

The Art of Religious Violence

A film-studies analysis of the myth of religious violence in popular culture

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I. Introduction

“The gods’ judgment is fierce, but also fair. The Warrior punishes those who believe themselves beyond the reach of justice. But the Mother shows her mercy to those who kneel before her.” (Benioff and Weiss, *Game of Thrones: The Winds of Winter* 2016) The High Septon of the Faith of the Seven (the head of the main religion in the fictional continent of Westeros in the tv-series *Game of Thrones*) reflects on the different aspects of his religion. It can be punishing and violent, but it can also be merciful and forgiving.

“I put no stock in religion. By the word religion, I’ve seen the lunacy of fanatics of every denomination be called the “Will of God”. I’ve seen too much religion in the eyes of too many murderers. Holiness is in the right action and courage on behalf of those who cannot defend themselves. And goodness - what God desires – [pointing at his head then heart] is here and here. And what you decide to do every day, you will be a good man, or not.” (Scott 2005)

A knight hospitaller reflects on the nature of (religious) action in Ridley Scott’s *Kingdom of Heaven*, a movie that offers a portrayal of crusaders and crusader kingdoms. The knight’s reflection illustrates the seemingly paradoxical relation between religion and violence.

“The officials told our Padres to abandon God and the gospel of his life. But they not only refused to apostatize, they asked to be tortured so they could demonstrate the strength of their faith and the presence of God within them. Some remained on the mountain for 33 days. The story of their courage gives hope to those of us priests who remain here in secret. We will not abandon our hidden Christians who live in fear. We only grow stronger in his love.” (Scorsese 2016)

A fragment of a conversation between Christian priests in Martin Scorsese’s *Silence*, a movie about Christian missionaries in 17th century Japan, describes the ordeals Christian minorities had to go through during that period in Japan. However, more interestingly it seemingly illustrates an innate relation between central aspects of religion and the concept of violence. This relation between religion and violence is not something that was invented for the sake of the narrative of these media products. This relationship is a popular and academically debated way of thinking about the relationship between individual action and religious aspects, beliefs, and values. This idea, or concept, is referred to as religious violence. The academic debate on religious violence tends to go one of two ways. Authors such as Mark Juergensmeyer see this inherent and historical link between religion and violence and claim that there is such a thing as religious violence. (Juergensmeyer 2020) While others such as William Cavanaugh argue that religion needs to be understood in a broader context of human social life and can thus not be solely responsible for acts of violence. (Cavanaugh 2009) Despite this academic debate the view on religious violence in the public domain seems to be more straight forward. Religion is and can be violent. A quick google search on “religious conflict” offers up a broad selection of news articles on conflicts and acts of violence that are implied to be strongly connected to religion (most often Islam in western media) without discussing the potential other causes of that violence or questioning religion’s agency. This seeming disparity between the academic debate and the view on religious violence in the public domain is the catalyst for this master thesis.

In order to get a better understanding of views and narratives on religious violence in the public domain the main goal of this thesis will be to analyze portrayals of religious

violence in popular media products. The products up for analysis are tv-series and movies. A case-study analysis of such products on the basis of the concept of religious violence will yield tangible examples of conceptions and views on religious violence in the public domain since popular media products such as movies and tv-series offer an accessible insight into culturally accepted, or challenged, views on differing societal topics by highlighting them or placing them in a different light. By analyzing popular visual media products such as movies, and TV series, this thesis aims to provide a better understanding of the relationship between visual media and religious violence. Furthermore, such research is relevant because it combines pre-existing notions about media and religion, and religious violence. While there is already quite a corpus of work on the relation between media and religion, the addition of the concept of religious violence in combination with a film-studies case analysis approach will shed a new light on the relation between media can have on public conceptions of religion. This thesis differs from papers such as *On the sacred power of violence in popular culture* by Eric Bain-Selbo, as I do not consider religion to be inherently violent. I will consider each case of violence in the sources as unique in order to establish its nature and its effect as a part of a popular culture product. Furthermore, I will not only be addressing physical violence, but also mental violence, and structural cultural violence such as for example the violence linked to the concept of orientalism discussed among others by Arjana in her paper *Monstrous Muslims: Historical Anxieties and Future Trends*. I will attempt to combine the discussion on the concept of religious violence with others such as orientalism, the sacred, and cosmic war in order to come to a conclusion of what exactly is being depicted in the sources up for analysis. Additionally, this research is particularly relevant in today's world, where social tensions, and ignorance, can cause violence and media consumption is as pervasive as it has ever been. By shedding light on the ways in which popular visual media shape our perceptions of religious violence, this thesis hopes to contribute to a better understanding of this complex issue.

The three primary sources that will be analyzed are: fantasy tv-series *Game of Thrones*; *Kingdom of Heaven* a semi fictional film; and *Silence* also a semi fictional film. All three are relatively modern (created between 2005 and 2019) visual media products. In order to properly analyze the primary sources, it is important to understand what they are, what their stories are, and what their relevance to this analysis is. Secondly, and more importantly I will offer a conceptual framework on media and religion, religious violence, and religious violence in media which will in turn be instrumentalized to analyze the cases of the primary sources. The thesis will be structured into four main chapters. The first main chapter will be the theoretical framework. Discussing all the relevant theories, concepts, and arguments concerning religion and media, religious violence, and film studies. It will also discuss the nature of the primary sources and the methods used to analyze them. Chapters two, three, and four will each of them be reserved for the analysis and discussion of the primary sources. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the findings in order to see if the goal of the thesis has been reached.

II. Theory, concepts, and methods

This chapter will offer an overview and discussion of the theories, concepts, and arguments that are relevant for the analysis of the primary sources.

Media, pop culture, and Religion

During the last several decades there has been a significant increase in the academic interest into the relationship between religion and media. One of the main explanations for this trend is the awareness of scholars of religion that if one wants to write or think about religious phenomena (e.g., religious violence) in the modern world one almost certainly has to think about how these phenomena are involved with various forms of media. Public media outlets and public media products such as movies can be considered as important vehicles for public knowledge about religion and public reflection on religion. Additionally, public media can be understood as a new public dimension in which religious ideas and symbols can be separated from the authority of the religious institutions they are linked to, allowing them to be interpreted in new ways. (Lynch, Mitchell and Strhan, Introduction 2011) This deregulation can also lead to situations in which religious organizations have to defend themselves as public actors from public criticism. (Lynch, Mitchell and Strhan, Introduction 2011) In other words, media has the power to shape public perceptions, construct religious narratives, and impact the visibility and understanding of religious traditions and phenomena.

Furthermore, public media provides a space in which religious ideas, symbols, and phenomena can be used, or discussed, separate from their authoritative place of origin which in turn can lead religious actors and institutions to defend their way of thinking. (Lynch, Mitchell and Strhan, Introduction 2011) A good example of this was the response of the Catholic church towards the media's uncovering of the sexual abuse scandal within the church system. The church was put into the position to defend itself, or rather, apologize in order to stave off considerable reputation damage. However, since the relationship between media and religion is complex and continually evolving it is important to specify what aspect of this relationship is most relevant for this master thesis. In order to properly analyze the primary sources for their portrayal, or reflection, of the concept of religious violence this sub-chapter will discuss the concept of media defined as a culture product relating to religion.

The processes of media and religion intertwining that are discussed above relate to the mediatization of religion theoretical framework. Mediatization of religion is a relatively new theoretical framework that has been mainly developed by media studies scholar Stig Hjarvard. In broad lines mediatization re-frames and analyses the role and influence of media in culture and society. More specifically, it highlights the social and cultural process through which an aspect of society, such as religion or politics, can become dependent, and/or intertwined with, on the processes and systems of media. (Hjarvard 2011) Mediatization theory takes its place among two other more well established theoretical frameworks within the field of media theory. One of these established frameworks is the theoretical framework of media effects. This attempts to analyze the influence media may have on societal and individual level regarding behavior and attitudes. A prime research example of this framework are the studies into the alleged effect that violence in video games can have on children. This might seem quite similar to the research goals of this thesis. The differences will be spelled out below.

