strengthened over the period. Influenced by the sorts of ideas promoted in Edward Bellamy's utopian novel *Looking Backward* (1888) and Frederick W. Taylor's handbook on *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911), many reformers believed that the best way of tempering the less than desirable side effects of modernization was simply more efficient regulation and rationalization. Progressives as various as Theodore Roosevelt, Jane Addams, and Robert LaFollette were addressing the conflicts, contradictions and instability inherent in the tensions between a modern free-market

capitalist economy on the one hand, and the egalitarian assumptions upon which the republic's constitution was founded on the other. But they were anything but revolutionary or socialist in their outlook. Indeed, exaggerated reporting of industrial violence, and alarmist forecasts of imminent class war, were significant in promoting a reformist agenda in early-twentieth century America (Jeffreys-Jones, 1978). Seeking to maintain the middle-class Protestant values upon which their status and influence depended, therefore, progressives were rather condescending in their attempts to improve the condition of the working-classes, and complacent in their attempts to curb the power of the corporations. Thus, Garraty and McCaughey (1989: 370) write that 'many progressives who genuinely wanted to improve the living standards of industrial workers rejected the proposition that workers could best help themselves by organizing powerful national unions'. This same mixture of paternalism and fear would inform middle-class dealings with the growing motion picture industry, whose predominantly urban, working-class audience stood in synecdochal relationship to the America that progressives sought to reform. It is to this problematic relationship we now turn.

'Democracy's Theater': Progressive America and the Movies

Film historians have, in recent times, devoted considerable attention to the changes which took place within the American film industry during the Progressive era. Understandably so, for it was this period which saw the emergence of the formal and industrial characteristics associated with the classical Hollywood system which would come to represent the very mainstream both of world cinema and American culture. Despite this attention, however, the religious aspect to the Progressive era has been downplayed somewhat in film historiography. In those relatively rare instances where the relationship of religion to the early development of the cinema as an American social and cultural institution is an issue, 'religion' itself tends to be represented in fairly simplistic terms; that is, as institutional, hegemonic, reactionary and repressive (see Chapter Two). While there is evidence to support such a view of

religion in relation to American cinema, what is largely absent from such a perspective is the recognition of how genuine and understandable anxieties regarding the moral meaning of America might have been in the face of rapid and, for some, bewildering economic, social, and cultural change. As live an issue as power undoubtedly was and remains in shaping American cinema, the problem of existential meaning is one which is inscribed within the discourse of United States nationhood: 'In God We Trust'. In an important sense, therefore, the emergence of a distinctively American style of motion picture represents a continuation of that discourse. The credo of reform may have been espoused by white, Protestant, middle-class Americans keen to maintain their social status and material well-being, but that does not mean that progressive deployment of religious rhetoric was entirely insincere or merely an expression of cynical self-interest. As worried as many reformers may have been with regard to the changes they were living through, they would appear to have shared a genuine if self-justifying belief in the significance and moral worth of the nation. This brief overview of the relationship between progressivism and the growth of the American cinema argues, therefore, that the somewhat vague but nonetheless often sincere religious anxieties which informed the broader social context in which the film industry enjoyed its most rapid growth and development, should be integrated into accounts of cinema's emergence as a fully fledged cultural industry.

Pictures, Profits, and Social Change

Like the nation's religious economy, the viability of cinema in the United States has always been, right from its beginnings in fairgrounds, penny arcades, and vaudeville, entirely dependent upon its ability to attract sufficient numbers of paying attendees. As John Izod (1988: ix) puts it, 'profits have always, from the earliest days, been the primary objective of the American film industry. However it may appear from outside, Hollywood has always been first and foremost a business'. In that respect, the character of the motion picture industry in America has, in the main, reflected the

basic assumptions of its parent culture: whatever one may think of this fact and its implications, the desire for material improvement has long been a basic article of faith in the American dream and one of the great motivating and organizing principles of U.S. society. Yet as accurate as it might be to describe Hollywood as an inherently conservative instrument of social consensus (e.g., Maltby, 1983) the competitive and audience-driven nature of the industry means that the American cinema has never been a closed system. Indeed, the movies were never so 'open' in the U.S. as they were during the early part of the twentieth century, when the unique combination of a society in transition allied to the medium's novelty and popularity led to the first concerted attempts to control the industry. Symptomatic of the broader changes American society was going through, as well as being a profitable and apparently influential cultural form, the cinema became a site of contestation and struggle.

Reflecting upon the initial success of the movies, Garth Jowett argues that far from being 'a lucky innovation, arriving merely at a propitious time', cinema actually 'answered a deep social and cultural need of the American people' (1976: 35). As much as Jowett is expressing an historian's professional interest in the relationship between socio-economic change and the emergence of the new medium, his comment is an intriguing one, for it suggests an almost organic relationship between the audience, the medium, and the conditions of social life in early twentieth century America. Certainly, the technological development of the motion picture was but one aspect of those forces, many of them profit-motivated, which were to transform a rural and agrarian America into a powerful, modern, urbanized, industrial nation. This rapidly changing economic, social, and cultural environment was well suited to the medium's rapid entry into the very mainstream of the culture, from the bottom up.

As we have seen, the progressive impulse to reform represented a collective response, across certain relatively privileged sections of American society, to the upheavals of modernization. It was entirely appropriate, therefore, that motion pictures were subjected to pressure from reformers. As Charney and Schwartz

(1995: 1-2) write, 'the culture of modernity rendered inevitable something like cinema, since cinema's characteristics evolved from the traits that defined modern life in general'. Introducing *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, a collection of essays all based on 'the premise that cinema...became the fullest expression and combination of modernity's attributes' (1995: 1), they 'identify six elements that emerge from the essays as central to both the cultural history of modernity and modernity's relation to cinema', all of which are relevant to the discussion of religion:

the rise of a metropolitan urban culture leading to new forms of entertainment and leisure activity; the corresponding centrality of the body as the site of vision, attention, and stimulation; the recognition of a mass public, crowd or audience that subordinated individual response to collectivity; the impulse to define, fix, and represent isolated moments in the face of modernity's distractions and sensations, an urge that led through Impressionism and photography to cinema; the increased blurring of the line between reality and its representations; and the surge in commercial culture and consumer desire that both fueled and followed new forms of diversion. (1995: 3)

Clearly, changes in the ways and means whereby persons apprehend and interact with social and material reality cannot help but challenge existing modes of locating one's significance in the world. Thus, as useful as their summary is, it is slightly disappointing (though not wholly surprising) that Charney and Schwartz ignore the religious aspects of these transformations. In the United States at the turn of the century, religious change and the widespread sense of moral crisis lay at the heart of those cultural developments which would shape the character of American cinema.

Of subtle significance in this respect, was the gradual weakening of the influence exercised hitherto by the churches. This creeping liberalism allowed some members of the urban middle-classes to begin patronizing the theatre, vaudeville, and other forms of entertainment which also served to provide the movies with their first audiences (Jowett 1976: 35). Compared with what was to follow, however, the numbers watching films were, to begin with, fairly modest, and the movies themselves little more than a sideshow. In terms of the cinema's development as a genuinely mass medium, material changes enjoyed by those lower down the socio-

economic ladder would prove far more important than the crisis facing the churches. Around the turn of the century, workers in the rapidly expanding cities had begun to benefit from a trend towards better wages and shorter working hours. This led to a growing demand for readily available, reliable, and affordable entertainment, which could be accommodated, easily into the working day. Hence, Robert Sklar (1975: 16) writes that 'as a business, and as a social phenomenon, the motion pictures came to life in the United States when they made contact with working-class needs and desires'.

The 'Nickel Madness'

In the early days of the American cinema, the lack of any purpose-built or specially adapted venues meant that exhibition of motion pictures took place in a wide range of contexts, including fairgrounds, travelling tent shows, schools, churches, and opera houses, as well as theatres and vaudeville palaces (Musser, 1990). Vaudeville, a predominantly middle-class amusement was probably the most important of these, and, according to Terry Ramsaye (1926: 264), was the motion picture's 'principal avenue to the public' in the first decade of the medium. This lack of 'system' meant that the film industry, which for a considerable time understood itself as based in the development and production of the technology of cinema rather than the movies themselves, was slow to exploit the possibilities offered by the social changes taking place. From 1905 onwards, however, cinema began to take on the attributes of a genuinely mass medium with the rapid spread of city store-front 'Nickelodeons' providing short programmes of one reel films at low cost, and catering primarily for a blue collar, working class audience.

Entertaining, cheap, and accessible, large numbers of neighbourhood nickelodeons sprang up across the cities almost over-night in response to an apparently insatiable demand for motion pictures. In 1907, an article by Barton W. Currie in *Harper's Weekly* entitled 'The Nickel Madness' estimated that there were as many as 500 movie houses in New York City attended by over 200,000 people a day

(quoted in Jowett, 1976: 45). By the time their popularity had peaked in 1910, the nickelodeons were attracting around 26 million Americans each week, almost 20 percent of the population (Merritt, 1973: 86). Available even to those sections of the urban population, such as the Jewish immigrants on Manhattan's Lower East Side, which were excluded from the mainstream of American society and its other entertainments, some observers proclaimed the nickelodeon, 'democracy's theater' (Merritt, 1973: 86-87). However, this upsurge in the popularity of the movies brought with it the attentions of those middle-class reformers already concerned at the impact of immigration, industrialization, and urbanization upon the social fabric of the nation. For the first decade of the medium's development, the middle-classes had all but ignored motion pictures. With the coming of the nickelodeon, the realization grew that, far from being just another novelty or 'cheap amusement', the movies would be around for some time yet. The reforming classes perceived, correctly to some extent, that the phenomenal growth of the nickelodeon had taken place outwith the bounds of so-called 'respectable society'. Given the broader cultural context, hegemonic moves to control the medium were inevitable.

Cinema, Class, and Culture: The Struggle for Respectability

The importance of the cinema as an arena of cultural struggle became increasingly clear once the traditional and somewhat romantic view of nickelodeons as entertainment for immigrants and the working classes (e.g. Ramsaye, 1926; Hampton, 1931; Jacobs, 1939; Wagenknacht, 1962) came under scrutiny following the publication of now widely cited research by Russell Merritt (1973) and Robert C. Allen (1979). These historians suggested that contrary to the view of nickelodeons which held them to be 'democracy's theater', movie-house owners sought to expand an existing and potentially more lucrative middle class audience for motion pictures right from the start of the 'nickel madness'. Such work supported an argument that the cinema was, from the beginning, a middle-class amusement which, for sound commercial reasons, was used to express and promote bourgeois values.

In turn, other historians like Robert Sklar (1990) and Ben Singer (1995) responded to this revisionist thesis by maintaining the importance of the immigrant and working class audiences to the development of the nickelodeon. Supporting this position, Stephen J. Ross (1998, 1999) contends that the working class character of American film audiences prior to the First World War had considerable effect on what was produced for exhibition, arguing that 'movies were far more politically engaged and ideologically varied in the pre-war era than at any subsequent time in the industry's history' (1999: 95). Ross suggests, moreover, that we expand the notion of 'audience' to include what he terms 'reactive audiences'; people outside of the cinema who reacted to, and sought to influence, what was being screened. In this category he includes 'capitalists, censors, clergy, politicians, police reformers, civic leaders, government officials, union and radical leaders, and the rank-and-file of their organizations' (Ross, 1999: 93).

Commenting on the debate surrounding the nickelodeon audience, Tom Gunning (1998: 259-60) notes that 'the effect of class antagonism and class definition on early American cinema remains a vital issue,' but writes that 'it is not necessary to attribute early American cinema to the domain of a single class. Rather, the most valuable approach sees cinema as one of the areas in which turn-of-the-century America defined class relations, culture, and dominance'.

As the discussion of progressivism highlighted earlier, middle-class responses to the changes associated with immigration, industrialization, urbanization, and secularization, were often expressed and legitimated in the Bible-based terms of what remained, in vestigial terms at least, a *de facto* Protestant civil religion. Progressive approaches to the perceived crisis may have varied in terms of diagnosis and method, but in terms of public pronouncements, all could agree that what was at stake was the moral integrity and well-being of the nation. Once the popularity of the nickelodeon had brought movies to the attention of the reform-minded, a similar rhetoric was brought to bear on the film industry. For while debate still continues with regard to the make-up of the nickelodeon audience, contemporary

middle-class responses to the new medium were, in the main, predicated upon the widespread *perception* that they were indeed most popular with those sections of the population, the working class and immigrants, most closely identified with the supposed crisis in the social order (Uricchio and Pearson, 1994, 1999). At their root, therefore, widely articulated contemporary concerns about sex, violence, crime, and the effect of movie-going on public morals, particularly with regard to women and children, need to be understood as a part of a broader, national, cultural process. Furthermore, the intense scrutiny applied to the cinema came just as producers and exhibitors began to organize the industry on a more secure basis whilst seeking to develop its potential profitability by cultivating a better, more lucrative, 'class' of audience.

One of the striking features about the debates which surrounded the nickelodeon is how little distinction was drawn between the actual movies and their audience; between what was being shown and the social activity of movie-going. In April 1907, for example, as part of a 'crusade' against 'the Five Cent Theatre', *The Chicago Tribune*, a paper with a largely white middle-class readership, ran a front page report on a fire which had broken out in one of the 'nickel theaters.' In a way which Lee Grieveson (1999: 79) describes as 'generic', reports of the 'disorder' and 'panic' which ensued were accompanied by reports of the 'suggestive' pictures being shown, featuring gambling, a harem, burglary, and a 'mob' of striking French waiters battling with the police. Furthermore, the *Tribune* assured its readers, the audience had also been 'watched closely': 'The children in this place were mostly the children of the poor. They were of the families of foreign laborers and formed the early stage of that dangerous second generation which is finding such a place in the criminals of the city' (quoted in Grieveson, 1999: 79). The reference to children was hardly insignificant. A month previously, a *Tribune* editorial had already argued that because motion pictures ministered 'to the lowest passions of childhood' there ought to 'be a law absolutely forbidding entrance of boy or girl under eighteen.' Describing their influence as 'wholly vicious', it opined, 'there is no voice raised to defend the

majority of five cent theatres, because they cannot be defended. They are hopelessly bad.' (quoted in Ramsaye, 1926: 473).

The *Tribune's* concern with children, characteristic of the wider discursive formation of the movie-going audience (Urrichio and Pearson, 1999), leads Grieveson (1999: 80) to place the paper's concern with the nickelodeon audience within

a wider regulatory regime which focused on concerns about immigration, governance and citizenship, enforced in different ways, by such regulatory agents as settlement workers, citizen groups, probation officers and juvenile courts. These concerns about governance and citizenship were particularly acute in relation to children, who were positioned as citizens-in-formation, seen in some ways as a tabula rasa for the imprinting of values, behaviours and ideals of what the *Tribune* called "good citizenship."

This concern with the social and civic functions of the cinema would profoundly influence the industry. Producers and exhibitors soon came to recognize that anxieties regarding the dangers, both moral and physical, associated with movie-going, were bad for business. By the end of 1907, Chicago had become the first major city in America to institute a system of prior censorship over what could be shown in its nickelodeons.

As one would expect, 'crusades' by the press were supported by numerous denunciations from the pulpit. In Philadelphia, for instance, a minister of the Calvary Evangelical Church described movies as 'schools for degenerates and criminals' (quoted in Black, 1994: 10). Similarly, a 1910 report by the 'cheerful reformer' Reverend Wilbur F. Crafts claimed that movie-houses offered 'trips to hell for [a] nickel.' (quoted in Black, 1994: 10) The Protestant clergy were also instrumental in organizing groups to lobby city governments. In New York, the Interdenominational Committee of the Clergy of Greater New York for the Suppression of Sunday Vaudeville urged Mayor McClennan to enforce the so-called 'blue laws' prohibiting certain kinds of entertainment on Sundays, and shut down the nickelodeons on what for most wage earners was their one day off and, not surprisingly, the most profitable day for exhibitors (Urrichio and Pearson, 1993: 31-32). Clearly, the clergy, mindful

of the effect of competition on the size of their congregations had a vested interest in supporting the blue laws, and condemnations of the nickelodeons were not always innocent expressions of moral concern.

To be sure, some of the dangers associated with the movie-houses were real: 'inadequate seating, insufficient ventilation, dim lighting, and poorly marked, often obstructed exits, posed serious hazards for their patrons.' (Uricchio and Pearson, 1993: 30) Catastrophes, such as fires and collapsing balconies, were widely reported in the press, and contributed to a widespread perception that the nickelodeons were often little more than death traps. Moreover, reports on the poor sanitation found in many nickelodeons which stressed the likelihood of contagion from diseases such as tuberculosis and typhoid, were seized upon by some opponents of the medium as further evidence of the threat to the nation. Citing the claim of Methodist preacher John Wesley Hill, from New York's Metropolitan Temple, that motion pictures were 'causing a spread of moral malaria throughout the community', William Uricchio and Roberta Pearson (1993: 30) write that

the metaphor of disease and contagion figured as prominently in the specific discussions of the impact of the moving pictures and the nickelodeons as it did in the discussion of the effects of the immigrant and working classes on the country at large.

From a vantage at the other end of the twentieth century, a concern with issues of health and safety appears both rational and admirable. In bringing some order, stability, and respectability to the industry, regulation might also be in the best long-term interests of the business. Yet, the Reverend Hill's not untypical conflation of the physical and moral dangers represented by the nickelodeon reminds us that notions of contagion, of purity and pollution, are not simple matters of practical hygiene but are profoundly implicated in how human societies generate order and meaning (Douglas, 1968). Whilst the drive to regulate the industry would lead to an improvement in the conditions in which motion pictures were exhibited and promote sound business practice, it emerged from a wider struggle to order and define American culture.

Symptomatic of what lay at stake in the over-heated debate prompted by the emergence of the new mass medium were the concerns raised by women going to the movies. Opponents of the industry were predictably feverish in their assessments. In 1910, for example, the trade journal *Motion Picture World* quoted feminist reformer, Dr. Anna Shaw, as saying that 'there should be a police woman at the entrance of every moving picture show and another inside. These places are the recruiting stations of vice' (quoted in Bowser, 1990: 38). Similarly, Frederick B. House, a magistrate, described '95% of the moving picture places in New York [as] dens of iniquity...more young women and girls are led astray in these places than any other way' (quoted in Bowser, 1990: 38). As dated as such statements might appear to us now, they reflect, in part, a broader debate about the changing role of women in the emerging urban industrial society. Demands for female suffrage were building and women were becoming increasingly visible in the workplace, not just in the factories but also in the more refined environment of the office; operating typewriters, telegraphs, and telephone switchboards. For some, this led to a greater degree of independence than ever before. Hence, Eileen Bowser (1990: 3) writes that,

the New Woman was enjoying her newfound freedom, and that would have included dropping in at the cafes, dance halls, and nickelodeons after the day's work was done. To be sure, the more refined or conservative young ladies would not be found in such places, but there were a sufficient number of young women present to alarm the guardians of morality.

Moreover, the unease expressed over the issue carried a symbolic weight to it. As we have seen, a process of 'feminization' had led to women being seen as the very embodiment of religious morality and the highest values of the nation (Douglas, 1988). Hence, although expressions of moral concern with regard to women and the oft-described 'darkness' of the nickelodeons were grounded in the actual conditions in which motion pictures were projected, they were also representative, to some extent at least, of wider fears regarding national identity. Whilst the introduction of lighting inside the theatres was a simple enough solution to physical gloom, the

industry also needed to dispell fears regarding its moral orientation if it was to profit from being thought of as legitimate and respectable.

For an industry beginning to seek respectability and the middle-class family audience which attended vaudeville, however, the New Woman was not just a symbol: increasingly visible both in the workplace and public life, she was also 'the ideal lifeline to the affluent bourgeoisie' (Merritt, 1973: 95). Thus, although women may not have comprised as substantial a proportion of the movie-going public as producers and exhibitors would have liked, the industry did afford them special attention. In Boston and Philadelphia, for example, half-price admission to the movie theatre for women and children became the norm (Merritt, 1973: 96). Moreover, this cultivation of the female audience, particularly that incarnation of respectability, the middle-class woman, found its way onto the screen as the industry came to realize that morals might be good for business. As Russell Merritt (1973: 96) writes of the nickelodeon period,

original screenplays in particular reveal a preoccupation with women's stories. Female protagonists far outnumber males, dauntless whether combatting New York gangsters, savage Indians, oversized mashers, or "the other woman." In the best genteel tradition, audiences were spared scenes of debauchery and criminal acts; the outdated moral code of the Victorian era that required vice to be punished and virtue rewarded became an inflexible law throughout this period.

The irony here, of course, is that in making and screening films featuring female characters and the more 'respectable' storylines thought to appeal to a female audience, the industry was, by sanctioning the public display of women, subverting the same church-centred morality upon which traditional notions of respectability rested. For D.W. Griffith, however, whose films devoted considerable (and often profitable) attention to the changing place of women in society, this tension would be integrated into his development of the medium's communicative capabilities (Simmon, 1993). What came to matter above all else in a film was the story.

Uplifting the Movies

While some reform-minded sections of society sought to suppress the movies as a threat to the fabric of civilized society, other similarly concerned citizens came to see motion pictures as having the potential to improve the moral condition of the working-classes and immigrants. Given the perceived make-up of the audience, the cinema was seen as representing an opportunity to address directly many of the most problematic sections of the populace. Social workers such as Jane Addams, and some clerics began showing movies with the aim of educating and elevating the urban poor as well as entertaining them. For this to succeed, however, suitable content was needed.

Attracted by the idea of attaining respectability, not to mention the profits associated with such upward mobility, whilst at the same time wary of the potential threat to their businesses from censorship, film producers came under pressure to make pictures of a morally improving and educational nature. As we have seen already in Chapter Two, one strategy was to make films based on such unimpeachable material as The Bible, Shakespeare and other examples drawn from a literary high-culture (Urrichio and Pearson, 1993). A different, but perhaps more effective strategy, particularly in a short silent film, was 'to sugar-coat the educational pill by enclosing the lesson in a drama with a moral' (Bowser 1990: 45). Indeed, Bowser (1990: 60) writes that 'it was the melodrama, particularly the psychological melodrama as articulated by D.W. Griffith, that would become the most popular medium for moral uplift'. Presupposed in all this though, is the ability of the audience to follow what was put on screen; something we now take for granted, but which actually posed a practical problem for the industry due to the nature of the cinema-going experience as nickelodeons began to establish themselves.

For example, it is commonly supposed that much of the beauty and appeal of the movies in early twentieth century America derived from the fact that they were silent, and thus did not exclude the substantial numbers of non-Anglophone immigrants which were still arriving in the industrial centres of the Northeast and

Midwest. In fact, as Eileen Bowser (1990: 19) notes 'the silent film was very rarely silent'. During the early nickelodeon period (pre-1908), various strategies were employed in the attempt to replace the missing sounds: the use of professional actors as 'talkers' behind the screen, lecturers and narrators, synchronized records, live or pre-recorded musical accompaniment, live or mechanical sound effects (Bowser 1990: 19-20). Often such efforts might have to compete with a loud and enthusiastic audience. Bowser's point is that the transformation of narrative techniques which took place from around 1908 onwards was, in large measure, a response to audience demand for more clarity in the story films they wanted to see. Part of this demand came from the large immigrant audience. To these new Americans, the Nickelodeons were not only a sociable respite from the hardships of day-to-day life in the cities, but also a way of learning about, and engaging with, the culture and mores of their new homeland (Jowett, 1976: 38). As Bowser (1990: 54) notes though,

a greatly expanded audience from diverse cultures no longer had the same frame of reference...Filmmakers could no longer expect the majority of the spectators to recognize the narrative events of a classic tale, a work of literature, a popular play, a familiar myth, unless they were in some way explained. Stereotypes of character and gesture would have to be reestablished for the new audience.

Thus, if a film was to impart a lesson or moral, it would have to be expressive in and of itself. Yet, as much of a problem as this may have been, it was also an opportunity: A movie that could be understood via its pictures alone could be watched by anyone.

Developing out of what Tom Gunning (1986) has dubbed 'the cinema of attractions,' a cinema based primarily upon the display of curiosities in which 'characterization was unimportant and the spatial and temporal relations essential to narrative development were basically irrelevant', (Gunning, 1998: 258) the emergence of the narrative film as the mainstay of American cinema lent considerable impetus to the explosive growth of the nickelodeon (Musser, 1991). Indeed, story films underpinned industrial expansion as producers soon recognised that the staged

narrative was especially suited to guaranteeing a steady flow of releases as audience demand for all types of film spiralled (Thompson, 1985: 161; Bowser, 1990: 54). While developments such as spectacle, longer film lengths, comedy, romance, attractive and/or talented players, etc., were in part aimed at extending the popularity of motion pictures' among the more prosperous sections of society, the industry never lost sight of the basic entertainment value and consequent box-office appeal of narrative films, stories in pictures. It was this basic idea which was refined into the cinematic conventions of what David Bordwell (1985b: 3) describes as the 'excessively obvious cinema' associated with Hollywood. By the end of the progressive era, this distinctive cinema, defined by formal characteristics such as the centered composition of images to direct the attention of the spectator, a narrative causality based on the exposition of character, and 'invisible' continuity editing, had, in most respects, been established as the basis of the industry's future development (Bordwell, 1985b). Yet, as 'obvious' as these formal aspects of the classical Hollywood paradigm appear to us now, such stylistic developments were but part of the transformation of the American film industry which took place in the period to 1917 or so. As we have seen, the process of upwardly mobile refinement in which D.W. Griffith was instrumental (e.g. Gunning, 1991; Pearson, 1992) and *The Birth of a Nation* a defining moment, emerged from a wider struggle concerning motion pictures, their position in American culture, and the profitability of the industry. How might we understand the social ramifications of this change.

The American Cinema: An Alternative Public Sphere?

For Miriam Hansen (1991), the move towards the classical Hollywood paradigm enacted an entire transformation of the movie-going experience and the industry's understanding of the audience. Drawing on the concept of the public sphere associated with Jurgen Habermas (1989), in particular, a critique of his original 'bourgeois' model by Negt and Kluge (1993) positing the notion of oppositional or

proletarian public spheres, Hansen suggests that the differences between early and classical cinema reflect the former's status as an oppositional public sphere.

Arguing on the basis that cinema-going in the early nickelodeon period was by no means the orderly, somewhat passive affair it would soon become, Hansen (1991: 43) suggests that variations and cultural specificities in the conditions of exhibition and reception gave the nickelodeon 'a margin of participation and unpredictability'. As she describes it, movie-houses were often an extension of working-class and immigrant cultures:

the neighbourhood character of many nickelodeons—the egalitarian seating, continuous admission, and variety format, nonfilmic activities like illustrated songs, live acts, and occasional amateur nights—fostered a casual, sociable if not boisterous, atmosphere. It made moviegoing an interactive rather than merely passive experience....At the same time, moviegoing marked significant changes in the patterns of working-class culture itself...from an ethnically separatist, inward-looking public sphere to a more inclusive, multiethnic one; and from a gender-segregated public sphere to a heterosocial one in which women of all ages and marital status could move in relative freedom from family and social control. (1991: 61-62)

Moreover, this lack of control was to some extent mirrored in the films themselves for a time as the 'cinema of attractions encouraged a recognition of the viewer as part of an audience', something which would often include a performer's gaze direct into the camera/audience; while the lack of narrative devices 'allowed [the] viewer more imaginative freedom' (Gunning, 1998: 261). The emergence of the classical paradigm, however, would change all this.

For Hansen (1991: 12-13), the key issue at stake in the shift from early to classical styles of filmmaking was not so much public discussion or politics in the conventional sense, but, rather, the 'experience' of participants;

as that which mediates individual perception with social meaning, conscious with unconscious processes, loss of self with self-reflexivity; experience as the capacity to see connections and relations;...as the matrix of conflicting temporalities, of memory and hope, including the historical loss of those dimensions.

What she argues, is that the integration, indeed, subordination of cinematic resources of *mise-en-scène*, framing, and editing to the task of narration in the

classical paradigm, was not simply a function of the audience's desire for greater clarity, but, rather, an attempt to control *how* films would be consumed and understood. As Hansen (1991: 79) puts it 'the transition from primitive to classical narration corresponded to a shift in the conception of the spectator—from a participant in a concrete and variable situation of reception to a term that informs the structure of the film as product'. Coinciding with the upwardly mobile aspirations of both the movie-makers and their audience, the importance of this concept of spectatorship in industrial terms was 'to make it possible to precalculate and standardize individually and locally varying acts of reception to ensure consumption across class, ethnic, and cultural boundaries' (1991: 84). During the early nickelodeon period, the cinema was, by Hansen's (1991: 101-14) account, something of an alternative to the dominant culture of a rapidly modernizing America; a 'heterotopia', or transitional space, to use Foucault's term, wherein immigrants, for example, could begin to adapt to their radically altered circumstances without abandoning their original identity. Similarly, 'the cinema opened up a space—a social space as well as a perceptual, experiential horizon—in women's lives, whatever their marital status, age, or background' (Hansen 1991: 117). Hollywood, however, reconfigured that space in line with the needs of the burgeoning, but still predominately white, Anglo-Saxon, and patriarchal culture of consumer capitalism. Thus, as Hansen (1991: 60-89) points out, the metaphor of a 'universal language', commonly used from this transitional period of film history onward to advance and legitimate the idea of cinema as both a moral institution and an instrument of Americanization, actually promoted the ellision and subsummation of difference. In so far as it sought to control the horizon of reception, therefore, the emergence of the classical Hollywood cinema was, in effect, a way of disciplining the audience.

Aside from the Biblical allusions carried in the title of *Babel and Babylon*, Hansen does not attempt to address the relationship between the American cinema and that other heterotopic public arena, denominational religion. Chapter Three discussed how religion, too, has long been something of an alternative, if not quite

oppositional, public sphere within American society. As Tocqueville saw, the apparent diversity brought on by disestablishment did little to weaken those civilizing, disciplinary aspects of (Christian) faith and practice which he deemed necessary to the maintenance of the social order. Even so, Hansen's work is valuable here because it indicates an imbrication of the commercial, technical, moral and social aspects to the gentrification of cinema within the broader process of nation building. Despite a tendency towards reductionism in pursuit of her theoretical aims, the emergence during the progressive era of spectatorship as a function of production, 'unspecific in class or gender' (Gomery 1998: 262), but not, one might add, race, can be seen as one consequence of the crisis which had come to afflict the American Protestant establishment. For, with organized religion placed on the defensive, the burgeoning film industry was in the perfect position to take up the job of shaping the attitudes, mores, and behaviour of Americans as the nation began to reap the rewards of modernization. As Hansen (1991: 15 *et passim*) herself acknowledges, one figure above all others is associated with the developments which would transform the film industry into one of the key elements of twentieth-century American culture; D.W. Griffith. It is to his role in enacting this transition, and the specific importance of *The Birth of a Nation*, that we now turn.

Redeeming the Movies: Griffith and the Lost Cause

D.W. Griffith's significance as perhaps the key figure in the early history of American cinema has been widely documented and his achievements widely discussed (e.g. Agee, 1958; Williams 1980; Jesionowski, 1988; Gunning 1991; Simmon, 1993). And while his reputation as the 'father of film' has been revised somewhat since 1970 or so (e.g. Koszarski, 1976; Salt, 1983; Thompson, 1985; Bowser 1990), it is probably the case, as Scott Simmon (1993: 23) suggests, that 'archival rediscoveries and

scholarly reappraisals are unlikely to locate a figure to displace him in this regard'.² Whatever the reality of his contribution to the development of film grammar and the medium as a whole, however, it is disappointing, though not entirely surprising to find that his religious orientation, whilst acknowledged, has only rarely been explored in any depth. Even if we eschew an 'auterist' approach to Griffith's films and/or *The Birth of a Nation*, the moral and social force of religion as a realm of 'powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations' based upon 'conceptions of a general order of existence' (Geertz, 1973: 90) cannot be dismissed so easily. Working on the supposition, argued in Chapter Four, that the religious elements to *Birth* were not peripheral but integral to Griffith's project, there is a strong case to be made for re-examining the personal religious background which informed the picture.