The second already established theoretical framework is concerned with the opposite of media effects. Instead of focusing on what media 'does' to people, it focusses on how people (individuals and groups) can make use of media for their own benefit. (Hjarvard 2011) An example of research within this framework might be concerned with how people use specific media products to form aspects of their social identity or to interact with certain social groups/sub-cultures they are interested in (e.g. a cultural studies framework). In short, the effects framework is concerned with what effects media can have on people, while the second framework focusses on how people can use the media themselves.

As mentioned, the mediatization of religion theoretical framework is the most recent addition to this field of research. Mediatization theory incorporates some aspects of both previous frameworks, however, it differs from them primarily because it does not define media as being detached from social- and cultural reality. Rather, it defines media as being an aspect of the social reality within a society. It emphasizes the constantly changing relationship between humans and the social structures they interact with, in this case media. Mediatization theory recognizes that in contemporary societies media are valuable and necessary aspects of social institutions such as politics, sports, business and most importantly for this thesis, religion. Additionally, it recognizes that media is fundamental as a means for communication in most societies, may that be on a public or private level. Concrete examples of the ways in which the process mediatization exerts itself are for example that media can enable communication and interaction that transcends the present moment and can therefore be an alternative for in-person communication and interaction. In addition, these alternative forms of communication and interaction, through media and in-person, merge together. Finally, as mentioned briefly before, individual social actors and institutions within a society might adapt to the principles and mechanisms of media. Because of these effects of the mediatization process, and it's understanding that media is part of society and not outside of it, the theory is especially relevant. Through it one can analyze how media exercise influence on, and potentially alter, social institutions such as religion. (Hjarvard 2011)

When it comes to the mediatization of religion there are two important aspects of religion that are altered by mediatization that are relevant for this thesis. First, media assume a significant role in providing information concerning religious matters to the public. This is possible since public media institutions serve as creators but also as suppliers of religious experiences. Additionally, interactive media platforms offer ways for individuals to manifest and exchange their personal beliefs. Secondly, Religious information and experiences undergo a transformation to align with the requirements of popular media genres. Established religious aspects such as symbols, practices, and beliefs are assimilated as essential components within the media's narrative, shaping stories concerning both secular and sacred subjects. (Hjarvard 2008) Simply said, using mass media in order to broadcast a religious service assumes a significant role as a tool in order for religious actors to reach a larger audience. The reception of popular media fiction containing religious undertones by the viewers may function as an alternative for actively engaging in religious practices. Furthermore, one can see the integration of religious and secular narratives and practices in popular media products such as movies as interconnecting the discourse of both respective fields which allows individuals who normally might not have come into contact with such issues to consume them as well. This thesis will be an example of this argument. Additionally, this argument illustrates the "power" media wield through this producing and intertwining of knowledge concerning religious aspects. For example, the script writers of a

new cinematic movie choose to address a specific religious issue in their popular movie. By doing this they set the agenda of what is consumed and reflected upon by the viewers. This process is defined as the agenda-setting function of the media. (McCombs 2004) In general, this means that media have influence on what and how much information concerning religious issues are present in a society. Through the logic of media, religion and religious issues are framed and the manner in which individuals (and groups) interact with religion and religious issues are altered. This switch from religious institutions to media as a main source of information concerning religious issues does however not necessarily mean that media are interested in spreading religious worldviews for the sake of any religion.

According to Hjarvard media shy away from propagating religious worldviews since in most instances media hold a secular worldview rather than a religious one. Instead of “preaching” religious ideas or using religious texts, they use a specific representation of religious aspects and ideas for their own benefit as inspirational material for among others, tv-series, and cinematic films. The religious content that does exist in media products is produced and rewritten to fit the mold of the specific media category. (Hjarvard, *The mediatization of religion: Theorising religion, media and social change* 2011, 127) The primary sources of this thesis, the cinematic movies *King of Heaven* and *Silence*, and the tv-series *Game of Thrones* thus offer the viewer an edited and specifically chosen form of religious representation that, as mentioned, merge religious aspects and/or religious issues with secular aspects such as politics, violence, and gender issues.

Popular culture, or pop-culture from now on, is another relevant conceptual layer for scholars attempting to analyze cultural products in general, and more specifically for this thesis, in the field of religious studies. The following paragraphs will elaborate on these statements by discussing the concept of pop-culture and its link to culture studies and religious studies. Pop-culture has three important underlying concepts that need to be understood in order for its relevance to be clear. These concepts are, *culture*, *the popular*, and *mass culture*. (Schofield Clark 2007) *Culture* refers to a distinctive way of life adopted by a specific group of people within a specific historical timeframe. This includes the tangible and intangible aspects such as stories, customs, and products that shape and define this distinctive way of life. Furthermore, *culture* influences the perspectives and experiences of such a group, even if they are not consciously aware of its structure or influence. The second concept, *the popular*, is somewhat ambiguous, however, it generally highlights the human aspect in popular culture, the human as a consumer of specific ‘cultural’ products. Lastly, *mass culture*, addresses the profit-driven nature behind the creation of the cultural products intended specifically for commercial sale. Additionally, it refers to the consumer demand that justifies production and distribution of such products.

Pop-culture products encompass a wide range of elements, encompassing not only mainstream media like film and television but also more “sophisticated” forms of expression such theater and art. For popular culture to thrive it must connect with something meaningful to people. It can be symbolic for the essence of a specific society, resonating with deeply ingrained values that align with what we perceive as the finest aspects of society. Additionally, pop-culture mirrors the hidden and unspoken perspectives and structures societies tend to overlook or deny. (Schofield Clark 2007) An example of the latter is the thriller *Us* by Jordan Peele which subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, highlights the racial structures in American society. (Peele 2019) An analysis of *Us* or any other popular media product can aid in highlighting and tackling unspoken perspectives and structures such as racism, or religious violence in the case of this thesis. It is, however, important to

note that this does not imply that movies, or any other popular culture products, necessarily have the power to change behavior and thoughts, but rather, the appeal of cinema lies in its capacity to express collective beliefs in a manner that does not jeopardize our core identity. Pop-culture products such as tv-series and movies serve as public spaces where these values, and ideas are explored through storytelling and portrayal. (Schofield Clark 2007) Again, this is precisely what makes them a suitable subject for academic analysis.

The field of religious studies exhibits a noticeable connection to the essence of pop-culture. Within religious studies, one of the primary areas of contemporary interest is the exploration of lived religion, which delves into the daily experiences of individuals practicing their faith. Consequently, emphasizing the significance of everyday life, meaning, and symbols becomes pivotal in advocating for the inclusion of pop-culture within the realm of religious studies. (Lynch 2005) Furthermore, the study of pop-culture allows scholars to move away from the context of pop-culture and delve into broader questions regarding the role of religion in society. Studies in this field can provide new understanding of how religions are portrayed and understood, and how religious traditions can be effectively communicated to future generations through storytelling and portrayal. Therefore, examining the intersection of religion and popular culture can provide a comprehensible opportunity for scholars to study the intricacies of everyday life. Ultimately, we can create a deeper understanding of how people construct and navigate the world they inhabit. (Schofield Clark 2007)

Religious violence

Religious violence is a concept that is loaded with assumptions. In order to properly discuss this concept we first need to understand what the concept signifies and what the main assumptions about it are. First the concept of violence. The concept of violence poses a challenge in terms of its definition, as it encompasses a wide range of actions and can be applied to both human and non-human entities. Moreover, its definition often varies on an individual level, reflecting personal perspectives. (Houben and van Kooji 1999) Additionally, violence can encompass diverse experiences, including physical and mental harm, cultural harm, and even the restriction of personal freedom. (Tanner 2007) The concept of religious violence refers to situations where religion is either the focal point or the target of violent actions. (Wellman and Tokuno 2004) Moreover, religious violence is characterized by its motivation, stemming from or in response to religious principles, texts, or the teachings of either side of the conflict. It encompasses acts of violence targeting religious institutions, individuals, objects, or events. It is important to note that religious violence is not limited to actions carried out by religious groups; it also encompasses acts perpetrated against religious groups.