D.W. Griffith: Methodism, Modernity, and the Movies

Although there is no need here to recount Griffith's biography in any great detail, his background, experiences, and ambitious character, mark him out as almost paradigmatic of American life in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. He was born in rural Oldham County, Kentucky on January 22, 1875, the sixth of seven children to ex-Confederate Colonel Jacob Wark ('Roaring Jake') Griffith, and his wife Mary Oglesby, a devout Methodist. Although the Griffith family had 'held a considerable land grant' before the Civil War 'and there had been a large house with a few slaves' (Hart and Griffith, 1972: 157), a mild, genteel poverty characterised his early life. After his father's death in 1885 revealed extensive debts held against the Griffith farm, the family sold up and moved to neighbouring Shelby County (Schickel, 1984: 30-32). In 1889, and following the broader, national pattern of drift away from the country to the city, Mary Griffith and family moved to Louisville (Schickel, 1984:

² Commenting on the temptation to reduce 'historical change to the genius of individuals' Allen and Gomery (1985:45) remind us that while 'Griffith was a very important figure in the aesthetic history of the American cinema....acknowledged as such by commentators at the time....assessments of the enormity of his role...must be viewed in light of the paucity of extant films directed by others against whose work' his own might be judged.

35-36), at that time 'one of the most prosperous and interesting cities in the South' (Lang, 1994c: 26).³

In Louisville, the young David supplemented the family income by working odd-jobs after school. After leaving high school in 1890, he worked as a clerk in a dry goods store but in 1893 found employment at Flexner's Book Store, the leading book store in Louisville. According to Griffith himself, 'the Flexners were gentle, cultured people and the intelligentsia of Louisville and the country side usually gathered in the back room of the store to talk of mighty subjects' (Griffith and Hart, 1972: 42). The job provided him with the perfect opportunity to develop his interest in books, art, music, and the theatre, especially stage melodrama, and by 1896 he had decided to pursue his dreams of a career in the theatre (Lang, 1994c: 26). Griffith never achieved the theatrical success he felt his talents were due, and although he worked quite extensively in various touring companies for a decade or so, travelling the length and breadth of America, he was often forced to take non-theatrical work in order to survive. This ranged from 'covering what was politely known as "the District," as a stringer for the [Louisville] *Courier-Journal*' (Schickel, 1984: 37) through to hop-picking alongside migrant labourers in California (Schickel, 1984: 66-67). In 1899, he came to New York City for the first time, where he endured poverty and the flophouses of the Lower East Side. Following his marriage in 1906 to Linda Arvidson, an actress from San Francisco, Griffith eventually settled in New York with the intention of establishing himself as a playwright. Largely unsuccessful, however, he drifted into work as actor and scenarist for the American Mutoscope and Biograph company in 1908, and in June of that year directed his first picture, *The Adventures of Dollie*. Although he began with no great love or respect for the medium, ambition coupled with a belief in his own genius, led him, over the four hundred or so one and two reel films he made prior to *Birth*, to experiment,

³ Scott Simmon (1993:4) comments that this pattern of 'internal immigration from farm to city' was 'one so often dramatized in [D.W. Griffith's] films'.

innovate and help transform the business of motion pictures. By 1914 he was established as the leading director in the American cinema.

Several commentators have suggested that Griffith's pre-filmmaking experiences furnished him a 'vigorous sympathy with the poor, the suffering and the lost that caused his early films to speak so directly and unpatronizingly to the nickelodeon audiences' (Schickel, 1984: 54). Thus Christy Chabanne, Griffith's assistant at Biograph remembered the director arguing that the movies were the ideal means 'to bring out the truth about unjust social and economic conditions' (quoted in Schickel, 1984: 177). As with the nation though, Griffith's progress also entailed a subtle transformation of his religious sensibilities; a change that would in some ways define his filmmaking.

He was raised a Methodist (May, 1983: 67; Schickel, 1984: 33), and there are strong indications that his mother harboured ambitions for him to become a preacher.⁴ Although there is not a lot of information in this regard, some idea of the impact of religion on the young Griffith is to be found in Richard Schickel's (1984: 33) description, based on a story in an unpublished draft of the director's autobiography, of an experience on the way to school one morning which was to stay with Griffith for 'a lifetime'; a vision of Christ:

It was after a sleet storm and the branches of the trees were gleaming with glaze. One group of branches was struck by the sun in such a way as to create a halo effect; Griffith thought the face of Christ appeared to him in its center, and he politely introduced himself: "My name is David and you know that means dearly beloved. I do hope you may like me a little, that I might even become your dearly beloved, because I love you and always have." Needless to say, Christ did not reply.

It is tempting to see a direct connection between this story and the vision of Christ staged by Griffith at the end of *The Birth of a Nation*. More important, though, is the more subtle impact of this religious influence upon Griffith's work.

⁴ In an interview in Kevin Brownlow and David Gill's documentary *D.W. Griffith: Father of Film*, the director's great niece says that not only did his 'mother want him to be a preacher' but 'she did not approve of him being in the acting profession.'

The most expansive exploration of Griffith's Methodist background in relation to his films is found within Lary May's (1983) *Screening Out the Past*, an historical study of American movies and their key role in the creation of a modern, consumerist, mass culture between 1890 and 1929. For May (1983: 60-95), Griffith's films gave aesthetic form to the assumptions, tensions and dilemmas of the Progressive era in their quest to affirm a traditional moral order in the face of rapid change. Unlike Corkin (1996), whose analysis of *The Birth of a Nation* also grounds the director's aesthetic sensibility in 'the reigning impulses of Progressivism' (1996:4) but ignores the significance of the religious background to the reform movements, May (1983: 68) emphasizes the importance of the director's Methodist background. Stressing the 'explicitly Protestant tone' of Griffith's work, he notes that 'reporters referred to [Griffith] as the "messianic savior of the movie art, a prophet who made shadow sermons more powerful than the pulpit"' (1983: 61).

By May's (1983: 67) account, Griffith's success and cultural impact came not from a cold calculation of audience tastes "but because he saw himself as 'above politics' and portraying feelings 'bred in the bone'", an attitude rooted in Griffith's Southern Methodist upbringing: appealing to all classes, but 'never noted for its originality of thought, or rebellion from authority, the Church emphasized a life of self-denial and sinlessness, which would transform not only the believer, but the entire world as well'. Sitting comfortably with the innate conservatism of the reformers, this formative orientation underpinned Griffith's belief that the medium of film "could become a tool for completing the great goal of history: lifting mankind from animality" (quoted in May, 1983: 72). Thus, May (1983: 72-73) articulates Griffith's own and widely circulated understanding of the cinema as "a moral and educational force" and "the universal language" predicted in the Bible:

Film not only transcended ethnic or language divisions, but was also superior to books, painting, or the stage....film transported the viewer to a more spiritual realm of existence, a sphere of the sublime....and like the "hand of God", Griffith saw it lifting people from their 'commonplace existence' into a sphere of "poetic simulations." Such a power allowed the director to work like those revivalist preachers he must have heard as a

child. Using images of sin and salvation, he might provide an experience that could convert the soul from evil to good.

While May is at times guilty of overplaying his hand in respect of Griffith's religious background, what is striking about his account here is the way it anticipates Miriam Hansen's (1991) argument that the development of the classical Hollywood style represented an effort to control the response and behaviour of spectators.

May (1983: 73) suggests that Griffith's particular and essentially religious understanding of 'realism', that the camera was a neutral but necessarily active instrument of truth and its revelation, led him away from the conventions inherited from the traditions of the stage towards the development of a style which succeeded in dramatizing the lives of 'real people in real settings'. This included the use of artificial lighting, the close-up, the iris-in, the fade-out, parallel editing moving the action across time and space, location photography, careful casting, and a more restrained 'natural' acting style. Indeed, May's (1983: 74) analysis of the director's working methods indicates how technique was used to enhance Griffith's idealistic vision of a virtuous, democratic society:

Without contrived poses and backdrops, film making reflected natural life rather than stilted artificiality....Yet to evoke idealism from this extended reality, the director used his tools to manipulate the medium and show God's will surfacing in the chaos of material life....On a darkened screen, a small dot would appear. Slowly it opened and a beam of light revealed the action. As the drama unfolded, it was as if the viewer used a spiritual eye to penetrate the truth of life...special lighting would show a world where the demarcations of good and evil were clear. Often heroes and heroines were bathed in light, while villains appeared dark and sinister in the shadows. The audience would have no doubt as to who was among the elect, and who among the damned....This was clearly a Protestant concept of redemption, and Griffith was well aware of it...Faith in these "images of pure and simple beauty," explained Griffith, "allowed us to believe it was done by God himself."

Such an understanding of the medium's workings and effects might appear old-fashioned to us now. But it is important to see that Griffith's ideas represented a positive response to progressive worries about the moral worth of the motion picture. Echoing the concerns of the reformers with regard to the nation's citizenry, Griffith

himself said that the cinema would 'keep boys and girls along the right lines of conduct. No one need fear it will deviate from the Puritan plane' (quoted in May, 1983: 73).

Although May is at pains to highlight Griffith's commitment to the ascetic individualism associated with the Puritan tradition, and paints him as a victim of the corporate order which emerged in the 1920s (1983: 92-95), he does not really address the way the director's own religious orientation came to shift from his original Methodism. Reflecting the broader process wherein religion was increasingly seen as something private, Griffith would eventually become a freemason, holding 'no strong sectarian beliefs' (Schickel, 1984: 33). Thus, while the religious allegories in several films including *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* support Richard Schickel's (1984: 33) assertion that Griffith 'harbored somewhat loftier, somewhat more romantic, somewhat vaguer religious sentiments', this aspect to the director's work cannot be aligned with the reform movements of the progressive era in as straightforward a way as May appears to claim. For, despite the moral concerns articulated in his pictures, we need to recognize the extent Griffith's movies reveal an antagonism towards 'meddling' reformers (Simmon, 1993).

In a discussion of Griffith's career which takes a more sophisticated view of the religious background to Griffith's work than Lary May, Scott Simmon (1993: 147) notes the consistency with which the director's pictures reflect a view of reformers as meddlers who 'exacerbate the conditions they profess to ameliorate' (Simmon, 1993: 147).⁵ Like May, Simmon (1993: 152) argues that Griffith's movies were informed by a belief in the medium's capacity for moral reform, and admits 'that Griffith's world remained a religious one'. Nevertheless, the director's relationship with the reformers was characterized by antagonism, Simmon (1993: 150) contends, 'primarily because he is battling them over common ground. Both are claiming the

⁵ Among the examples Simmon (1993: 147) cites as precursors of *Intolerance* (1916) in this regard are an early ('probably the first') script Griffith wrote for Biograph, *Old Isaac, the Pawnbroker* (1908), as well as later Griffith directed pictures like *Muggsy's First Sweetheart* (1910), *The Unwelcome Guest* (1913) or *The Reformers; or, the Lost Art of Minding One's Business*.

territory of moral instruction...newly open for contention because of the evident retreat of organized religion'. Drawing on accounts of American culture which stress the 'feminization' of the Protestant tradition (Douglas, 1988), and a privatistic 'shift from a Protestant to a therapeutic orientation within the dominant culture' (Lears, 1981: xviii), Simmon (1993: 153) proposes that Griffith's work might be seen as 'representative of another, more complex cultural transformation in America: the breakup of Puritan unity (in which spirituality had been expressed through work) for more purely practical manifestations of moral reform'. Thus, he reiterates the profound significance attached by the director to the development of both the form and status of motion pictures:

Griffith's real ambitions for the movies as art are inextricably tied into [the] claim...that art is a truer guide to moral reform than is any organized society of reformers. Put a little more strongly, art...now fills the reformist role that was once reserved for organized religion, a role that organized reformers can only counterfeit and pervert. (1993: 150)

What Simmon seems to be suggesting here is that Griffith understood the medium of film not just in terms of art but as something which might perhaps succeed religion as a source of moral guidance and 'the ceremonies of community' (1993: 153).

Despite Griffith's love of such 'camp' excesses as 'flying in angels on wires or Christ himself to beatify grand finales', as in *The Birth of a Nation* for example, Simmon (1993: 152) argues that Griffith 'was not unaware of the extent to which conventional doctrine fails the twentieth-century filmmaker', and opines that the director's 'most literal religious imagery plays quite inauthentically'. Indeed, one can never know 'how much of Griffith's darker world of God and fate was genuine devotion, how much conventional piety, and how much another scheme to legitimate movie art' (1993: 152). We also need to admit, however, that such problems reflect the contradictions of the times as much as the confusions of the film-maker. D.W. Griffith's career as a director began and developed at a time when the traditional hegemony and moral authority associated with American Protestantism had been called into question by the cultural upheavals wrought by non-Protestant immigration,

large-scale industrial development, and rapid urbanization, as well as the fundamental ideological challenge of positivist science. In the cinema, itself a product of scientific development, this positivist worldview was reflected in the largely unconsidered 'realism' of the screen image (Corkin, 1996). Yet, for all its problems, Protestant Christianity remained the basic symbolic currency of American public life. Indeed, the early motion picture industry was controlled, almost entirely, by white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant men (May 1980: 251-52). Griffith, it would appear, responded to the times by attempting to reconcile the apparent 'truth' of the movies with the traditional, Bible-based conception of the absolute, widely accepted across America as the ultimate source of national legitimacy. Perhaps the inauthenticity Scott Simmon detects in Griffith's pictures arising from the director's most overt and literal deployment of Christian imagery indicates the inherently problematic nature of such a project: the squaring of belief in a pragmatic and economically effective empiricism with faith in an invisible yet still personified moral order.

The basic argument presented by Simmon in his survey of *The Films of D.W. Griffith* is that the director's most admirable and enduring work is found in the 400-odd short films Griffith made for Biograph between 1908 and 1913, not *The Birth of a Nation* or *Intolerance*, the films he is now most famous for. He comments that *Birth* in particular 'has evolved into one of the ugliest artifacts of American popular art' (1993: 105). Yet in seeking to downplay the significance of *The Birth of a Nation*, Simmon also obscures the importance of that picture as it relates to both Griffith's own career and the history of American cinema. Despite acknowledging the way the film subverts *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and positing *Birth* as a jeremiad at the tail end of the Puritan tradition (1993: 132), his antipathy to the film prevents him from fully examining the reasons, beyond racism, for its astonishing impact, and popularity. If *The Birth of a Nation* was indeed designed 'to direct an imperiled people of God toward the fulfillment of their destiny, to guide them individually toward salvation, and collectively toward the American city of God' (Bercovitch, 1978: 9), why did Griffith choose and, in some respects, succeed with such contentious subject matter? Did

Griffith's picture really mark the end of the Puritan tradition or did it simply enact a transformation of it in accordance with the new conditions of American life?

Redeeming the South

As was noted in the previous chapter, discussion of D.W. Griffith's understanding of the Civil War and its impact on Southern culture has largely revolved around the director's relationship with his father. Whilst this follows the common and understandable interest in the colourful character of 'Roaring Jake' within the broader literature on Griffith and *The Birth of a Nation* (e.g. Rogin, 1987), downplaying the more routine, day-to-day, influence of the director's mother, Mary, reflects the general lack of interest afforded the Southern perspective articulated in the film. This is not to say that it has been ignored. Rather it reflects the tendency in many commentaries on *Birth* to reduce and equate Southern culture to the white supremacism espoused by it. It is as if the caricatured portrayal of blacks in the film has been turned on its head and used to explain why Griffith made the picture he did. Yet as justifiable as opposition to the film may be on moral grounds, such a view of *Birth* tends to deflect our attention away from those aspects of it which make it so effective; something which extends beyond the technical skill deployed by the director or the propulsive ride of the Klan. As Simmon (1993: 114) notes in response to Griffith's tender staging of Ben Cameron's homecoming after the war, where his mother and sister reach out from the doorway to pull him home, much of the film's power came from such moments of reunion and death, not in tableaux of history footnoted, but in history humanized through gestures of compassion'.

In fact, there is very little material available in relation to the director's relationship with his mother.⁶ Thus Griffith (cited Schickel, 1984: 18) himself described her as 'a silent sort of woman...so silent and quiet...that I never dreamed she loved me until she was about 70 years old when I discovered that stern, cold,

⁶ See Allen (1999: 20-24) for further discussion of this problem in relation to Griffith's work.

hard exterior covered a tremendous emotional and an affectionate nature that was terrible in its intensity'. Given the hardships she survived in order to raise seven children, the civil war, her wastrel husband, gradual impoverishment, the enforced sale of the family farm and subsequent removal to Louisville, one might also surmise that her Methodism was a great source of comfort and strength to her in facing these trials. As Griffith wrote, his 'good Christian spirit...had been impressed upon me by my mother and other members of the family who, particularly after father's death, clung in their despair more earnestly than ever to religion' (Griffith and Hart, 1972: 36). Such snippets lend support to May's (1983: 68) argument regarding the significance of the 'old-time religion' of the South in shaping Griffith's worldview, and the way 'this religious spirit came to rest on women and the family, which represented the highest values of civilization'. This 'reverence for pure womanhood' (May, 1983: 68) came to inform both his personal life and the director's representation of women in his movies (Schickel, 1984). For example, in *The Birth of a Nation* all the principal female characters except for the Stoneman's mulatto housekeeper Lydia and the Falstaffian black servant Mammy, are presented as ideals as much as if not more than characters in their own right; Ben Cameron's falls in love with a miniature portrait of Elsie, not the woman herself. At a broader cultural level, however, the South's defeat at the hands of the North meant that the practical ramifications of this gendered religious symbolism went beyond mere sentimentalism.

Describing the personal motivation behind *The Birth of a Nation* in his autobiography, Griffith wrote in his autobiography that

One could not find the sufferings of our family and our friends—the dreadful poverty and hardships during the war and for many years after—in the Yankee-written histories we read in school. From all this was born a burning determination to tell some day our side of the story to the world.

The tears of *The Birth of a Nation* were sprung in watching my mother on many a lonely night standing by a window waiting for someone's arrival—the arrival that would never be—and knowing of the thousands of other Southern women who had waited in vain for the return of their loved ones. Its drama was but an echo of the stories told of the gallant soldiers who

fought one of the most brilliant wars known to history. (Griffith and Hart, 1972: 26-27)

This is an interesting passage in several respects. Firstly, and most obviously, Griffith's understanding of the disastrous consequences of the civil war for the South comes to rest in the image of his mother. Secondly, her (and by extension, the young David's) lonely suffering is played down in comparison with the gallantry of the Confederate army, in which Jacob Griffith distinguished himself, fighting for another lost cause. Thirdly, David Griffith's own experience of hardship and poverty really came after the death of his father, and the subsequent instability and upheaval the family was to face following the revelation of 'Roaring Jake's' debts. What is revealed here is the director's disavowal of his father's complicity in bringing about the decline in circumstances the family had to endure. Unable to provide the comfort and moral sustenance his mother would appear to have sought and found in traditional religion, her son transposed the source of the chaos and misfortune met by the family, the moral decline of his father, onto the war and defeat at the hands of the Yankees.

This disavowal would appear to have had some practical value for Griffith though; preventing a rupture between the myth of the Old South represented by the 'chivalrous' and 'charismatic' Jacob on the one hand, and the postbellum reality as witnessed by Griffith and embodied in the 'religious' Mary, on the other. Indeed, as a Southerner, Griffith's experience was by no means untypical. Alongside the material privations faced by the South after the war was a collective need, among the white Protestant majority, to make sense of their defeat by the North and thereby maintain their own distinctive regional identity. As Chapter Four discussed, this cultural orientation, commonly known as the 'Lost Cause', is derided by some commentators as one of many clichés via which the Civil War is remembered in America 'not as history but as legend' (Lang, 1994b: 3). Yet, dismissing the Lost Cause in this way ignores the deeper, religious, significance attached to it as the South came to terms with defeat and humiliation. If we are to avoid the stereotypes Griffith resorted to in

telling the Southern side of the story with *The Birth of a Nation*, we need to examine how the South itself conceived of that story.

The Lost Cause: A Southern Civil Religion

The Lost Cause was a broad set of cultural phenomena which facilitated the white South's acceptance of defeat in the civil war. As Gaines M. Foster (1987: 4) describes it, the Lost Cause was an interpretation of the war which 'emerged in...the post war writings and activities that perpetuated the memory of the Confederacy'. While Foster (1987: 5) admits that 'a minority of white southerners never adjusted to defeat and continued to cherish wartime hatreds', he goes on to argue that importance of the Lost Cause was that 'it eased the region's passage through a particularly difficult period of social change (1987: 6). Thus he writes that

most white southerners, despite their alleged heedless romanticism and obsessive love of the past, were far too realistic to let bitter memories get in the way of rebuilding their society. Although they continued to champion states' rights and white supremacy, they abandoned forever their vision of an independent slaveholders' republic and did not long dwell on its passing. Southerners realized that they had to accept a new order without slavery and had to work within the Union. Even though they accepted these developments, they did not repudiate their decision to wage war on that Union. Rather, throughout the postwar years, they defended their actions in 1861-65 and insisted that the North acknowledge the honor and heroism of their cause. (1987: 5)

In short, the South faced backwards as it moved into the future.

From the perspective of this study, however, Foster's detailed history of the Lost Cause is somewhat problematic. For one thing, he maintains that the Lost Cause was largely spent as a movement by 1913 (the 50th Anniversary of Gettysburg); the year after Wilson's election confirmed the South's full re-integration into national life. Although Foster (1987: 198) details the ways in which the 'ghosts of the Confederacy' revived by the Lost Cause 'helped to make [the South] a conservative, deferential society...[and] contributed to an unquestioning patriotism and respect for the military', he denies any lasting influence of any substance. In

suggesting that the symbols of the Confederacy came to stand only for defiance rather than any coherent ideological position or tradition, though, he might be guilty of underestimating the broader significance and power of that attitude, however inchoate it might be, upon twentieth century American culture. He does not examine, for example, the Lost Cause as an influence upon the development of the media, most obviously in *The Birth of a Nation*. Indeed, Foster (1987: 48) is content to play down the role of the Ku Klux Klan within the Lost Cause tradition. He suggests that despite their dressing up as the ghosts of the Confederate dead, and coming to occupy a central place in the folklore of the South, the Klan were more concerned with ensuring white supremacy than interpreting the war. Whilst it may be true that the Lost Cause was able to accommodate a variety of perspectives on the race issue, the distinction Foster makes is by no means as clear as he would have us believe.

Foster's account of the Lost Cause also ignores the time-bound horizontal relationships between, on the one hand, those postwar Confederate organizations such as the United Confederate Veterans, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and the Southern Historical Society, which he describes as 'the central institutions of the Lost Cause' (1987: 4), and, on the other, the traditional institutional bedrock of southern culture: the churches. As a historian, Foster (1987: 7-8) makes a strong case for eschewing terms such as 'myth' and 'civil religion,' and favouring the notion of 'tradition' in reference to the body of cultural attitudes which informed the Lost Cause. But although he devotes much attention to the rituals of the Lost Cause, the parades, the unveiling of monuments, the memorial services, etc., he argues that in the end 'the Confederate celebration did not so much sacralize the memory of the war as it sanitized and trivialized it' (1987: 196). Be that as it may, one of the most obvious characteristics of life in the South has been the social and cultural importance attached to religion. As an expression of regional identity and pride, the Lost Cause would have been no exception to this. Indeed, the need among white southerners to make sense of defeat in the Civil War had strengthened the social

power of the theologically orthodox and rather more evangelical Protestant denominations to be found there (Wilson, 1980a&b). Hence, those aspects of the Southern experience which led H.L. Mencken to disparage the region as 'the Bible Belt' still need to be incorporated into accounts of it if we are to gain an understanding of it on its own distinctive terms.

One scholar who recognizes this is Charles Reagan Wilson. In Wilson's (1980a&b) formulation, the collective need white Southerners had to make sense of defeat did indeed evolve into something he terms 'Southern civil religion' or 'the religion of the Lost Cause'. Instead of dismissing 'the Lost Cause' as mere 'myth' or 'legend', Wilson (1980a: 232) argues that 'judged by historical and anthropological criteria, the civil religion that emerged in the postbellum South was an authentic expression of religion'. The theoretical understanding of 'religion' Wilson applies to the extensive empirical evidence he marshals in support of his thesis is rooted in fairly conventional notions of religion as a response to chaos, disorder and socio-cultural crisis; made manifest in symbols, myths and rituals; dividing existence into two realms, the sacred and the profane, via which members come to perceive their society as having a sacred or holy quality (Durkheim, 1915; Eliade, 1963; Wallace 1966; Geertz, 1973). Viewed from the evolving paradigm of research into media, religion, and culture, this traditional scholarly understanding of religion is not without its problems. Yet, neither is it inappropriate to the discussion at hand. As Wilson (1980a: 232) recognizes, 'for postbellum southerners such traditional religious issues as the nature of suffering, evil, and the seeming irrationality of life had a disturbing relevance'. Moreover, beyond these more general religious and theological issues, the postwar South was confronted with a fundamental cultural problem specific to its own unique circumstances. At the heart of Confederate identity was a widely shared belief that the South had taken on the mantle of a 'chosen people'. They held that the North was corrupt and that only the South could protect traditional American values and ideals. Because of this, the South had a God-given duty to fight the 'evil' represented by the Yankees. How, then, did they make sense of their defeat?

In contrast to Foster, Wilson suggests that the foundations and much of the basic institutional framework of the Lost Cause were provided by the churches and ministers of the mainline Protestant denominations in the South; the one constant in a society turned upside down by war. Thus, he conceives of the Lost Cause as a particular linkage of religion and history. Before the war the churches had already been influential in moulding public opinion and morale-building. The dismantling of other regional institutions in the aftermath of defeat meant that this hegemonic role was, if anything, strengthened; something prompted in part by the fear among Southern clergy that defeat and Northern influence would threaten their own status and position. Concerned to maintain a separate identity, denominations such as the Southern Baptists mobilized (Wilson, 1980b: 9-10). Hence, in contrast with the North, the period from 1870 through the early decades of the twentieth century, saw both an extension and a hardening of the evangelical consensus which had already existed in the South prior to the war (Hill 1972). Yet, Wilson (1980b: 14) is also at pains to point out that a 'Southern civil religion...should not be seen as the equivalent of Southern Protestantism'. Not only were there Southern Protestant clergy who did not support the Lost Cause, and Southern Protestant concerns entirely distinct from it, but Catholics and Jews were also involved in celebrating Confederate sacrifice in the war. In this way, Wilson's notion of a Southern civil religion carries with it an implicit recognition that religious or cultural identities are by no means fixed, singular or monolithic. Examining the religious dimensions of the South's cultural response to defeat in the civil war, Wilson provides substantial support for a view of religious orientation as multi-faceted, multi-leveled, and responsive to changing circumstances; a communicative process rather than a fixed object.

Taking up Bellah's (1967: 21) notion of 'an elaborate and well-institutionalized' American civil religion distinct from the denominations Wilson (1980a: 232; 1980b: 12-14) adapts this to the specific historical context of the postbellum South. In fact, not only does Wilson distinguish the southern variant from the American version, but his argument is founded on a much broader empirical base

than Bellah's more abstract and theoretical conception. Whilst it may have tended to reinforce and reproduce attitudes which were largely conservative, the Southern civil religion of the Lost Cause was by no means a 'top-down' or merely ceremonial phenomenon: rather, it found expression at various levels of social and cultural interaction in the South, informing experience from the most formal rites of identification and remembrance through to the more prosaic and even banal activities of everyday life.

Certainly, like Foster, Wilson (1980a, 1980b: 18-36) recognizes the importance of the organizational focus provided by the voluntary associations such as United Confederate Veterans: reunions, rituals of commemoration, the dedication of memorials; such occasions, were key in the articulation of popular support for the Lost Cause during the half-century or so after Appomattox. Unlike the more general deism of the American civil religion, though, Wilson stresses the degree to which the Lost Cause was saturated with rhetoric and values drawn from more traditional and specifically Protestant religiosity. He notes, for example, that prayers at veterans' meetings would end with some variant of 'We ask it all in the name and for the sake of Christ our dear redeemer' (quoted in Wilson, 1980b: 33). Not only did Confederate heroes appear at evangelical revivals in the South, but memorial services would make connections between invitations to follow Christ and invitations 'to follow once again Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and Jefferson Davis' (Wilson 1980b: 35). This link was by no means as tenuous as it might first appear. As the war receded ever further into the past, and the participants grew older, some reunions came to resemble 'vast revivals, with tens of thousands of listeners hearing ministers reminding them of the imminence of death for the aged veterans, and of the need to insure everlasting life' (Wilson, 1980b: 35).

In terms of this study, one of Wilson's (1980b: 35) most significant conclusions about the relationship between the Confederate celebration and the churches is 'that, despite their suspicion of popery, Southern Christians in the Lost Cause religion invested profound meaning into their Confederate artifacts and

symbols'. The Lost Cause introduced an important visual and material dimension to the collective consciousness of the South. For, where Protestant churches have tended to eschew iconography, 'the Southern civil religion was rich in images (1980b: 25). Indeed, within Wilson's account, there is an almost Catholic richness to the material culture of the Lost Cause and the significance attached to monuments, pilgrimages, relics, rituals, even stained glass windows, and a range of institutions (including the Ku Klux Klan) extending beyond the Protestant churches which remained the bedrock of the distinct cultural environment of the South. War, moreover, had furnished a whole pantheon of Southern saints, and martyrs.

With regard to *The Birth of a Nation*, Wilson's recognition that the Lost Cause added an all-pervasive material and visual aesthetic to the largely word-based traditions of the Protestant South is crucial. In terms of film, this materiality was important because it provided Griffith, the resources with which he could attempt to translate a moral order based on Protestant traditions into the visual forms of the motion picture. However, although Wilson (1980b: 100-18), stresses the significance of the Ku Klux Klan as one of the main institutional foci for the Lost Cause, highlights the cultural impact of Thomas M. Dixon's racist fictions such as *The Clansman*, and acknowledges the popularity of D.W. Griffith's adaptation of that book in *The Birth of a Nation*, he does not pursue the implications of the film as an articulation of the Lost Cause any further. Indeed, there appears to be no writing on the film which takes up the religious dimension to the Lost Cause that Wilson describes. Given the historical importance of Griffith's film, there is a strong case to be made for exploring how far its impact derives from the picture's overtly emotional appeal in terms of the Lost Cause. Ahead of examining how Griffith deployed the aesthetic resources furnished by the Southern civil religion, we need to explore the cultural meanings articulated by the myth of the Lost Cause.

The idea of 'myth' deployed by Wilson in tracing the historical development of the Lost Cause is a fairly orthodox one (e.g. Eliade, 1963; Levi-Strauss, 1963, 1969; Geertz, 1973). He writes that 'a myth is an attempt to unify the contradictory,

ambiguous experience of a people' (1980b: 38). In the face of apparent chaos, myth gives order and meaning to existence. Transcending a particular symbol or image, a myth, in these terms, is, above all, a story or set of stories which succeeds in engendering a sense of collective identification with, and active participation in, the history of that people; a sacred narrative expressing a specific view of the past. Often representing the community as a 'chosen people' with a special purpose and value to their lives, such myths will not only provide comprehensive explanatory accounts of the world around them, but also furnish models which pattern their behaviour in that world (Wilson 1980b: 38-39). As Wilson would appear to recognize, moreover, a myth is a mutable social process rather than a static fixed object: the continuous cycle of re-presentation, via ritual, literature, images, artefacts, etc., which gives myth form, can only generate meaning in relationship with the lived experience of the community. Hence, the re-telling of a myth will often change in response to circumstance; even when the myth is supposedly founded upon an eternal and fixed moral order.