As mentioned, there are certain significant assumptions that stick to the concept of religious violence. These assumptions mainly revolve around the definition of religion. The definition of religion is a subject of some debate within the field of religious studies. This ongoing discussion has urged scholars to exercise caution when using the term "religion" as a tool for research. The ability to analyze and study religion relies on the assumption that it is a distinct and discernible entity with agency. Nevertheless, numerous scholars of religion have raised doubts and questioned this underlying assumption. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Protestant theologian, advocated for the concept of a "religionless Christianity." In his argument, he distinguishes between tangible, worldly aspects of religion, everything

encompassing our understanding of religious views and practices, and the metaphysical belief in a higher power. According to Bonhoeffer, the tangible aspects of religion, which he refers to as "real-world religion," are social constructs and products of human imagination. (Bonhoeffer 1997) Building upon this line of thought, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in his book, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, further emphasized that the concept of religion lacks analytical value as it fails to represent a distinct and independently identifiable entity. Smith argued that religion, without human agency, cannot act autonomously. Therefore, he opted to replace the term "religion" with "cumulative tradition" and "faith" to describe the concrete cultural traditions of religious communities and the internal and external personal views and practices associated with them. (Cantwell Smith 1962)

Talal Asad, a cultural anthropologist, delved deeper into the notion of religion as a social construct. He argued that the term religion was a relatively recent invention in Europe, serving to establish a contrast between the secular and the religious domains. Asad's perspective highlights how the concept of religion, as understood today, emerged within a particular historical and cultural context, reflecting the Eurocentric framing of religious and non-religious domains. (Asad 1993) These arguments collectively highlight the difficult nature of the concept of religion. If one acknowledges that religion is not a distinctly identifiable entity with agency, it raises questions about how one can discuss phenomena such as religious violence. However, Robert Bellah, a sociologist of religion, presented a slightly different perspective on this issue. While he agreed that religion is socially constructed or imagined, he reasoned that it is still possible to see religion as a clearly identifiable entity. Bellah proposed that religion can be understood as a distinct worldview, a particular lens through which people perceive and comprehend the world. He viewed it as a religious experience or dimension within human reality. Based on this viewpoint, Bellah argued that it is feasible to study religion if a scholar would examine this specific dimension of human existence. (Bellah 2011)

Is it possible for religion to be violent? This question stems from the debate on whether religion is a distinctly identifiable entity capable of agency in the section above. If one aligns with Smith and Asad's perspective that religion lacks a concrete essence, it becomes difficult to attribute acts of violence directly to it. Nevertheless, if one adopts Bellah's viewpoint, it may be possible to make such a connection. Mark Juergensmeyer, a scholar of religion, shares Bellah's perspective on the nature of religion. In his book titled *God at War: A Meditation on Religion and Warfare*, Juergensmeyer delves into the perceived connection between religion and war. He claims that war, along with its consequential violence, can be seen as an alternative reality, a view comparable to Bellah's understanding of religion as a distinctly separate worldview: "Both war and religion present an alternate order of existential tension and moral contest that encompass any apparent anomalies in life, such as bombing attacks or the persistence of sinful mortality." (Juergensmeyer 2020, 59) Juergensmeyer further suggests that these parallel realities of war and religion mutually reinforce one another, suggesting that religion can employ war and violence to boost its moral authority. Yet, in his book *Terror in the Mind of God*, he nuances this idea by arguing that the analysis of religious violence must always consider the specific context of that violence:

[...] religion is not innocent. But it does not ordinarily lead to violence. That happens only with the coalescence of a peculiar set of circumstances – political, social, and ideological – when religion becomes fused with violent expressions of social

aspirations, personal pride, and movements for political change. (Juergensmeyer 2003, 10)

In his book, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, theologian, and philosopher William T. Cavanaugh presents a contrasting view to Juergensmeyer's. Cavanaugh builds upon the ideas of Smith and Asad, arguing that religion is not a timeless and universal phenomenon. He continues to argue that Western societies/cultures have created the distinction between religious and secular realms. According to Cavanaugh, Western societies use this vague divide and the concept of religious violence to affirm their moral superiority over nonsecular societies and even justify violence against them. This suggests that the categorization of non-Western societies, which do not separate matters of faith, as irrational, stems from the clash between Western and non-Western worldviews. Cavanaugh suggests that the belief in religion's inherent violence comes from its perceived irrationality, contrasting it with the perceived rationality of Western secular worldviews. This clash of worldviews can then be exploited to legitimize violence against those who cannot be reasoned with. Additionally, Cavanaugh argues that religion should not be solely held responsible for violence. He examines academic arguments that blame religion for violence and identifies three common claims: religion is absolutist, divisive, and insufficiently rational. However, Cavanaugh argues that these arguments fail because according to him violence can arise from various motivations and beliefs, not just religious. Thus, in order to properly understand violence, one needs to include all aspects of the context of that violence, including both secular and nonsecular concepts. The point is not only to give equal attention to secular and religious violence, but to recognize that the distinction between the two is meaningless. To fully understand the factors contributing to violence, it is necessary to move beyond this categorization. (Cavanaugh 2009) The goal of the media analysis at the core of this thesis is to illustrate that popular media contributes to maintaining the idea of religious violence in the public domain. This means that this thesis adheres to the ideas of Cavanaugh and the scholars that precede him in arguing that violence needs to be assessed within its complete context, not just the religious aspects of said context. In other words, I consider religion to be incapable of violence on its own.

Regardless of one's agreement or disagreement with Juergensmeyer or Cavanaugh, it seems to be an undeniable fact that violence and war are inherent parts of human existence, just as religion is, whether in the form of personal faith or organized religious institutions like the Catholic Church. This leads to situations, as Juergensmeyer highlights, where these concepts intersect and mutually reinforce each other. This raises two important questions: how can religion be used to justify violence, and how do religions cope with their association with war and violence? Firstly, religious justification of violence. In his book, *The Justification of Religious Violence*, Steve Clarke claims that Religion is often invoked as a justification for war and violence, he mentions among others the crusades in the near east during the Middle Ages as such religiously invoked violence. Clarke argues that religious justifications for violence often rely on at least one of three common arguments: the notion of a cosmic war between different religions or worldviews, the protection of an individual's afterlife, or the defense of specific religious aspects or values that are seen as unbreakable, such as traditional marriage in Christianity. However, beyond these three arguments, religious justifications for violence are quite similar to secular justifications. While the structure of religious arguments used to justify violence are similar to secular ones, religious perspectives are capable to incorporate a multitude of ideas into these structures. (Clarke 2014)

Furthermore, Clarke delves into two possible explanations for the role of religion in

the justification of violence. The first explanation proposes that religion contributes "anything and everything," suggesting that the justification process is normative and derives from divine norms. In short, morality is entirely derived from religion. The second explanation argues that authentic religion inherently promotes peace, attributing violence to "corrupted religions" and misinterpretations of religious texts. According to this perspective, religious justifications for violent actions always stem from misunderstood dogmas. Clarke himself argues that the role of religion in justifying violence lies somewhere between these two explanations. Religion does provide additional opportunities for justifying acts that are not available to those without religious beliefs. However, not all actions can be justified only through established religious systems. (Clarke 2014)

Secondly, how do religions cope with their association to violence? The most significant theory regarding this problem is the just war theory. It is based on the belief that in certain circumstances, war and violence are necessary to prevent even greater violence. This utilitarian principle can be found in most organized religions. (Niebuhr 1940) According to the just war theory, war and violence are justified when certain conditions are met: there is a moral rationale behind it, it is authorized by a legitimate government, there is a reasonable chance of success, the benefits outweigh the costs, and it is the last resort. These principles have existed in some form within Christianity, the main religion in the so-called rational west since it became the official religion of the Roman Empire. The theory developed as a means to reconcile the peaceful ethics of Christianity with the worldly power it acquired over the centuries. Even today, the principles of the just war theory continue to shape Catholic Christian perspectives on war and violence (Juergensmeyer 2020)

Religion and violence in popular media

The connection between violence, religion, and popular media is not a groundbreaking topic that will be discussed for this first time in this thesis. Scholarly work has been done on this connection in various ways. In order to enhance the context for the analysis conducted in the thesis I will briefly discuss some of the work in this field.