Because of their tendency to place the myth of the Lost Cause in the context of other legends and past history, Wilson (1980b: 39) suggests that Southern ministers were well aware of their mythmaking function. They alluded to the myths of ancient Greece, Arthurian chivalry, and the romantic novels of Sir Walter Scott. Links, real or imagined, were stressed between virtuous heroes of the American revolution like George Washington and Confederate leaders such as Robert E. Lee. The South, ministers of the Lost Cause held, fought for the same principles as were at stake in 1776. But as much as Southerners came to identify with heroic figures from the past, the myth of the Lost Cause was largely structured in opposition to the North:

the Yankee monster symbolized a chaotic, unrestrained Northern society that had threatened the pristine, orderly, godly Southern civilization.... [S]weeping through and devastating the South,...Sherman's march to the sea and his devastation of civilian life was the image that Southerners remembered. (Wilson, 1980b: 40)

Such barbarism was seen to have posed a direct threat to 'the highest symbol of Southern Virtue...the Confederate woman'. In contrast, the Confederate army came to be portrayed as the agents of an evangelical, religious and moral crusade.

At the heart of the myth of the Lost Cause, then, was the battlefield, understood as the site of both a political and a spiritual struggle. Here, the analogy between the redemptive passion of Christ and the principled sacrifice made by the South was, to ministers of the Lost Cause, obvious. Army revivals which raised morale and prepared soldiers for war were one thing, but it was in combat that ultimate commitment to the Lost Cause was demonstrated. In battle, Confederate sins were, in the words of Mississippi minister George C. Harris, 'washed away under the baptism of blood' (quoted in Wilson, 1980b: 44). Such rhetoric was commonplace. Indeed, death on the battlefield, took on a communal aspect. As Wilson (1980b: 44) notes, 'the shedding of blood' was deemed to have 'cleansed all of Southern society, as well as its individual soldiers'. Comparisons were drawn between the Confederacy in the final stages of the war and Christ's passage from Gethsemane to Golgotha (Wilson, 1980b: 45). The suffering of individuals like Jefferson Davis and the executed young spy, Sam Davis (no relation) was depicted as Christ-like; even though, in the case of the former president, they went on to live for over twenty years after Appomattox. Nevertheless, if the comparisons with Christ were to mean anything, the myth of the Lost Cause had to explain defeat.

An important formal aspect to the Lost Cause was the distinctively Southern appropriation of the jeremiad. Associated above all, with the Puritans (Bercovitch, 1978) the New England jeremiad transcended public preaching to become 'the generic form of self-justifying American cultural criticism' (King, 1993: 364). As Chapter Three noted, moreover, the cultural and social utility of the jeremiad derived from its capacity to enable a reconciliation of the changes demanded by the developmental processes of Americanization and modernization with the religious values represented in the Puritan tradition. Across the postbellum South, it fulfilled a similar function, being adapted in the service of the Lost Cause by clergymen

concerned at the threat to a distinct Southern identity carried in the economic, political, and social changes coming from the North (Wilson, 1980b: 79-99). Typically, it was delivered on those occasions which mourned or celebrated the Confederacy; rituals recalling the blood sacrifice of the Civil War: 'the dedications of monuments, the burials of veterans, Confederate Memorial Day, fast and thanksgiving days, meetings of the local and regional Confederate veterans' groups—all brought forth the Lost Cause sermon, prophesying Southern doom if virtue was not preserved' (Wilson, 1980b: 82).

Even before the war, the South 'had developed a new image of itself as a chivalric society, embodying many of the agrarian and spiritual values that seemed to be disappearing in the industrializing North' (Wilson, 1980b: 3). Associated 'virtues' like self-restraint and feminine purity combined with themes drawn from European romanticism to inform a 'cultural nationalism' which underpinned wider political claims (Wilson, 1980b: 3). The Civil War, however, cast serious doubt over the whole idea of a separate Southern identity. What the Lost Cause jeremiad did was assert the continuing value of this identity and urge constant vigilance in its defence. Noting that 'a major theme of the Lost Cause jeremiad was the wickedness of the Yankees', Wilson (1980b: 81) writes how

in addition to warning Southerners of their own decline, the jeremiad cautioned Southerners to learn from the evil North. The danger of the South's future degradation was readily embodied in the North's image, with some ministers even teaching that the South must serve as a model to the corrupt North. By maintaining Confederate virtue in the postbellum world, the South would be an example to the North in future days of reform. This was a Southern mission worth achieving.

Furthermore, although the passage of time brought reconciliation between the former enemies, the South did not abandon the civil religion of the Lost Cause nor the prophetic functions which attended it.

According to Wilson (1980b: 161), the turn of the century marked a revival of the American civil religion in the South. Important in this respect was the Spanish-American War of 1898, which was well-supported in the South (Wilson, 1980b: 162).

Yet, despite such Northern-led encroachment onto the terrain of the Lost Cause, it did not signal the latter's disappearance. Instead, Southern preachers suggested that the historical experience of the South made it 'quintessentially American. As the rest of the nation had changed because of industrialism, urbanization, immigration, and other forces of modern America, the South had remained most like the nation of the Founding Fathers' (Wilson, 1980b: 167). Only as a result of the South's willingness to fight and sacrifice for liberty and constitutional rights in the Civil War when the North was 'going after other gods' did traditional American values survive (Goodwin quoted in Wilson, 1980b: 166).⁷ Interpreting the Lost Cause in such a way enabled Southerners to renew their participation in national life whilst retaining pride in their own regional identity. By 1912, the process of reintegration was more or less complete with Woodrow Wilson becoming the first Southerner elected to the presidency since the Civil War. It is this revived and religiously based cultural authority which Griffith, with the aid of Dixon, sought to mobilize in *The Birth of a Nation*.

Blood Sacrifice:

The Birth of a Nation and American Civil Religion

The Lost Cause furnished the South with a grand narrative which was capable of adapting the traditions of the antebellum past to the demands of an America in the throes of modernization. Given the times, moreover, and the widespread sense of national crisis among the respectable middle classes, its linkage of religion and history furnished an almost perfect basis for Griffith to combine personal preoccupations with his lofty ambitions for the medium. This section of the chapter

7 R.A Goodwin was rector of St John's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia. The short quotation cited comes from a 1909 sermon in which he asks "what thoughtful man can fail to see that God is in the history of our country, and that this people has a great part to play in the onward march of the events of the world". The South's destiny within this was, for Goodwin, to ensure the continued survival of those same values it had fought for in 1861 by 'retaining the abiding "principles of self-government, self-defense, self-respect and loyalty to our traditions for which we have contended ever since Appomattox"' (Wilson, 1980b: 166).

discusses how *The Birth of a Nation* translated the Lost Cause onto the screen. As was indicated in Chapter Four, there is already a copious quantity of writing, from a wide range of perspectives, analyzing the film. What the following examination of *Birth* seeks to contribute to this existing discourse is insight into the picture's use of violence. Developing a brief but largely unexplicated comment on *The Birth of a Nation* made by Michael Rogin (1987: 282), it utilizes an understanding of violence based in the work of French theorist René Girard as a means to address the way the structure and emotional appeal of the film is organized in terms of *sacrifice*; a notion routinely invoked in Lost Cause jeremiads. As a prelude to this, however, there is a need to address the material Griffith used as the basis of his film.

Race in Progressive America

It is understandable, perhaps, that the instability brought on by immigration and urbanization engendered an upsurge of nativism across America from the late-nineteenth century onwards. Many concerned citizens came to share the view set out by Josiah Strong in his best-selling *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Present Crisis* (1885) which linked immigration to the growth of the cities to the threat of socialist insurrection, and saw 'no more serious menace to our civilisation' (quoted in Uricchio and Pearson, 1993: 18). Anxieties about the threat to national integrity and values posed by immigrants, workers, and the urban poor were an important factor in shaping the ideas, rhetoric, and actions of the reformers. The temperance campaign which culminated with Prohibition in 1919, for example, was nothing if not anti-Catholic. Despite this, however, the scale and complexity of what was taking place in the cities mitigated to some degree against the tendency to resolve this 'boundary crisis' via a process of scapegoating. Perhaps a more visible symbol of the bounds of 'Americanness', of what was considered beyond the pale, was needed.

As obvious as the racism of *Birth* is, though, we need to recognize that the black 'problem' barely figured within the broader discourse of national reform. Thomas Cripps (1963: 111) writes that prior to 1912, 'the reforms of urban

Progressives were essentially for whites only', and he reminds us that disenfranchisement of blacks was common and segregation the norm even before the election of Wilson 'brought to Washington a return to Southern ideals'. Thus, although the incidence of racial violence had gone into something of a decline since its peak in the 1890s, blacks had, nonetheless, 'been rendered both politically impotent and socially invisible' by the time *The Birth of a Nation* came to be made (Stokes, 1996: 72). Viewed in this way, the decision to have such an ambitious film portray 'the black problem' in such alarmist terms might appear a curious one (Sorlin, 1980: 108). In context, however, it is possible to see how blacks furnished progressives with a useful symbol of the chaos apparently threatening America. Sympathy for the southern perspective on race not only grew with each successive wave of non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants or black migrants to the cities, but fitted neatly with the then prevalent social scientific ideology of Social Darwinism (Schickel, 1984: 79; Stokes, 1996: 73-74).

Instructive in this respect is the career of Thomas Dixon. What is often overlooked in accounts of Griffith's co-conspirator is that Dixon was relatively slow to espouse white supremacy, despite being raised in North Carolina. After he became a Baptist minister, for example, Dixon embraced the Social Gospel Movement and founded a non-denominational 'People's Church' in New York City. There he spoke out for women's rights and justice for immigrants (Schickel, 1984: 75). In 1896 he even thanked God 'that there is to-day not one clang of a single slave's chain on this continent' (quoted in Schickel, 1984: 76). Within a few years, however, he had written *The Leopard's Spots* the first of three virulently racist but popular works Griffith would use as sources for *Birth*. Commenting on the consequences of this shift, Schickel (1984: 77) writes that Dixon's popularity at that time makes him one of 'the individuals who must share the heaviest responsibility for the radical deepening and broadening of race hatred that occurred during the first decades of the twentieth century in the United States'. Moreover, whilst he acknowledges that Dixon's self-cast role as 'lonely defender of the Anglo-Saxon race'

might have been motivated in part by a genuine belief that blacks were simply incapable of conducting themselves in line with the democratic institutions of the nation, Schickel (1984: 76-77) notes the lowly position of blacks at the time and suggests an 'insatiable need for self-dramatization' as being more important. It is this aspect of Dixon's work, overblown, melodramatic, that would appear to have most attracted Griffith when Frank Woods gave him a copy of *The Clansman*. As the director would later recall, he recognized immediately the visual possibilities of the Klan 'with their white robes flying' (Griffith and Hart, 1972: 88). In seeking to reform America through the medium of film, therefore, it is this reflexive, self-aggrandizing aspect of the Lost Cause which might be seen as the source of the film's problems. Griffith did not set out to denigrate black Americans. Rather, his portrayal of them as unfit for full citizenship was a function of their convenience as a visible symbol of the chaos deemed to be threatening America. In an important sense, the violence enacted against blacks both within and by the film was collateral to its more central concern with citizenship and national identity.

Violence and the Sacred

In *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard (1978: 8) argues that the purpose of ritual sacrifice, the base note of all religious and cultural activity within his account, 'is to restore harmony to the community' and 'to reinforce the social fabric. Everything else', he asserts, 'derives from that'. For Girard, the conflicts engendered by the mimetic quality of human desire make violence a fact of life. If a society is to survive and prosper it must find a means of dealing with it: 'violence is not to be denied, but it can be diverted to another object, something it can sink its teeth into' (1978: 4). According to this understanding, the mechanism of sacrifice protects the community from 'internal violence—all [its] dissensions, rivalries, jealousies, and quarrels' by redirecting and focusing that violence onto 'a substitute for all the members of the community, offered up by the members themselves' (1978: 8). Crucially however, Girard contends that, at its most basic and primordial, sacrifice consists of an act of

collective murder of another individual or small group from within the community itself, a scapegoat. It is this initial generative act which is subsequently represented in ritual. This terrible secret, he insists, means that the efficacy of ritual sacrifice depends upon 'a certain degree of *misunderstanding*. The celebrants do not and must not comprehend the true role of the sacrificial act' (1978: 7). For within this framework, it is a thin line indeed between 'good' or sacred violence, and the 'evil' forces that ritual activity would contain.

Because sacrificial violence aims to build group cohesion and solidarity as well as maintain order, ritual victims will usually be sought from outside the group, or at least, from its margins. To keep the secret of the ritual intact a potential sacrifice must to some degree be set apart from the community. Nevertheless, it also needs to resemble its members in some way in order to attract the impulse to violence. Moreover, because violence always brings with it the risk of further reciprocal or mimetic violence in the form of revenge, the sacrifice must be understood as something imposed from without, by divine decree or higher principle for instance (1978: 14). Likewise, the objects of sacrificial rites, be they human, animal, or inanimate, actual or metaphorical, should be ones whose sacrifice will not engender further vengeance (1978: 18). Such principles ensure that violence remains under control. Hence, in modern societies an apparently impartial legal and judicial system is vital to the maintenance of the social fabric. As Max Weber (1948: 78) noted, a state can be defined in terms of its claim on a 'monopoly of the legitimate use of force within a given territory'.

Things change though, and shifts within a society, will lead, inevitably, to a blurring of the social differences hitherto maintained by the sacrificial structure. As Girard himself suggests, the routinization of ritual practice is often a part of this process (1978: 39). This slippage leads, according to Girard, onto a 'sacrificial crisis', wherein the conflicts formerly displaced onto a scapegoat resurface within the community, setting it on the road to disintegration. Girard admits that the supposedly meaningful distinctions within any given social order may well be arbitrary. But he

warns that erosion of those differences risks unleashing the violence held in abeyance by the sacrificial process upon the community itself (1978: 51-58). For as members of an increasingly undifferentiated society become mimetic doubles of one another, they will seek, with increasing destructiveness and violence, to reassert their own distinct identity; to deny their essential similarity and thus differentiate themselves from the collectively experienced 'monstrous double' (1978: 161). The resolution of this crisis, the appeasement of the violence which threatens all, and the restoration of peace and harmony across society, comes in the re-generative sacrifice of a surrogate individual or sub-group by, or at least on behalf of, what is ideally at least an 'unanimous-minus-victim' collective. This act, Girard claims, restores the hierarchical system of differences (and individual identities) upon which a stable social order depends but which is forever threatened by the mimetic nature of human desire.

Violence, Rape, and Civil Religion

The ideas of Girard have recently been taken up by Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle (1996, 1999) who have developed and applied them to the social psychology of nationalism. In a startlingly unsentimental revision of Bellah's (1967) 'American Civil Religion' thesis, Marvin and Ingle (1996: 767) not only acknowledge American culture to be 'as religious as any that exists' but 'contend that nationalism is the most powerful religion in the United States, and perhaps in many other countries'. Whilst mindful of the objections such a suggestion is sure to attract, Marvin and Ingle (1996: 767) compare nationalism with more conventional and sectarian religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and argue that 'structurally speaking...both sectarian and national religions organize killing energy by committing devotees to sacrifice themselves to the group'. As with Girard's notion of a social order maintained by ritual sacrifice, they argue that it is the organization of killing energy which creates and sustains the group. The long term viability of any enduring group depends on the willingness of its members to sacrifice themselves on behalf of the

larger community. Within this theoretical framework, confusion over group identity leads, in Durkheimian terms, to a 'totem crisis' (1996: 774) where it is no longer possible to differentiate between 'us' and 'them'. The most obvious example of such an event is the breaching of territorial borders. Marvin and Ingle (1996: 774) argue that in instances like these,

totem legitimacy is re-established only by sacrificing our own—in the successful case, enough of us to make an offering of real value. Sacrifice restores totem authority and reconsolidates the group. This is why we die *for the flag* and commit our children to do so.

In these terms, it is war which represents the fundamental and most important ritual of nationhood. Moreover, it is not killing the enemy that gives meaning to war. Rather, it is the blood sacrifice of our own community that matters. Post-war rituals of commemoration which maintain the authority of the revised totemic order are concerned with our dead not those we have killed.

Marvin's and Ingle's (1996: 771) thesis is predicated upon a recognition of bodies as 'the raw material of society', and they write that 'organizing and disposing of them is the fundamental task of all societies'. Despite this, however, they do not develop the implications of their argument about the nature of national identity with regard to gender; a problem, in so far as the viability of an enduring social group is dependent, at a basic level, upon biological reproduction. Their claim that totemic authority rests on the recognition of an 'exclusive right to kill its own' (1996: 771) is only half the picture. Control of procreation is just as important. As Mary Douglas (1966: 141) puts it 'sexual collaboration is by nature fertile, constructive, the common basis of social life'. Like most things human though, cultural understandings of sexual relations are rarely straightforward expressions of mutual dependence and harmony. Nira Yuval-Davis (1997: 37) reminds us, for example, that 'there are always specific rules and regulations which relate to women as women'; especially so 'when we consider the political implications of the ways women are constructed as biological reproducers of "the nation"'. A nationalist concern with blood ties and the 'purity' of the nation is inevitably translated into a preoccupation with sexual ethics

and the sanctioning of relations between members of different groups. That, to some extent, explains the symbolic power of rape. For, in so much as any such system of differences can be said to constitute a nation, rape, like war, represents a potential threat to the integrity of such an arrangement. Indeed, as distressing as rape is for the victims, the sexual violation of 'enemy' women, often systematic in its execution, is as an effective and humiliating attack on the other (male-led) nation's or community's 'honour' as defeating them in battle. Women raped in war often 'lose the respect and support of their surviving families and communities', whilst the Geneva Convention defines rape 'as "a crime against honour" rather than as a mode of torture' (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 110). In terms of Marvin's and Ingle's understanding of nationhood, therefore, rape needs to be acknowledged as a particular kind of violence; especially important perhaps in the context of the United States, where the threat to territorial boundaries has, for a long time, been slim. There, the distinction between black and white has underpinned a near explicit hierarchy based upon desirability of origin and culture which has guided nation building processes like immigration and natal policies (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 26-27). In that context, we need not be surprised at the significance attached by sections of the majority white community to miscegenation: usually conceived in terms of the rape of white women by black men, its basic ritual form is the lynching.

Whilst Marvin's and Ingle's schema is clearly open to criticism as a somewhat reductive explanation of national feeling, it does offer a potentially insightful line of enquiry into American culture in particular. The point need not be laboured but, as Michael Bellesiles (1999: 1) observes, 'it is well known and thoroughly documented that the United States is the most violent nation in the industrialized world. To find comparable levels of interpersonal violence, one must examine nations in the midst of civil wars or social chaos'. Many Americans, perhaps even a majority, would appear to accept such violence as integral to the national character. Extending Marvin's and Ingle's argument, one can see that 'the right of the people to keep and bear arms' enshrined in the Second Amendment is, quite literally, an article of faith

for large numbers of US citizens, as basic and important as the franchise itself. Rightly or wrongly, exaggerated or not, it is the violence of American history, understood within a loose biblical framework of chosenness, which furnishes the basic stories and myths via which Americans imagine themselves as belonging to 'the land of the free and the home of the brave': the revolution, the Civil War, the conquest of the West, making the world safe for democracy, the growth of organized crime, etc. And this, of course, brings us back to the role of the media.

Violence, Sacrifice, and Civil Religion in The Birth of a Nation

Expanding on Dixon's *The Clansman*, which was wholly concerned with the Reconstruction period, the first half of *The Birth of a Nation*, devoted to the Civil War, appeals to the nation as a whole by stressing the similarities of North and South. The essential unity of white America, depicted in warm, familial terms, is only partially undone by 'the bringing of the African' and the subsequent meddling of abolitionists and politicians. Within the supposed idyll of antebellum life, black slaves are seen only as an happy, all-singing, all-dancing, counterpoint to the developing friendships and romantic attachments between the Stonemans and the Camerons as they all visit the latter's plantation. This underlying connection between North and South is underscored by the picture's portrayal of Lincoln, for Bellah (1967) the embodiment of the American civil religion 'at its best'. As Lang (1994b: 20) observes, Griffith presents "'the Great Heart'" as 'an extraordinary synthesis of potential incompatibilities....as an infinitely thoughtful and suffering man, rather in the manner of a father who must make unpopular decisions for the good of the entire family'. Distressed by the need to go to war to preserve the Union, Lincoln is generous in victory, seeking to deal with the South 'as though they had never been away'. Indeed, he is contrasted with the altogether more vengeful Stoneman, and the film invites us to believe that the South had, in defeat, come to accept Lincoln as a worthy leader. Hence, his assassination, which unleashes forces hitherto held in

check against which the white South must do battle in Part II, works, somewhat paradoxically, to reiterate a deep emotional bond between the former enemies.

Like Lincoln's appeals on behalf of the Union, *The Birth of a Nation* too, 'appealed to an audience with an essentially emotional solution' (Lang, 1994b: 14). For all the intellectual authority supposedly invoked by his use of filmic footnotes and 'historical facsimiles', Griffith understood that national identity was and remains, largely a matter of the heart. In that respect, the key to Part I is to be found in the battle scenes at Petersburg, during 'the last grey days of the Confederacy'. The film builds up to this sequence with fairly brief scenes depicting the gradual destruction of the harmonious antebellum way of life in tragic terms: a guerilla attack on Cameron Hall; the deaths of Duke Cameron and Tod Stoneman together on the battlefield followed by the news reaching their families; Elsie Stoneman working at a military hospital; Sherman's march and the burning of Atlanta; the death of Wade Cameron. At Petersburg, however, Ben Cameron demonstrates not only his courage but his moral worth by leading a hopeless assault against a Union position under the command of Phil Stoneman. In the midst of battle, Cameron pauses to offer water to a wounded Union soldier drawing admiration and cheers from his foes. With no hope of victory, he remains defiant to the last ramming a flag into the mouth of a Union cannon before collapsing. And, while Ben is destined to live, pictures of the dead lying strewn across the battlefield remind us of the human cost of the war, and the restoration of the Union, in a way recalling the famous photographs of Matthew Brady.

Unashamedly melodramatic but effective nonetheless, the sequence posits a deep camaraderie between the soldiers of both sides which transcends the temporary disruption of the Civil War. Gestures of mutual respect suggest a shared capacity to understand and forgive the violence each side visits on the other. Moreover, Ben Cameron's willingness to sacrifice himself for an already lost cause, his staunch adherence to the 'victory or death—for our cause is just' motif on the state flag, marks him out as someone worthy of inheriting at least some of the moral

authority of Lincoln. As the principled exemplar of Southern virtue, it is Ben who must challenge the misguided North in the wake of Lincoln's demise. This connection with Lincoln is strengthened by the President himself pardoning Ben at the behest of the latter's mother. It is as if the 'Great Heart' anticipates his death and hence the nation's future need for someone like Ben.

The death of Lincoln at the end of Part I leads straight into Reconstruction and the imposition of black misrule on the South at the beginning of Part II. Above all, this 'anarchy' is conceived as an erasure of the distinction between black and white which had hitherto defined "civilization in the South". Developing a theme established early in the film with the malign ministrations of Stoneman's housekeeper, Lydia, the dissolution of the old order is embodied on screen in 'Stoneman's protege, Silas Lynch, the mulatto leader of the blacks'. Whilst, the new regime brings out what we are led to believe is the natural indiscipline of the blacks—the exuberance of their dancing at the plantation taken to excess, as it were—it is the power-hungry and corrupt Lynch who represents the real threat to democratic principles. Instrumental in the humiliation of Ben Cameron and beneficiary of white disenfranchisement, Lynch's desire to marry Elsie Stoneman, a northern beacon of 'whiteness' (Dyer, 1996), establishes him, both politically and romantically, as the 'monstrous double' in Girard's (1978: 161) terms, who must be destroyed for order to be restored. It is to that end the rest of the narrative, not to mention the ride of the Klan, is directed.

Given the context of progressivism and Griffith's ambitions for the medium, celebrating the dubious achievements of the Ku Klux Klan was in many respects a high-risk strategy. While the dramatic appearance of the white robes was well suited to the screen, in seeking to excite national sentiment and, at the same time, furnish his chosen medium with the trappings of respectability, Griffith still needed to justify the illegal and anti-government actions of the Klan. How could the picture justify disenfranchisement as its still astonishing solution to the problem of race relations in America. Certainly, there were precedents for such an outcome. As Robert Bellah

(1967: 4) recognized half a century later, although the ballot box 'is carefully institutionalized as the operative source of political authority' in the US, 'it is deprived of an ultimate significance. The will of the people is not itself the criterion of right and wrong. There is a higher criterion in terms of which this will can be judged; it is possible the people may be wrong'. The congressionally sanctioned desire to "put the white South under the heel of the black South", as the citation of Woodrow Wilson puts it in the intertitles at the beginning of Part II, is depicted as an abuse of the rights of white Southerners. Within Bellah's (1967: 4) account of civil religion and the legitimation of the national political process, 'the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God'. Seen in these terms, *The Birth of a Nation* does more than attest to the divinely sanctioned primacy of the individual citizen's conscience over the possible injunctions of the state. It goes on to affirm these rights, 'more basic than any political structure' according to Bellah (1967:4), as 'a point of revolutionary leverage from which any state structure may be radically altered'. As Dixon and Griffith would seem to have argued, it is this principle which allows the Ku Klux Klan to function both as agents of national reform, and models for an active, morally engaged, citizenry. Yet, Griffith the film director would also appear to have recognized these principles as far too abstract to engender the kind of emotional identification with the Klan he was seeking. Blood sacrifice, he appears to have sensed, would be more effective.

As we have seen in Chapter Four, the crucial turning point of the narrative, comes in a much discussed sequence in which the hapless Gus, a symbol of blacks elevated to a position of equality with Southern whites by the reformers of the North, attempts to court Flora Cameron. Griffith's portrayal of Flora is an endearing one which traces her development from a child into a still slightly awkward but spirited adolescent woman, the embodiment of Southern resilience and virtue. However, where Dixon's original novel has Flora kill herself after being raped by Gus, the film, possibly as a result of pressure from the National Board of Censors (Merritt, 1990: 219), is a good deal more decorous though hardly less disturbing. Ignoring her

brother's warnings, Flora goes to fetch water alone. Gus follows her, and his subsequent proposal of marriage elicits panic in Flora who flees from him. After a typically Griffithian chase through the woods, she jumps to her death from a high promontory, thereby keeping her maidenhood intact. It is this sacrifice which prompts a grieving Ben Cameron to lead a fully-fledged rising of the Klan in defence of 'his people'.

Protecting her virginity and, by extension, the integrity of the white South, Flora Cameron's makes an heroic sacrifice to the Lost Cause. As Scott Simmon (1993: 129) recognizes,

Ben Cameron's look into the camera (already so rare in film by 1915) as he displays his sister's corpse is less a holdover from "primitive" film form than from the scene's Christian iconography, as in those direct confrontations of the viewer by mourners in Renaissance depositions of the dead Christ. In this context the Christian symbolism of the Klan is something more than historical coincidence.

For Simmon (1993: 128-29), Flora enacts a neat subversion of the death of Little Eva, an explicit 'parallel to Christ as a teacher and a martyr', in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in as far as she expresses a 'political argument in the single most powerful way available to young, nineteenth-century heroines: by their deaths'. Indeed, the willing sacrifice of one's own life for others is not only 'central to Christian soteriology' (Tompkins quoted in Simmon, 1993: 129), but also foundational in building national solidarity (Marvin and Ingle, 1996). Hence, Flora's death, like Eva's, is made meaningful because it 'serves as an instrument of redemption', both in the Christian sense of the term and the more specific white southern understanding of 'redemption' as the end of reconstruction and misguided Northern rule (Simmon, 1993: 129). Yet, as much a Christian lesson and spur to action in defence of white America as Flora's demise might appear, Ben's look into the audience is a reminder that all is not as it seems.

What is interesting about Gus' role in bringing about Flora's death, is that he is, in an important sense, innocent. Taking up Russell Merritt's (1990: 228) point that actor Walter Long plays Gus in an unusually 'hesitant' and 'tentative' manner for a

villain in a melodrama, there is a strong suggestion from Griffith's handling of the scene that Gus' 'crime' is mere uppityness; a victim of the North's insistence on emancipation and equality for Southern blacks. All he seeks is Flora's hand in marriage. To be sure, other scenes show him in a more unsympathetic light; stalking Flora, for example, or shooting Jeff, the town's blacksmith. But Merritt (1990: 219) is onto something when he highlights this section of the film as 'formally ungovernable'. For, as far as prompting the rising of the Klan, what Gus has done matters little. Whilst the merest hint of miscegenation would have been enough to condemn him in the eyes of many whites, in comparison with Flora's heroic sacrifice, Gus' execution, i.e. his ritual killing, carries meaning only as a provocation of the real enemy, Silas Lynch. What Ben confronts the (white) audience with as he holds the body of his dead sister is our/their own complicity in the crimes the Klan are about to commit. In as far as she represents a surrogate for the audience by offering up her body to the totemic authority of the Confederate flag, it is Flora's death, not Gus' 'crime', which is critical in justifying the Klan as an instrument of national regeneration and redemption. After Gus' body is unceremoniously dumped on Lynch's porch, the point is made explicit as Ben prepares the Klan for action by using Flora's blood stained flag and invokes her death as 'a priceless sacrifice on the altar of an outraged civilization'.

The steady build-up of pace in *The Birth of a Nation* after Flora's suicide, in part a function of Griffith's brilliant editing, deflects attention away from the superficial, or indeed, illusory justice of the Klan's cause. Following the lead given by Flora and Ben, a sympathetic audience need only submit to the authority of the sacrificial order to 'enjoy' the near mathematical precision and skill with which Griffith depicts the redemption of the South as the supposed tyranny and chaos of black rule is overthrown. As if recognizing the flimsiness of its political argument, however, the film continues to demand further emotional investment by developing the theme of white victimhood as the Clansmen assemble ahead of their 'appointed mission'. In Piedmont, respectable white families are confined to their homes as black mobs run

amock in the streets. Dr Cameron is arrested on the orders of Lynch after a spy spots Margaret hiding a Klan costume beneath a cushion. Other Klan sympathisers are tarred and feathered. If we were in any doubt as to what is at stake by the time Dr Cameron and party find refuge in a log cabin with some Union veterans an intertitle spells it out plainly: 'the former enemies of North and South are united again in common defence of their Aryan birthright'.

This sense of the Klan defending the human rights of white Southerners, established on-screen in sacrificial terms, is fundamental to *Birth's* attempt to articulate the most primal aspects of national feeling in terms respectable Americans could assent to. Depicting whites as victims, the film posits the ride of the Klan as a brave and moral response to oppression, not a vengeful and bullying expression of white supremacy. The machine-like precision with which Griffith sought to orchestrate the emotional responses of the audience is tempered by the human touch of the Lost Cause. This moral logic even allows the disavowal of any pleasure one might find in the erotic charge of Silas Lynch preparing a bound and gagged Elsie Stoneman for 'forced marriage'; a sequence which reduces the film's political argument with liberals and 'radicals' such as Austin Stoneman to the challenge; yes, but would you let your daughter marry one? In contrast to the vain and misguided idealism of Stoneman, the defenders of the 'besieged cabin' are portrayed as noble realists, with both Dr Cameron and one of the Northerners being prepared to sacrifice themselves and kill their respective daughters rather than surrender to the black horde. Moreover, the use of suspense by Griffith, the almost masochistic deferment of rescue, is crucial in these scenes. By inviting us to believe that the final triumph of the Klan remains in doubt to the last—resistance is fierce, several Clansmen are killed—the film rewards the faithful by conflating the reassurances and satisfactions of moral community with the simple pleasure of being on the winning side. Indeed, the pay-off for any spectator drawn into a commitment to the Klan's cause is more than just a vicarious experience of belonging and the righteous exercise of power. It is a promise made on behalf of the nation, that sacrifice will not

go unrecognized, unremembered, or unrewarded. In a subtle revision of the Puritan ethic, *The Birth of a Nation* suggests that while virtue is to remain the basis of achievement in modern America it need not mean the endless deferment of gratification.