On the sacred power of violence in popular culture by Eric Bain-Selbo

In this chapter Bain-Selbo analyses an apparent link between religious violence and violence in popular culture. He utilizes ideas and views on religion and violence in order to create a better understanding of violence that can be found in his cases of the sport of football and cinematic films by Quentin Tarantino, thus popular culture. Bain-Selbo's starting point, however, is problematic. Without much consideration for nuance, he argues that religion is inherently violent: "They are institutions that are inherently violent. Religion and violence are intertwined. While all violence is not religious, much of it is or at least has religious overtones or dimensions." (Bain-Selbo 2012, 72) This starting point is problematic since it does not take into consideration what authors such as Asad, Cavanaugh, and Smith assert about religion. That is, that religion is not a uniquely definable object that can be understood as the cause of whatsoever. Even if one would disagree with this account, it is a far stretch to claim that almost all violence is or has religious aspects connected to it. From this starting point Bain-Selbo goes on to argue popular culture has replaced religion as the place where violence is ritualized and controlled. Furthermore, he deems violence, or depictions of violence, to be an important and necessary part of human social-psychological life:

“Whether we are watching violence in various sports or actors on television and film, violence continues to be central to our psychic and social lives. It is not gratuitous and barbaric, it is necessary and meaningful.” (Bain-Selbo 2012, 85) Lastly, Bain-Selbo argues that violence in popular media functions in similar ways to the violence in religion, hence why it is capable of replacing it. (Bain-Selbo 2012) Even though the views and arguments of this chapter by Bain-Selbo do mainly not align with the ones in this thesis. It is relevant as an example of how violence is portrayed in popular media and what we can understand through that connection.

Religion and video games: Shooting aliens in cathedrals by Rachel Wagner

In this chapter by Rachel Wagner the focus is not necessarily on religious violence. Rather, it utilizes a case of religiously related violence in the video game *Resistance: Fall of Man* in order to highlight a connection between video games, religious ritual, sacred space, and how people interpret media products:

Resistance: Fall of Man raised the hackles of the Church of England not long after its release due to an intensely violent shootout in the game staged in a perfect digital replica of Manchester Cathedral. The Church responded with anger, [...] The game raises powerful questions about the nature of sacred space in virtual form, about the power of virtual storytelling and ritual, and about player immersion when playing video games. The considerable and carefully considered exchange that took place between the Church of England and Sony reveals for us the intense and as-of-yet unresolved questions that portrayals of sacred space in virtual reality evoke, especially when these sacred spaces appear in violent video games. (Wagner 2012, 119)

Wagner argues that video games and religious rituals are similar in that they are equally capable of inducing “other worlds” through their respective practice. These practices offer the public a possibility of escapism. However, when such virtual other worlds represent real-life sacred spaces, or other sacred aspects, conflicts of interpretation can occur such as with the example given above. Wagner offers the concept of sacred space as it is conceptualized by Mircea Eliade as a tool for understanding the sacred in virtual representations. In short, Eliade suggests that people construct buildings such as the Manchester cathedral in order to recreate, or reflect, their image of heaven. Such sacred spaces function as places of solace within the disorder and unpredictability of earthly existence. With this knowledge it is easier to understand where differences in interpretation concerning the sacred originate from in (visual) virtual media. Another tool that Wagner offers to understand disparities in perspective concerning gaming media is Ian Bogost’s concept of procedural rhetoric. This entails the methods employed by creators of experiences, such as popular media products and rituals, to fill those experiences with processes intended to influence our perception. Procedural rhetoric is particularly valuable as it prompts us to question the specific arguments that a ritual or game is presenting concerning how we should perceive ourselves, the world, and the sacred. (Wagner 2012) Concludingly, Wagner offers several relevant conceptual tools aimed at understanding how popular media products such as video games can shape perspectives on the sacred and other religious aspects/issues.

Monstrous Muslims: Historical Anxieties and Future Trends by Sophia Rose Arjana

In this chapter of the book *Religion and Popular Culture in America* by Bruce David Forbes Jeffrey H. Mahan (editors), Sophia Rose Arjana highlights the structural cultural violence that often befalls Muslims, and Islam, in American (and arguably in western) popular culture. A key concept for understanding this phenomenon is orientalism, first coined by Edward Said in 1978. Orientalism refers to the often-negative representations and attitudes, of and towards societies in the middle east and north Africa. Arjana argues that the negative narrative of depictions of Muslims in popular media focuses on the rescue narrative that features an American hero and Muslim villain. This narrative includes different themes that support negative depictions within different popular media genres. The first underlying theme revolves around portraying Muslims as foreign savages who abduct white women and pose a threat to Western civilization. The association of Muslims with distant lands, harems, palaces, and other exotic symbols also contributes to shaping a particular perception. Films like the Indiana Jones franchise have played a role in establishing these ideas by featuring menacing characters from the Orient, including Muslims, which resonate with American anxieties. Hollywood films, even outside the adventure-fantasy genre, often cast Arabs as villains. Following the events of 9/11, television shows and cinematic movies such as *Homeland* emerged. In such popular culture products Muslims are steadily portrayed as religious, and political, terrorists who want to destabilize America. By utilizing these examples and the concept of Orientalism, Arjana tries to present the argument that popular culture depictions of individuals and religions that differ from our own tend to be incorrect. These portrayals reveal more about the makers of such media than they do about the actual people being represented. Moreover, Arjana asserts that these distorted fictional narratives have tangible consequences for the real individuals belonging to those marginalized groups. (Arjana 2017) While this chapter by Arjana does not offer a contribution to religious violence in popular media in the classical sense, that is depictions of physical harm, it does discuss structural, and cultural violence that is aimed mainly at a religious group, Muslims. Through its use of orientalism and its examples of violent depictions it can aid the broader understanding of violence in the coming analysis.

Method and motivation

In this section I will shortly outline the film analytical methods that will be used in order to analyze the primary sources, *Game of Thrones*, *Kingdom of Heaven*, and *Silence*. Additionally, my motivation for choosing these primary sources will be discussed.