That Griffith had some idea of what he was doing in this respect, is suggested by the peculiar way the director chose to frame the story. At the beginning of the film, Griffith, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, lampoons the Puritan North, the traditional touchstone of American nationalist sentiment, as misguided and full of meddlers and hypocrites, especially with regard to the issue of slavery. Probably citing an original intertitle, an early reviewer describes how the film shows how 'Puritan divines blessed the traffic, but when slave trading was no longer profitable to the North the "traders of the seventeenth century became the abolitionists of the nineteenth century"' (Bush, 1915: 177). Such antagonism towards the North might have been understandable given the South's then still living memories of defeat and humiliation in the Civil War. Yet, there might be more to this opening gambit than mere rancour. Rather, the prologue helps frame the film's invocation of the Lost Cause; a restatement of the South's claim to be the repository of national virtue at a time of change.

By the end of the film, with harmonious union between the whites of North and South having been restored by the Klan, Ben Cameron and Elsie Stoneman are rewarded with the sight of Christ ushering in the Kingdom of God followed by a vision of 'a city upon a hill', a clear reference to one of the most famous sermons of the American Puritan tradition, John Winthrop's 'A Model of Christian Charity' (1630), a reminder to the soon founders of Boston of their responsibilities to God. Whilst this final sequence might appear more than a little dated or even ridiculous to us now, it remains an important indicator of the sensibilities and intentions which shaped the film. In it, rests the film's own commentary on what the director hoped it would have achieved during the intervening three hours.

Conclusion: Rethinking *The Birth of a Nation*

Beyond a recuperation of the not inconsiderable investment that went into it, the most obvious goal of *The Birth of a Nation*, was a revitalization of American nationalist feeling; first, by recalling the national blood sacrifice of the Civil war, and, subsequently, by mythologizing the so-called 'redemption' of the South. It almost goes without saying, that, despite Griffith's denials, this aim is predicated upon an understanding of the sacred core of US national identity as fundamentally white, i.e. constructed in opposition to blacks. There is more, however. In furnishing an actual, albeit crude, and not metaphoric vision of the kingdom to come at the end of the film, not only for Ben and Elsie, but also for the audience, D.W. Griffith was staking a claim on behalf of the film industry for those aspects of the national imagination which had hitherto been largely the preserve of the Protestant churches and political orators. Indeed, Griffith's audacious attempt to shift the symbolic and, thus, religious foundations of US nationalism from Massachusetts Bay to somewhere south of the Mason-Dixon line, was a sign that, in practical terms, the narratives via which Americans continued to understand their significance as a 'chosen people' or 'New Israel', would derive less and less from the pulpit and the Bible, and ever more from the 'stories in pictures' produced in the studios of Hollywood.

The Birth of a Nation addressed an America undergoing rapid modernization on a massive scale. Within the Girardian framework outlined previously, the transformations being wrought by industrialization, urbanization, and the greatest single wave of immigration in human history, not to mention the rising intellectual authority of science and the enlightenment worldview, can be understood as having engendered a national sacrificial crisis. Developments during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries such as an expansion of trade union membership and the steady if as yet unspectacular growth of the women's movement, prompted exaggerated fears of violent disorder and social collapse. In the face of such

changes, the cultural hegemony enjoyed by the Protestant establishment, a civil religion in all but name, began to crumble.

In this context, Griffith's interest in developing the motion picture as an agent of moral and civic reform was by no means unusual, nor especially sinister. For him, it was the still under-developed medium of film, rather than the campaigns and movements of progressives, which offered the greatest possibilities for the moral regeneration of America as the churches slowly retreated from the mainstream of national life. Having grown up in a South which had come to terms with defeat in the Civil War, moreover, Griffith would have been well placed to have seen how the Lost Cause enabled a reconfiguration of Southern identity which did not abandon the traditions of the past but, rather, adapted them in line with altered circumstances. Not only that, but in the shape of the Ku Klux Klan in particular, the Lost Cause furnished a dramatic visual iconography well suited to the new medium. Looked at in this way, one might see his decision to use Thomas Dixon's writing as the basis for his 'big picture' as, in many ways, a logical extension of his previous smaller scale work with Biograph. Indeed, the sacrificial structure Griffith used to develop and organize his raw materials, allied to a highly advanced grasp of the medium's technical capabilities, would appear to have been especially effective in engendering a widespread emotional identification among whites with the cause of national unity.

However, the Lost Cause also represented a disavowal of what had really been the bedrock issue during the Civil War: not states' rights but slavery and the status of black Americans. Casting the Confederacy as the victims of the Civil War meant that, in sacrificial terms, Griffith's movie was a failure as it prompted further conflict and violence within the national community, not least by inspiring a revival of the Ku Klux Klan. Flora's death is a case in point here, in so far as it helps to effect a crucial misrecognition of who the real victims of the sacrificial order were: African-Americans. Yet, there is a sense in which this brings us to a fuller comprehension of its long-term significance. By revealing, however unintentionally, the contradictions, divisions, and violence of American life in such a dramatic and commercially

successful way, *The Birth of a Nation* had indicated the rich potential of the cinema as a public space, like the religious sphere, in which the tensions and conflicts of a large and unwieldy nation could play themselves out.

Viewed from the broad theoretical perspective elaborated in Part I, what is especially striking about Griffith's achievement is his use of the then relatively new visual medium of cinema to translate and promote a tradition based on the primacy of the written Word. Far from abandoning the traditions of Protestant America, *The Birth of a Nation* was, in many respects, both a product and a transformation of them. Thus, we might also see *Birth* as having helped enact a transformation of the American civil religion wherein the nominally secular medium of film came to revive and sustain the belief among some sections of the U.S. citizenry that their nation was a uniquely favoured instrument of Providence. Indeed, the creation of a national cultural arena which was free, to some extent, from Protestant suppositions as to the primacy of the word, provided certain non-Protestant groups, Catholics and Jews in particular, with a point of entry into the American cultural mainstream. Through the work of such luminaries as John Ford, Frank Capra, Louis B. Mayer, and the Warner brothers, this fresh blood would, in turn, regenerate and revitalize the cultural roots of US nationhood and American religion via the screen.

Yet, at what price? As a basic narrative conceit, for example, we can see that the Lost Cause jeremiad of *The Birth of a Nation* was well suited to the emerging, consumption-led America of the twentieth century. It reconciled the national sense of mission derived from the worldly asceticism of the Puritan tradition with the romantic 'passion and...creative dreaming born of longing' identified by Colin Campbell (1987: 227) as fundamental to the cultural logic of the consumer society. Arch-propagandist of consumption Cecil B. DeMille said as much when he paid tribute to Griffith as not only 'the teacher of us all' (1960: 113) but the man who, with *The Birth of a Nation*, had first shown that the movies 'were capable of bigness' (quoted in Stern, 1965: 102). Indeed, as even a brief survey indicates, 'lost causes' abound to this day in mainstream Hollywood cinema, particularly in films concerned with issues of

nationhood: from John Ford's *The Iron Horse* (1926), through *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (d. Frank Capra, 1939), *High Noon* (d. Fred Zinneman, 1952), and *Rocky* (d. John Avildsen, 1976) right up to more contemporary 'blockbusters' like *Independence Day* (1996, d. Roland Emmerich), the narrative structure of 'the Lost Cause redeemed' defines much that is peculiarly 'American' or 'Hollywood' about mainstream cinema. How might we explain its appeal?

Contrary to much that has been written about *The Birth of a Nation*, we might understand the appeal of the film as resting not on the supposed attraction of its white supremacist viewpoint (as compelling as that might be to some) but, rather, its re-affirmation of *faith* as the basis of national life. In the face of the cold hard historical forces of modernization, rationalization, and the rise of the corporate order, *Birth* offered a vision of America in which moral autonomy survives and the 'victims' of change could still regain control of their lives and communities through direct action. This compelling fiction has furnished American cinema with a narrative formula which has, over the years, encouraged its audience to believe that, for all the transformations wrought by modernity, and the emergence of the United States as a world power, the 'self-evident' principles upon which the nation was founded survive intact, at the heart of American culture, and that their country is indeed 'like a city upon a hill'. Ghosts of the Confederacy haunt the dream factory still. If you listen sometimes, you might hear a rebel yell.

CONCLUSION

Being thus arrived in a good harbor and brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees and blessed the God of Heaven who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean, and delivered them from all the perils and miseries thereof, again to set their feet on the firm and stable earth, their proper element.

(William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation* in Heimert and Delbanco, 1985: 56-57)

This study has argued for the recognition of a deep and important connection between American religion and American film. Positing nationhood as the ground of this cultural interchange, it suggests that the history of movie-making in the United States has been profoundly influenced by the religious environment of America and that, consequently, the development of the cinema has had a significant impact on the way Americans imagine themselves to be members of a national community.

The thesis began by addressing an evolving paradigm of scholarship rethinking relations between media, religion, and culture. With regard to this scholarship, it complained that a broad concern with developments in contemporary society had left the historical aspect to this 'web' of relations somewhat neglected. Recognizing the importance of America within the debates being pursued by students of media, religion, and culture, it suggested that the issue of national identity had hitherto been taken for granted. In relation to this, moreover, the study indicated a need for this emerging scholarship to develop its understanding of cinema, the most important mass medium of the first half of the twentieth century, and its key role within American culture.

This point was developed in Chapter Two which sought to furnish an overview of existing writing on religion and film in America. Although evidence was found to suggest the importance of religious stories, ideas, images, identities, and

institutions as influences on the development of the U.S. motion picture industry this, it was found, was largely scattered around the periphery of film studies, while religious writing on the cinema had only just begun to explore the socio-historical aspects to American film.

Establishing a theoretical basis for work which might deepen our understanding of the historical relations between religion and film in American culture, Chapter Three highlighted the importance of religion as both a agent of the national community and a means to articulate difference within the broader cultural framework. Whilst it acknowledged the problems associated with Robert Bellah's conception of an U.S. civil religion, it was nonetheless suggested that the perspective offered by Bellah represented a useful means of engaging with the religious elements in American cinema.

This suggestion was taken up in Chapters Four and Five which presented a case-study of one of the most important, influential, and controversial films of the American cinema; D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. Whilst there are indications of how important an influence religion was on the making of the picture within the vast literature prompted by it, the issue of race has tended to deflect attention from other important aspects to the film. The case-study argued that *Birth* represents a response to the changing place and role of religion in the early part of the twentieth century. During the Progressive Era, modernization and transformative social forces like immigration, industrialization, urbanization, as well as the growing intellectual authority of science, were undermining the public position of the Protestant churches as the bedrock of the social order. Concerned at the instability and uncertainty around them, many middle-class Americans sought to adapt to these changing circumstances by reforming national life in line with the traditional values upheld by mainline religion. For D.W. Griffith, however, it was the new medium of cinema that represented the best opportunity for moral reform.

Having established himself as the leading filmmaker of the day, Griffith set about making his first 'big' picture, and chose as his subject matter, the Civil War and

and its aftermath from a Southern perspective. Whilst the film is racist in the extreme, glorifying the Ku Klux Klan, the study raised the possibility that the insulting portrayal of African-Americans in *Birth* is collateral to Griffith's efforts to invoke the Southern myth of the Lost Cause as a means to address the perceived ills of national life. The appeal of the film, it was argued, lies rather more in its affirmation of faith in the face of modernization than its crude white supremacism. Leaving open the question of whether film can be thought of as being properly 'religious', it argues that Griffith's picture was quite explicit in staking a claim on behalf of the film industry for those aspects of the national imagination which had hitherto been bound up with the Puritan tradition. Indeed, the study suggests that the unprecedented impact of *Birth* helped enact a transformation of the ways and means in which Americans thought of themselves as members of a national community uniquely favoured by Providence.

Whether or not this shift can be thought of as something 'religious' clearly depends on how one understands the term 'religion'. What this study suggests, however, is that the development and growth of the supposedly 'secular' medium of cinema in America offered up opportunities for the re-negotiation and transformation of American national identity, its civil religion if you will, in box-office communion with the actual lived experience of ordinary Americans.

Suggestions for Future Research

It is customary for a project like this to conclude with suggestions for the development of future research. Several spring to mind.

For scholars in the field of film studies, there is a real need to develop theories and methods which are sensitive to the social significance of religion in American life. If they do seek to understand the role of cinema in the construction and maintenance of American national identity, then film scholars should, as a matter of priority, account for and engage with the complexity of the American religious economy. Taking religion seriously would be a good way to start.

Students of religion, on the other hand, should be considering the ways in

which the advent of the mass media has impacted upon religious belief and practice. In America, for example, did the emergence of the motion picture, and that medium's emphasis on the visual transform how, and in what, believers believe? Indeed, work addressing the importance of religion in American society needs to consider the extent to which the nationalizing role of religion was usurped by the advent of Hollywood. It may be that the broader collective cultural framework or 'imagined community' furnished by cinema and other media has facilitated the further fragmentation of the already diverse religious economy of America.

And so we come back to the evolving paradigm. If nothing else, this research has tried to remind scholars in this nascent field that there is a history to the contemporary convergence of media, religion, and culture, and that that history is a worthwhile object of study. It is hoped, for example, that the preceding study of *The Birth of a Nation* indicates how interesting and perhaps, even, surprising a re-examination of the social and cultural history of American cinema through the prism of religion can be. Thus, it might be worthwhile tracing the development and transformation of the Lost Cause myth as a component of film appeals to American national identity. Indeed, the issue of national identity is one that needs to be addressed more directly from within the evolving paradigm of media, religion, and culture. If one of the benefits of historical research is the provision of perspective onto the present, then a study of American history reminds us that religion, as both a category and a field of activity, has, for over two centuries, been subordinated to the nation. It is the broader process, the blood, sweat, and tears of nationhood, which gives real meaning and vitality to American religion. That historical frame has much to offer students of media, religion, and culture also. *The Birth of a Nation* just shows us is where the bodies are hidden.

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Filmography

The Birth of a Nation (1915)

Production Company	Epoch Producing Company
Executive Producer	D.W. Griffith
Director	D.W. Griffith
Screenplay	D.W. Griffith and Frank E. Woods from Rev. Thomas Dixon, Jr.'s novels <i>The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan</i> , and <i>The Leopard's Spots</i> , and the play, <i>The Clansman</i> .
Director of Photography	Billy Bitzer
Editing	D.W. Griffith, assisted by Joseph Henabery and Raoul Walsh

Principal Cast

Ben Cameron	Henry B. Walthall
Elsie Stoneman	Lillian Gish
Flora Cameron	Mae Marsh
Austin Stoneman	Ralph Lewis
Margaret Cameron	Miriam Cooper
Phil Stoneman	Elmer Clifton
Silas Lynch	George Siegmann
Lydia	Mary Alden
Gus	Walter Long
Dr. Cameron	Spottiswoode Aitken
Mrs Cameron	Josephine Crowell
Abraham Lincoln	Joseph Henabery
Mammy	Jennie Lee
Jake	William de Vaull
Tod Stoneman	Robert Harron
Wade Cameron	Maxfield Stanley
Duke Cameron	J.A. Beringer

Appendix

The Birth of a Nation: A Thin Description

PART ONE

I Titles and Prologue

Following a demand 'for the art of the motion picture' to be afforded the same freedom 'conceded to the art of the written word', another title asserts that the origins of American national disunity began with the introduction of Africans to America. A 'Puritan' (Bush, 1915: 176) minister is shown blessing a manacled slave.¹ The subsequent campaign for abolition is depicted with a preacher presenting a group of young black children to 'a typical Northern congregation' (Bush, 1915: 176).

II Antebellum America

The Stoneman boys visit the Camerons.

In 1860, Phil and Tod Stoneman, the sons of Austin Stoneman, a rising power in the House of Representatives, pay a visit to the family of Dr. and Mrs. Cameron in Piedmont, South Carolina, leaving their disappointed sister Elsie to stay behind in the Stoneman country home in Pennsylvania.