The two main analytical tools that will be used to analyze the primary sources are the narrative approach method and the shot-by-shot, or scene analysis, method. However, before utilizing these tools the primary sources will undergo a preliminary watch without the use of any academic tools. The shot-by-shot method serves as a valuable tool for understanding the narrative, visual, and auditory elements, as well as establishing connections between complex details and overarching patterns within a movie. (Pramaggiore and Wallis 2020) When using this method, the objective is to meticulously analyze a single scene from a film, delving into the distinct qualities of each individual shot. Evaluative judgments are often unnecessary when employing this approach, as the shot-by-shot method mainly relies on illustrative statements. In fact, it is often advantageous to solely describe the specifics of each shot's setting, cinematography, editing, and sound

design. (Pramaggiore and Wallis 2020) According to Marylin Fabe, a film studies scholar and author of the book *Closely Watched Films: An Introduction to the Art of Narrative Film Technique*, the shot-by-shot analysis is the most effective tool for understanding and appreciating the artistry of filmmakers. Fabe argues that viewers who possess training in closely examining individual film sequences are better equipped to perceive and value the visual and auditory complexity of movies. Through precise analysis, the influence that film images, combined with sound, possess over our minds and emotions can be understood. (Fabe 2014)

The narrative approach method focusses on the progression of the storyline throughout the entirety of a movie. A narrative, in this context, refers to a coherent sequence of events unfolding in both space and time. It is not a random collection of elements but rather an organized sequence of events linked by cause and effect. Narratives arrange events in a linear manner that clearly demonstrates to the audience the motivations behind character actions or the outcomes of events in a movie. Unlike the shot-by-shot method, the narrative approach does not need an analysis of each individual shot. Instead, one can develop ideas by identifying patterns that appear across multiple scenes in the movie. These patterns are there to highlight the key concepts the filmmaker intends to communicate. When using the narrative approach, it is also helpful to consider scattered details throughout the film that enhance, or add to, the primary narrative or provide insight into character or plot development. (Pramaggiore and Wallis 2020) A combination of the discussed film analysis methods will ensure that both the primary narrative and the details, relating to religious violence, of the primary sources will come to light. If only one of the methods would be used there would be a risk of either overlooking the narrative or, on the other hand, several important details.

The selection of the three primary sources serves multiple purposes. Firstly, all of these sources are relatively modern, with *Kingdom of Heaven* being the oldest (2005), followed by the *Game of Thrones* seasons five and six (2015-2016), and *Silence* (2016). This modernity allows for easier comparisons between them. Additionally, these sources represent post-9/11 popular media products, which is relevant in terms of their portrayal of religious violence. Furthermore, despite all three sources being fictional stories, they belong to different cinematic genres. *Kingdom of Heaven* is a historical epic based on real historical events, making it semi-fictional. *Game of Thrones* is an entirely fictional high-fantasy drama series, and *Silence* is a historical fiction drama based on a novel from 1966. The diverse genres of these sources, along with their distinct settings and time periods, offer varying representations of religion, culture, humanity, and consequently, religious violence. The subsequent chapter will commence with the analysis of the first source, *Kingdom of Heaven*, followed by the analysis of the other sources, and ultimately, a conclusion.

III. A Kingdom of heaven or earth?

Kingdom of Heaven, a historical epic film, was directed and produced by Ridley Scott with a screenplay by William Monahan. The movie made its cinematic debut in 2005, followed by a director's cut version released a few months later. For the purpose of analysis, this thesis will be focusing on the original theatrical release. Set during the era of the Third Crusade, the film presents a fictionalized account of events and characters, centering on the efforts of Balian of Ibelin to protect the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem against powers from within and Ayyubid Sultan Saladin. To provide a comprehensive analysis of the movie, it is first

necessary, for the sake of context, to summarize its plot.

In medieval France, Balian, a blacksmith grieving over his wife's recent suicide and the loss of their unborn child, encounters a group of Crusaders who visit his village. Their leader, claiming to be Balian's father, Baron Godfrey, invites him to join them to the Holy Land, but Balian refuses. However, after discovering that the town priest was responsible for desecrating his wife's body, Balian confronts and kills him. Fueled by guilt and seeking redemption, Balian decides to accompany his newfound father and the Crusaders to Jerusalem. Their journey is met with opposition when they clash with soldiers sent to arrest Balian, resulting in casualties and Godfrey being wounded by an arrow. Arriving in Messina, they face Guy de Lusignan, a prospective king of Jerusalem, who intends to undermine the fragile alliance between the Crusader states and Sultan Saladin. Prior to their departure, Godfrey knights Balian, appointing him the new Baron of Ibelin, and implores him to serve the King of Jerusalem and protect the vulnerable, succumbing to his arrow wound soon after.

While sailing for the Holy Land, Balian's ship is wrecked in a storm, leaving him as the sole survivor. He embarks on a journey to Jerusalem on foot and engages in a skirmish with a Muslim cavalier over a horse. Balian triumphs over the cavalier but spares his servant, who becomes his guide to Jerusalem. In the city, Balian displays mercy by releasing the servant, which earns him respect among the Saracens. He swiftly familiarizes himself with Jerusalem's political landscape, including King Baldwin IV, Tiberias the Marshal of Jerusalem, and Princess Sibylla, King Baldwin's sister, who is married to Guy.

Balian travels to his inherited estate at Ibelin. In Ibelin he further proves his virtue by helping the people of Ibelin with revitalizing the area. Sibylla visits him, and they develop a romantic relationship. Meanwhile, Guy and his templar ally, Reynald of Châtillon, provoke Saladin by attacking Saracen caravans. In retaliation, Saladin besieges Reynald's castle. Responding to the king's request, Balian defends the castle and its nearby villagers, despite being heavily outnumbered. Following a fierce battle that culminates in the defeat of the Crusaders, Balian encounters the servant he previously freed, who reveals himself to be Saladin's chancellor. In gratitude for Balian's earlier act of mercy, Balian is released. Subsequently, Saladin and Baldwin arrive with their armies and negotiate a truce. Reynald and Guy are punished, and a weakened Baldwin urges Balian to marry Sibylla and assume control of the army. However, Balian refuses, as executing Guy and the Templars is a prerequisite for such an arrangement. Baldwin eventually dies, and Sibylla, his heir, then passes the crown to her husband Guy.

As king, Guy declares war on the Saracens and attempts to assassinate Balian, who narrowly survives. He also releases Reynald, leading to the latter's murder of Saladin's sister. Balian arrives shortly before the crusader army departs. Despite Balian's advice to remain near Jerusalem's water sources, Guy marches the Crusaders into battle, resulting in their defeat by the Saracens in the desert. Saladin captures Guy, executes Reynald, and marches toward Jerusalem. Tiberias departs for Cyprus, while Balian remains to protect the people. After a deadly three-day siege Saladin negotiates with Balian. Balian asserts that if Saladin does not accept his terms, he will destroy Jerusalem. Saladin agrees to let the Christians depart safely, and he and Balian contemplate whether it would be better to leave the city in ruins, eliminating the cause of future conflict. The Christians evacuate Jerusalem and Balian eventually finds Sibylla, who renounces her claim to the throne, and together they depart for France.

During the short epilogue, English knights on their way to the Holy Land visit Balian,

now renowned as the defender of Jerusalem, in his village. Balian declines the English king's offer to join their army. The movie closes with a shot of Balian passing by his wife's grave and a subsequent outro text stating to the viewer: "nearly a thousand years later, peace in the Kingdom of Heaven still remains elusive." (Scott, *Kingdom of Heaven* 2005)

Analysis

The story of *Kingdom of Heaven* is filled with not-so-subtle references to, and images of, religion and religious violence as we have defined it for this thesis. This might be evident for anyone when taking just one glance at the movie's poster, title, and plot, since in essence, we are dealing with a movie that is depicting the outcomes of the second crusade (the crusades that are referred to here are those in the near east), and the lead up to the third crusade. However, as is discernable from the discussion on religious violence between Juergensmeyer and Cavanaugh, it is quite debatable if religion actually has the agency to cause violence. Therefore, the question is whether *Kingdom of Heaven* is actually illustrating religious violence, or perhaps something else.

The first minor hint at a broader motivational context for the events of this movie other than religion appears in the first moments of the movie. The movie begins with a short textual exposition: "It is almost 100 years since Christian armies from Europe seized Jerusalem. Europe suffers in the grip of repression and poverty. Peasant and lord alike flee to the Holy Land in search for fortune or salvation. [...]" (Scott, *Kingdom of Heaven* 2005, 01:00-01:28) The crusades are often understood as being religiously motivated military campaigns. (Armstrong 1999) However, this exposition offers at least one cause for going on a crusade, or to the holy land in general, that is not directly linked to religion, fortune. The understanding of actions in a broader context than only religion, as Cavanaugh argues, (Cavanaugh 2009) will be a recurring, major theme throughout the movie.

The first act of violence occurs when the village priests is overseeing the burial of Balian's deceased wife. When it becomes clear that she committed suicide the priest orders the beheading of her body, additionally he steals the cross necklace she was wearing: "Wait. she was a suicide. Cut of her head." (Scott, *Kingdom of Heaven* 2005, 02:30-03:50) This situation comes to a climax in a later scene with the priest and Balian:

They would have taken you to Jerusalem, away from this... all this. I am your priest Balian. I tell you, God has abandoned you. I swear to you, you will have no peace so long as you stay here. No man ever needed a new world more. The village does not want you. If you take the crusade, you may relieve your wife's position in hell. I put in delicately. She was a suicide, she is in hell. Though what she does there without a head... [The priest smiles. Upon noticing his wife's necklace around the priest's neck Balian kills the priest and reclaims the necklace]. (Scott, *Kingdom of Heaven* 2005, 08:39-10:26)

Balian ultimately leaves for Jerusalem with the crusaders. It is clear that he goes not for wealth, fame, or to fight Muslims. Rather, he goes to erase his, and his wife's, sins. However, since he murdered a priest the local bishop sent out a warrant for his arrest. Instead of following the local law and repenting as such, many more are murdered in order to keep Balian safe. This passage of scenes illustrates multiple ideas. Firstly, it positions the first religious authority, the priest, the viewers encounter as an unpleasant man that seemingly uses religious ideas for personal gains. Secondly, it demonstrates that violence is somehow justified under the right conditions. Lastly, it continues on the idea mentioned in the opening

exposition, people using a pilgrimage to the holy land as a tool for personal reasons, whether that be salvation or wealth. These ideas connect with the theories and concepts on several levels. The portrayal of religion, and religious actors, in a seemingly negative light is reminiscent of Cavanaugh's view on religion versus secularism. People who act through religions motivations are irrational, their emotions and potential violence is chaotic, while people who act through secular motivations are rational, controlled, and often good. (Cavanaugh 2009) While this reasoning is not entirely compatible with this sequence, it will develop into a stronger theme throughout the movie. The seemingly arbitrary justification of violence that is presented may be linked to the just war theory which states that violence can be justified under certain conditions, such as for example violence to prevent more violence. (Niebuhr 1940) Furthermore, the fact that the killing of men of the church is seemingly not problematic potentially illustrates that religion is not the be all and end all when it comes down to the actions of these religious knights, their ulterior motives are more important than religious authority.

The next section of the movie is used to establish the relations between different characters, between Christians and Muslims in the holy land, and the justification for the current state of these relationships. Additionally, a crucial new theme is introduced that is linked to ideas on religion and rationality discussed previously. It becomes apparent that, perhaps, religion is not the source of good, and good action. Rather, it is humans that need to act on what they believe to be virtuous, not blindly follow religious dogmas. A first clue of the former comes from a priest near Messina: "to kill an infidel is not murder it is the path to heaven." (Scott, *Kingdom of Heaven* 2005, 19:24-19:31) On his sick bed, Godfrey, explains to Balian what his goal in the holy land is, or better how he should strive to be a good man:

Balian: what could a king ask of a man like me? Godfrey: a better world than has ever been seen. A kingdom of conscience. A kingdom of heaven. There is peace between Christian and Muslim. We live together. Or, between Saladin and the king, we try. Did you think that lay at the end of crusade? (Scott, *Kingdom of Heaven* 2005, 22:02-22:32)

With this Godfrey narrates what he believes to be good: peace and harmony. He makes no reference to religion, or any reasoning behind the crusade. Rather, he insinuates that even though the crusade was violent, it led to this peaceful status quo. The theme of being a good person instead of a good Christian/Muslims is further strengthened by the remark we encountered in the introduction of this thesis:

Balian: At any rate, it seems... I have lost my religion. Crusader: I put no stock in religion. By the word "religion", I've seen the lunacy of fanatics of every denomination be called the "Will of God". I've seen too much religion in the eyes of too many murderers. Holiness is in the right action and courage on behalf of those who cannot defend themselves. And goodness - what God desires - [pointing at his head then heart] is here and here. And what you decide to do every day, you will be a good man, or not. (Scott, *Kingdom of Heaven* 2005, 39:55-40:34)

"I put not stock in religion." Perhaps the most concrete evidence that this movie does not see a direct relation between being a good and being religious. Rather, it is quite the opposite. Religion is linked to lunacy and murderers. This idea, again, resembles the ideas of Cavanaugh, who argues that some make a dangerous distinction between the rational secular, and the irrational religious: "They [irrational other] have not yet learned to remove

the dangerous influence of religion from political life. Their violence is therefore irrational and fanatical. Our violence, being secular, is rational, peacemaking, and sometimes regrettably necessary to contain their violence.” (Cavanaugh 2009, 4) The movie insinuates that perhaps one should not be too religious since that might lead to lunacy and violence. This view is, according to Cavanaugh, a modern view that western societies created in order to justify their superiority over, and violence against, among others Islamic nations. (Cavanaugh 2009) Since this is a modern view it, historically speaking, does not belong in the setting of the holy land in the eleventh century. I

Another concept that is linked to this opposition between secularity and religion, or west and east, is orientalism. While orientalism is not specifically focused on religion, it does feature this opposition and expands on it with cultural and racial aspects. (Arjana 2017) Lastly, and quite puzzling, is that this scene illustrates the existence of the idea of religious violence in this movie. The templar in question clearly links certain acts of violence to religion. However, he himself is a knight that is ordered by the head of an institutionalized religion to fight other believers in the name of a God. As we will later see this link between violence and religion is not as certain as it seems to this templar.

As the relations between different parties in the movie are further established it becomes clear that in practice there are two sides, which in essence build upon the established narrative of religion versus the more secular. The “good” Christians, among which Godfrey, Balian, the king and his followers, and the “good” Saladin and his main advisor. They are portrayed as being good because they seek peace instead of war: “[speaking about Saladin]: He could win a war if he goes to war, and he’s daily given cause for war by fanatics newly from Europe, [...], But Saladin and the king between them would make a better world.” (Scott, *Kingdom of Heaven* 2005, 43:31-43:52), and because they see Christians and Muslims as equals:

“[speaking about Muslim prayer]: Subhena Rabi Alladin. [meaning] Praise be to God. It is proper to praise him. Balian: Sounds like our prayers.”, and “He [the king] holds Jerusalem as a place for prayer for all faiths, as the Muslims did before we came. [Templars being hung] These men are templars, they killed Arabs. So, they are dying for what the pope would command them to do? Yes. But not Christ, I think. Nor this king. (Scott, *Kingdom of Heaven* 2005, 23:04-23:14, 41:05-41:33)

The opposing side being those Christians and Muslims who seek war instead of peace and seemingly use religious justifications to get it. This group is often signified by what you could call their catchphrase: “God wills it!”. To claim that the former group is secular incorrect. However, they do adhere more to a secular, or humanist, mindset. Namely, their worldview seems to focus more on the worldly, and the human, specifically on virtuous human action, than the divine. E.g., helping the poor, defending the innocent, being peaceful. The opposition between these two groups becomes most apparent during a heated argument at court between both sides:

Reynald, with the templars, have broken the king’s pledge of peace. Saladin will come into this kingdom— [Templar interrupts] Tiberias knows more than a Christian should about Saladin’s intentions. [Tiberias to templar]: That I would rather live with men than kill them, is certainly why you are alive. [Templar] That sort of Christianity has its uses, I suppose. [Tiberias] We must not go to war with Saladin! We do not want it and we may not win it. [Templars] Blasphemy! An army of Jesus Christ, which bears his holy cross,

cannot be beaten. [...] There must be war. God wills it! (Scott, *Kingdom of Heaven* 2005, 59:55-1:00:43)

The templar refers to being peaceful as “that sort of Christianity” inferring that there are more types of Christianity, or perhaps that being peaceful is not truly Christian. The templars readily invoke God and Jesus Christ to justify their actions, while the other side simply focusses on peace. A final theme that is used to differentiate between the two groups is that of racism, or in a broader sense as discussed, orientalism. On multiple occasions the templars show their hatred towards Muslims, and Saracens more generally. They consider Christians who are allies to Muslims as traitors, Muslims are referred to as being untrustworthy, and irrational. This seemingly racist view is strongly linked to the concept of orientalism coined by Edward Said. Orientalism refers to the condescending view from the Western world towards Middle Eastern societies. As stated by Said, the West tends to oversimplify and stereotype these societies as lacking progress. Implicit in this view is the belief that Western society is advanced, rational, flexible, and superior. (Said 1994)

The following and final section of the movie focusses mainly on the prelude of war, the war itself, and the aftermath. Throughout it multiple recurring themes, and one crucial new theme, are illustrated. The latest, and arguably most relevant for this thesis, theme is that of political, religious, and military pragmatism, or the use of religion as tool for other goals. The first clear example of this theme can be recognized shortly before the argument at court discussed above. The templars attack a Muslim caravan. Their leader, Guy, is anxious that his will bring him in political turmoil, however, his companion, Reynald, makes it clear that he will be to blame, Guy was not there, he was praying. This attack on the caravan seems to have one major motivation, namely provoking the Muslims in order to start a war which will politically favor the templars. When confronted with this act of violence at court the templars claim: “It was no caravan. It was an army headed to Bethlehem to desecrate the birthplace of our lord [Jesus].” (Scott, *Kingdom of Heaven* 2005, 59:49-59:55) A clear example of using religious justifications to disguise the true political, or power, motivation behind this act of violence. This act of violence does indeed provoke the Muslims who march on a crusader stronghold. This seemingly religious conflict is rather a political one, peace agreements were broken. It does not lead to war, the king and Saladin still agree on peace. Saladin offers an insight into his decision making when an advisor confronts him:

[Advisor]: Why did we retire? Why? God did not favor him. God, alone, determines the results of battles. [Saladin]: The results of battles are determined by God, but also by preparation, numbers, the absence of disease and the availability of water. [...]. How many battles did God win for the Muslims before I came? That is, before God determined that I should come. [Advisor]: Few enough. That’s because we were sinful. [Saladin]: It is because you were unprepared. [Advisor]: If you think that way, you shall not be king for long. (Scott 2005, *Kingdom of Heaven* 1:15:20-1:16:14)

Saladin illustrates that he, as the “good” Christians, has an earthly focus. He is pragmatic and does not blindly follow what his religion might advise him. Furthermore, he establishes that good things have happened to Muslims because of him, not just because of God. As the templars, Saladin’s advisor considers such views blasphemous. His only point of reference is his religion and his God. This reaffirms the idea the religion is irrational and that one should focus on themselves and on earthly matters. Additionally, this scene illustrates that Saladin

also does not consider this to be a truly religious conflict. He came because agreements were broken, and he withdrew because peace terms were reached.

What follows are multiple political plots for power in Jerusalem. The king offers Balian to be commander of his armies and to marry his sister so that he might become king, however, in order for this to happen the crusaders need to be killed. Balian refuses this immoral, but perhaps politically wise, offer. Shortly after the king dies and the roles are reversed. The templar, Guy, becomes king, attempts to assassinate Balian and again uses violence to provoke the Muslims. Before marching to war, it is made explicitly clear that the templars want power and glory as Balian urges them to defend instead of attack. Their motivations are not religious: “[Templar] We should meet the enemies of God. [...] [“Good” Christian]: Then you do so without my knights. [Templar]: Then I shall have the glory, Tiberias. You had your years and years ago. It’s time for mine.” Tiberias later reaffirms this sentiment: “First I thought we were fighting for God. Then I realized we were fighting for wealth and land. I was ashamed.” (Scott, *Kingdom of Heaven* 2005, 1:31:21-1:31:47, 1:37:54-1:38:06)

Lastly, during and after the defense of Jerusalem it is again made clear that religious, ethnic, and social background do not matter. Rather, actions define a person, and because of that, different religious followers, and different religions, are put on equal footing:

[Balian]: What is Jerusalem? Your holy places lie over the Jewish place the romans pulled down. The Muslims places of worship lie over yours. Which is more holy? The wall, the mosque? The sepulcher? Who has claim? No one has claim. All have claim. [Bishop]: That is Blasphemy. [Balian]: We defend this city, not to protect its stones, but the people living within these walls. (Scott, *Kingdom of Heaven* 2005, 1:41:59-1:42:42)

Balian reiterates this view on action by knighting many commoners. All that matters is that they have good intentions. Additionally, through this, the idea of religion as being an entity with agency is countered since only humans have agency and control over that power.

Discussion

Kingdom of Heaven illustrates multiple concepts and theories that were discussed in the previous chapter. However, most prevalent, and relevant for this thesis are those of religious violence and mediatization. The connection to the theory of mediatization is relatively straightforward. The creators of this movie have used, religious issues, aspects of religion, and their views on religion in general to create this media product. Through it they share their views with a broad audience who can in turn use it to reshape their own views on these issues, aspects, and ideas.

Concerning religious violence. On the first glance this movie seems illustrate a stereotypical example of religious violence, namely, crusader violence. As mentioned, the crusades are often referred to as such. (Armstrong 1999) However, what becomes clear after a thorough analysis is that this movie recognizes the nature of the violent events depicted in it as non-religious. Rather, it is understood as violence in the context of a geo-political conflict, with elements of racism, and personal glory. Furthermore, it establishes that human action is what leads to violence, not religion. These points connect to the views of Cavanaugh who understand religion as an entity that lacks agency and therefore cannot be

the cause of violence. (Cavanaugh 2009) However, it is important to note that there is another connection made between religion and violence in *Kingdom of Heaven*. While it does not attribute the violent actions solely to religion, it does suggest that people who blindly use religion as their reference to the world are more irrational and therefore more prone to violence. This idea can be linked to the views of Juergensmeyer who argues that there is a violent essence to religion, and it can thus more easily lead to violence:

The question is whether religious terrorism is different from other kinds. In this book it will become clear that, at least in some cases, religion does make a difference. Some of these differences are readily apparent— the transcendent moralism with which such acts are justified, for instance, and the ritual intensity with which they are committed. Other differences are more profound and go to the very heart of religion. The familiar religious images of struggle and transformation—concepts of cosmic war—have been employed in this-worldly social struggles. When these cosmic battles are conceived as occurring on the human plane, they result in real acts of violence. (Juergensmeyer 2003, 9)

The view that religion is irrational and therefore dangerous is clearly indicated by the fact that the “good guys” more often refer to pragmatical, worldly, and personal views, while the “bad guys” most often refer to religion. In this we can recognize an element of orientalism, people who adhere to religion are irrational, unpredictable, and dangerous. (Arjana 2017)

IV. Fan(t)a(s)tical violence

Game of Thrones, developed by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss for HBO, is an American fantasy drama television series. It is an adaptation of George R. R. Martin's epic fantasy novel series titled *A Song of Ice and Fire*, with the first book known as *A Game of Thrones*. The fictional world of *Game of Thrones* is set across the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros and the vast continent of Essos. The series depicts multiple plot lines. The primary story arc revolves around a tumultuous war for succession, where various contenders vie for control of the Iron Throne within the Seven Kingdoms. Alongside this power struggle, noble families also seek independence from the central authority. Another focal point involves the actions of the exiled heir to reclaim the throne. The third plotline delves into the imminent threat of a harsh winter and the mythical creatures and resilient peoples inhabiting the treacherous North. Overall, *Game of Thrones* depicts a complex narrative with political intrigue, personal ambitions, and supernatural elements. (Benioff and Weiss, *Game of Thrones* 2011-2019)

This analysis will focus on the religious presence in the *Game of Thrones*. Specifically, on that of the Sparrows, or Faith Militant, a militant religious organization that plays a political and religious role in season five and six of the tv-series. To provide a comprehensive analysis of the tv-series, it is first necessary to understand the context of this analysis. Therefore, I will start with a short outline of the information and plot concerning the Sparrows, or faith militant.