In Piedmont, amid scenes of harmony and contentment between blacks and whites on the plantation, the two families grow closer: Phil, the older of the two Stoneman boys, falls in love with the eldest of the two Cameron daughters, Margaret; Tod, strikes up a warm friendship with Duke, the youngest of three Cameron brothers; the eldest, Ben Cameron, 'finds the ideal of his dreams' in a picture of Elsie.

¹ Unless otherwise referenced, all quotations refer to the film's intertitles.

Political tensions grow between North and South.

The unity of the two families is undercut when a new national administration threatens the sovereignty of the Southern States making secession and war likely.

In his Washington apartments, Austin Stoneman confers but disagrees with Charles Sumner, the leader of the Senate. After Sumner leaves, Lydia, Stoneman's mulatto housekeeper,² lies to Stoneman that Sumner treated her roughly. He comforts her.

Stoneman's sons are summoned back north and take their leave of the Camerons.

III The Civil War

War begins.

In Washington, a reluctant Abraham Lincoln signs a proclamation which commits 'the Presidential office for the first time in history to call for volunteers to enforce the rule of the coming nation over the individual states.' Responding to Lincoln's call, the Stoneman brothers bid farewell to their (weeping) aunt and Elsie, and depart to join their regiment.

In Piedmont, amidst bonfire celebrations following Confederate victory at the first battle of Bull Run, a farewell ball is held for the town's quota of departing troops. In the morning, Ben Cameron mounts his horse and leads the troops as they move out cheered on by the townsfolk, both black and white. Left behind in Piedmont are a subdued Dr. and Mrs. Cameron, Margaret, and her younger sister, Flora.

In the North, Elsie tells her father that his sons have left for the front.

America at war.

Two and a half years later, Ben and Flora write to each other.

Piedmont, including Cameron Hall, is attacked by black Union guerrillas led

² All the principal black and mulatto characters depicted in *Birth* are played, quite clearly, by white actors in blackface, i.e. in make-up.

by a 'scalawag' white captain. The town, as well as the Cameron's residence, is rescued from further looting and destruction by a company of Confederate troops.

At the front, 'letters from home revive tender reveries' of pre-war days 'for the "little Colonel," Ben Cameron. He examines his portrait of Elsie he took from her brother Phil and almost throws it away but decides not to.

On the battlefield, Duke Cameron and Tod Stoneman are killed and die in each others embrace. The news reaches the families. In the increasingly hard-hit South, the Camerons sell their possessions for the ailing Confederate cause. In the North, Elsie Stoneman works as a nurse. Leaving a trail of destruction, Sherman's army marches south towards the sea. As Atlanta burns, Wade, the middle Cameron brother, is killed.

The war ends.

In 'the last grey days of the Confederacy', Southern troops at Petersburg under General Lee attempt to rescue 'a sorely needed food train', cut off behind Union lines. During a furious engagement, Colonel Ben Cameron leads a charge against the Union lines under the command of Captain Phil Stoneman. The assault succeeds in taking two lines of entrenchments, 'but only a remnant of his regiment remains to continue the advance'. With 'all hope gone' prior to a 'last charge', Ben pauses to give water to a wounded Union soldier lying on the field of battle. Union soldiers including Captain Stoneman 'cheer the heroic deed'. As the final Confederate charge peters out in the face of Union fire, the wounded Ben Cameron picks up the Confederate flag from a fallen standard-bearer, and, with Phil Stoneman ordering his men to hold their fire, is able to ram the flag into the mouth of one of the Union cannons before collapsing. Phil drags the unconscious Ben into the Union trench. At the end of all the death and destruction the North are victorious. Lee's surrenders at Appomattox marks the end of state sovereignty.

News of Wade and Ben reaches Piedmont. In a makeshift military hospital, Ben and Elsie meet. Ben's mother comes to visit him in hospital. However, 'a secret

influence has condemned Col. Cameron to be hanged as a guerrilla'. At Elsie's suggestion Mrs. Cameron appeals to President Lincoln, and her son is pardoned, after which she returns home to Piedmont. Ben is discharged on the same day as the Confederate surrender at Appomattox, and also makes his way back to Piedmont.

Death of Lincoln

In Washington, Austin Stoneman protests to Lincoln about the President's 'policy of clemency for the South', arguing instead that 'their leaders must be hanged and their states treated as conquered provinces'. Lincoln is assassinated and Lydia confirms that Stoneman is 'now the greatest power in America', whilst news of the President's death is greeted with dismay by the Camerons who fear for the South's future.

END OF PART ONE

PART TWO

I Reconstruction

Introductory titles

The second part begins by describing Reconstruction as 'the agony which the South endured that a nation might be born,' and as a continuation of 'the blight of war' on the South. A series of titles cite Woodrow Wilson's *History of the American Peoples* and his claim that during the Reconstruction period, congressional policy brought about "a veritable overthrow of civilization in the South" and it was this 'determination to "put the white South under the heel of the black south"', which led to the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, "roused by a mere instinct of self-preservation."

The Imposition of black rule on the defeated South

In Austin Stoneman's house on Capitol Hill, the new seat of power after the assassination of Lincoln, Stoneman introduces his 'protege, Silas Lynch, mulatto leader of the blacks' to Senator Sumner, who is there to urge 'a less dangerous

policy in the extension of power to the freed race'. Stoneman announces that blacks are to be raised to full equality with whites and tells Sumner that he will make Lynch 'a symbol of his race, the peer of any white man living'.

Because Stoneman is too ill to travel, he despatches Silas Lynch south to implement his policy. Whilst Lynch is still with the sickly Stoneman, Elsie brings flowers into her father's office. Her presence prompts excessive attention from Lynch.

In the South, Lynch establishes his headquarters in Piedmont, and sets about changing the existing way of life there. Outside Cameron Hall, Ben and Flora are first impeded by a squad of soldiers, then Silas Lynch's first meeting with Ben leaves the latter humiliated and angry when he says that "this sidewalk belongs to us as much as it does to you, 'Colonel' Cameron".

On his physician's advice, Austin Stoneman seeks 'a milder climate and desiring to see his policies carried out at first hand, leaves for South Carolina.' Phil and Elsie influence him to select Piedmont and the party arrive at Cameron Hall. In his second meeting with him, Ben snubs the 'condescending' Lynch in front of Austin Stoneman and Elsie.

The power hungry Lynch attends a pre-election rally with his patron, where whites try to explain the principle of 'equality' to blacks, although the latter are shown as ignorant and uninterested as to what the extension of the franchise means.

Despite the turmoil around them, love develops between Ben and Elsie. However, 'bitter memories' prompt Margaret Cameron to reject the renewed interest of Phil Stoneman.

At the election, 'all blacks are given the ballot while the leading whites', including Ben Cameron and his father, are disenfranchised' in various ways. As a consequence, 'the negroes and the carpetbaggers sweep the state', and 'Silas Lynch is elected Lieut. Governor'. During the celebrations, Lynch renews his interest in Elsie.

Black rule and the rise of the Klan

As Ben relates some of the abuses that have occurred, Jake, one of the Camerons' 'faithful' black servants, is flogged by black soldiers 'for not voting with the Union League and Carpetbaggers'. An elderly black who attempts to halt the flogging is shot dead by the officer in charge of it.

In a chaotic and boorish, black dominated State House of Representatives of South Carolina, a bill is passed, 'providing for the intermarriage of blacks and whites' with a jubilant Silas Lynch 'accepting the congratulations of the legislators'.

In this radically altered social environment, Flora Cameron attracts the unwanted attentions of Gus, a black renegade, who stalks the younger Cameron sister from outside the picket fence. Ben Cameron orders Gus to keep away but Silas Lynch intervenes, clashing angrily with Ben, and tells Gus to report any further incidents of this sort to him. As Ben sits on a riverbank 'in agony of soul over the degradation and ruin of his people' he sees two white children frighten double that number of black children by covering themselves with a white sheet. This inspires Ben, and the result is 'the Ku Klux Klan, the organization that saved the South from the anarchy of black rule'.

After an early, and small-scale Klan raid, three white-robed clansmen are shot dead by Gus and other soldiers supporting Lynch. As Austin Stoneman examines one of the dead clansmen's tunics he announces that "we shall crush the white South under the heel of the black South", and tells Elsie that her lover, Ben, "belongs to this murderous band of outlaws." When she next meets Ben, a bundle containing a Klan costume falls at their feet. Ben's reaction confirms her suspicions. Out of filial loyalty, Elsie breaks off the engagement, although she tells Ben that she will not betray him. Ben enlists the aid of his mother and two sisters in the manufacture of Klan costumes.

After Flora attempts to cheer Ben up (Elsie too, is disconsolate), she goes to fetch fresh water from the spring, but against her brother's warning, insists on going alone. Gus follows Flora through the woods and attempts a proposal, but succeeds

only in frightening her. She runs away, and a chase ensues. By now a worried Ben is on their trail. Reaching the top of a rocky promontory, and fearful of Gus's advances, Flora jumps and falls onto the rocks below. When Ben finds her, he asks Flora who did it, to which she replies "Gus", then dies in his arms. Ben stares directly into the camera/audience. The Cameron family is joined in grief by their black servants, while Phil Stoneman pleads 'against his father's radical policy'.

Aided by some of the townsmen, Ben succeeds in finding and capturing Gus, who is tried and found guilty by the Klan. His dead body is thrown onto the steps of Silas Lynch's house with a note bearing the letters "KKK" attached. Lynch responds by ordering Negro militia into the streets, whilst Austin Stoneman temporarily departs the worsening crisis.

II Redemption

Lynch's proposal, Piedmont in chaos, and the ride of the Klan.

The Ku Klux Klan prepare for action, and Ben douses a fiery cross in a basin of water in which he has dipped a Confederate flag which belonged to Flora. Meanwhile, spies find evidence of the Cameron family's involvement in making clan costumes, and, under orders from Lynch, Dr Cameron is arrested by some black soldiers. Margaret appeals to Elsie to have her father intervene. As Elsie searches in vain for her absent father, Dr. Cameron is paraded in chains and faces the jeers of his former slaves. However, aided by Phil Stoneman (who shoots one of the soldiers), Jake and Mammy, the faithful black servants of the Camerons, rescue their master. Along with Margaret and Mrs. Cameron, they all make their escape in a wagon. A bewildered Elsie looks on, and is told by a Northern officer that her brother has killed a black soldier during the rescue. As she waits in her father's study for the latter's return, and the rescue wagon departs, a squad of black soldiers is mobilized. Meanwhile, Silas Lynch, 'the social lion of the new aristocracy', enjoys a social evening with some mulatto female and black male guests.

As the wagon carrying Dr Cameron and his rescuers goes down a small bank, it loses a wheel. The party climb out of the wagon, seek refuge in a small log 'cabin occupied by two Union veterans' and a young girl, who welcome them inside. As black soldiers search for the escape party, 'the former enemies of North and South are united again in common defence of their Aryan birthright.'

With Austin Stoneman failing to return, a restless and increasingly agitated Elsie, 'ignorant of Lynch's designs on her' goes to the Lieut. Governor for help. Pleased that Elsie has come to him, Lynch has his servant break up the party he is hosting and goes into his study to listen to her appeal. Responding, he writes and despatches a note, but as Elsie shapes to leave Lynch detains her and offers a marriage proposal. Shocked and angry, Elsie threatens to have him horsewhipped and tries to leave, but Lynch locks her in and showing her the jostling black soldiers outside the window firing their rifles into the air says tells her, "See! My people fill the streets. With them I will build a Black Empire and you as a Queen shall sit by my side." Ignoring her pleas, an increasingly threatening Lynch pursues his suit, horrifying Elsie who becomes increasingly desperate to escape. As Lynch, 'drunk with wine and power', gives orders to prepare for a forced marriage, the Clans are summoned and mounted Ku Klux Klan members begin to gather in the surrounding countryside.

Through streets crowded with blacks, a carriage brings Austin Stoneman back to Piedmont. As he arrives at Lynch's residence, Elsie, inside, faints. Lynch carries Elsie through to the next room, while Stoneman waits impatiently outside the locked study. Lynch unlocks the door and Stoneman enters carrying a paper in his hand and giving instructions. Meanwhile, the Clansmen continue to assemble. Lynch is congratulated by Stoneman when he tells the latter that he wishes "to marry a white woman." Fully assembled, the Clans 'ride off on their appointed mission.' In the log cabin, Margaret Cameron is unmoved by the pleas of Phil Stoneman.

While a drugged (Lang, 1994: 141) Elsie lies unconscious in the next room, Lynch explains that the woman he wishes to marry is in fact Stoneman's own

daughter. Stoneman responds angrily. As he turns to leave, Lynch grabs his arm. Outside, Piedmont is 'given over to crazed negroes brought in by Lynch and Stoneman to overawe the whites.' An angry Lynch calls in a guard while Stoneman realizes Elsie is in the next room. A column of mounted Clansmen ride down a straight road. Elsie regains consciousness, smashes a window, and manages to scream for help before one of Lynch's maids restrains her. Two horsemen, 'white spies disguised' as blacks, are alerted, turn and ride away, while Stoneman, who has also heard the screams, is forced down into a chair by Lynch.

The two horsemen are with a squad of black soldiers who have discovered the disabled wagon used by Dr. Cameron *et al.* Inside the cabin, the young girl touches a tear on Margaret's cheek who draws the child to her. Outside, black soldiers make their way towards the cabin. Shots are fired and a siege begins. 'The Union veterans refuse to allow Dr. Cameron to give himself up.' Hooded Clansmen continue their ride.

In Piedmont, two of Lynch's servants struggle with a gagged Elsie. Outside, anarchy and disorder reign. Families of helpless whites can only spectate as Klan sympathizers are tarred and feathered by a large jostling crowd of blacks. Two white men are carried from the jailhouse and beaten with sticks as the by now rioting crowd presses against the jailhouse door. The column of Clansmen is stopped by the spies as it approaches the town, then continues once the latter have given their report with Ben Cameron at their head. They enter Piedmont, and begin dispersing the mob and engaging in combat with the black soldiers. Hearing the gunfire, Lynch steps outside to take charge. Meanwhile, the position of those in the cabin looks increasingly desperate. Five Klan riders approach the besieged cabin but are unable assist those inside and two of them are shot by the soldiers as the remainder ride away to summon more help.

In town, a charge by Clansmen succeeds in routing both the soldiers and the mob who flee running through the streets past Cameron Hall. Back inside, Lynch carries off Elsie who has succeeded in removing her gag. Before he can effect his

escape, however, several Clansmen burst into Lynch's study, one of the guards is shot, and Lynch is pushed and held down in a chair. The leader of the Clansmen puts his arm around Elsie, lifts his hood, and reveals himself to her as Ben Cameron. She responds by throwing her arm around him.

When news of the besieged cabin reaches Piedmont, the Clansmen ride off to the rescue. But the soldiers have by now entered the cabin forcing those inside back into its inner room. All appears lost, and one of the Union veterans prepares to kill the young girl with his rifle butt so as to stop her falling into the clutches of the black soldiers, some of whom are drunk. Just in time, the Klan arrive and the besieging blacks retreat or are killed by the rescuing Clansmen.

Order restored

Afterwards, blacks are disarmed by the Klan who enjoy a triumphant parade through the streets of Piedmont with Elsie and Margaret at the head. As blacks return to their homes, relieved white townsfolk cheer and embrace their families.

At the next election, blacks are forced back into their homes (rather than being allowed to vote) by Clansmen.

III Epilogue

'The aftermath' finds Margaret and Phil, and Ben and Elsie on a double honeymoon by the sea. On a bluff overlooking the sea, Ben turns to Elsie: "Dare we dream of a golden day when the bestial War shall rule no more. But instead—the gentle Prince in the Hall of Brotherly Love in the City of Peace." This title is followed by images of the God of War (Lang, 1994: 155) engaged in pitiless slaughter and then Christ holding out his arms over a heavenly throng. Ben and Elsie stare out to sea. A city on a hill appears hovering over the heavenly throng. Holding hands and exchanging loving looks, Elsie and Ben turn and look toward the vision of the heavenly city. A title fades in: "Liberty and union, one and inseparable, now and forever!" THE END.'