The Faith Militant is a military organization associated with the dominant religion in Westeros known as the Faith of the Seven. In the tv-series *Game of Thrones* the Faith Militant does not exist at first. It had been disbanded 300 years prior by a previous king, who took such action following a devastating conflict between the ruling power and the Faith Militant. (Martin, Garcia and Antonsson, *The world of ice and fire* 2014) In the TV series, the Faith Militant is commonly referred to as Sparrows. The Sparrows are portrayed as a modest

order primarily composed of commoners. They serve as soldiers of the faith, safeguarding other believers as they travel through the kingdom, practicing their religious beliefs. The Sparrows are characterized by their humble appearance, dressed in cloths and wielding meager weapons which makes them resemble beggars. (Benioff and Weiss, *Game of Thrones* 2011-2019) The Faith Militant adheres to the Faith of the Seven, the predominant religion in Westeros. This religion centers around the worship of a single God who manifests in seven different aspects: The Father, The Mother, The Warrior, The Smith, The Maiden, The Crone, and The Stranger. (Martin, *A feast for crows* 2005) The Faith of the Seven operates under a hierarchical structure, with the leader of the religion holding the title of the High Septon. (Martin, Garcia and Antonsson, *The world of ice and fire* 2014)

During the fifth season of *Game of Thrones* the Sparrows are introduced. Ser Kevan Lannister informs his niece, Queen Cersei Lannister, that his son Lancel has joined this religious group. Led by Lancel, a group of Sparrows enter a brothel and discovers that the High Septon frequents it in secret. Lancel confronts the outraged High Septon, accusing him of defiling the Faith of the Seven. The Sparrows shamefully expose the High Septon, stripping him of his clothes and parading him naked through the streets. Angered, the High Septon complains at the Small Council (advisory council), seeking retribution against the High Sparrow, the leader of the Sparrows. Queen Cersei, however, decides to personally meet the High Sparrow and finds him to be a humble monk dressed in coarse robes, barefoot, and selflessly serving food to the underprivileged. The High Sparrow thinks Cersei has come to arrest him, but to his surprise, she shares that she has imprisoned the High Septon. Cersei emphasizes the need for unity between the Crown and the Faith to restore order amidst the ongoing war's chaos. Cersei manipulates her son, King Tommen, into appointing the High Sparrow as the new High Septon. Cersei informs the High Sparrow that Tommen has reinstated the Faith Militant to enforce the Faith's justice throughout the city. The Faith Militant takes to the streets of King's Landing, targeting establishments such as taverns and brothels. (Benioff and Weiss, *Game of Thrones* 2011-2019)

Under Lancel's command, the Sparrows arrest Ser Loras Tyrell for his same-sex relationships. During Loras's trial, his sister, Queen Margaery Tyrell, testifies in his defense. However, a witness accuses Margaery of lying, leading to the Sparrows apprehending Loras and arresting Margaery as well. King Tommen, fearing the escalation of violence, does nothing. Later, the High Sparrow exposes Cersei's own transgressions after Lancel confesses his sins, including his past sexual relationship with Cersei and their involvement in the murder of the former king. In the season's finale, Cersei partially confesses her sins and is subjected to a walk of atonement. Stripped of her clothes, she is paraded through the streets while being subjected to mockery of the common people. A Septa (a nun) accompanies her, ringing a bell and repeatedly shouting "Shame!" (Benioff and Weiss, *Game of Thrones* 2011-2019)

Season six opens with the High Sparrow and Margaery in a cell. Subsequently, the High Sparrow holds a meeting with Ser Jaime Lannister and King Tommen. Tommen insists on seeing his wife, but the High Sparrow stresses that Margaery confess first. Ser Jaime threatens the High Sparrow's life. The High Sparrow warns Jaime about the power of the unified Sparrows, stating that although they may be individually weak, together they possess the strength to overthrow empires. Tommen later has a private meeting with the High Sparrow who reveals that Margaery is expected to undergo a walk of atonement. Jaime, along with Kevan Lannister and Olenna Tyrell, devises a plan to bring a Tyrell force into the city to confront the Sparrows and secure the release of Margaery and Loras Tyrell. Led by

Lord Mace Tyrell, the Tyrell troops enter the city and meet with Jaime. They march towards the Sept of Baelor, confronting the High Sparrow. However, the High Sparrow reveals that Margaery has successfully converted King Tommen to the Faith, effectively aligning the Crown with the Faith. Tommen proclaims a new holy alliance between the Crown and the Faith. Tommen, influenced by the High Sparrow, dismisses his uncle Jaime from his guard for opposing the Faith, claiming it was also an affront to the Crown. (Benioff and Weiss, *Game of Thrones* 2011-2019)

During the subsequent court gathering in the throne room, Tommen announces that trial by combat is now illegal, deeming it corrupt. He declares that the trials of Cersei and Ser Loras Tyrell will be held with the High Sparrow himself serving as one of the seven judges, as was done historically. The nobility of King's Landing assembles at the Sept of Baelor for the trials. Ser Loras confesses his sins and commits to serving the Seven, joining the Sparrows. However, Cersei fails to appear. Concerned, Margaery urges everyone to flee, but they are denied by the Sparrows. As the High Sparrow watches, an explosion rips through the Sept of Baelor, obliterating it. Cersei successfully eliminates her enemies, but her son Tommen, overwhelmed by grief, takes his own life. (Benioff and Weiss, *Game of Thrones* 2011-2019)

Analysis

Religion is an important aspect of the world of *Game of Thrones*. Numerous distinct religions exist with their own deities, traditions, and rituals. While other religions in *Game of Thrones* are implicitly linked to violence, the violence used by the sparrows is arguably the most explicit and memorable example of such alleged religious violence. On the surface it indeed does appear that the extreme violence the sparrows use is purely religiously motivated. Therefore, it would not be difficult to understand if most casual viewers of *Game of Thrones* would argue that in this case, religion is violent, and therefore can be used by fundamentalists such as the sparrows. However, the question is whether that truly is the case, and if so, how can that be understood in light of the academic discussion on religious violence between Juergensmeyer and Cavanaugh. This sub-chapter will analyze and discuss the fifth and sixth seasons of *Game of Thrones* in order to answer these questions.

The sparrows are introduced in the first episode of season five. Two important nobles share their view on the rise of the sparrows and the current dominant view regarding religion: [Kevan]: “they call themselves “sparrows”. Bloody fanatics. Religion has its place, of course, but at a certain point... [Cersei]: I’m sure he’ll (Lancel) grow out of it, whatever it is.” (Benioff and Weiss, *Game of Thrones: The wars to come* 2015, 27:43-27:58) Kevan and Cersei illustrate two important views that are relevant for this analysis. One, they put into words what has been clear throughout the previous seasons of the show: religion, or the main faith in Westeros (the faith of the seven), does not play a significant role in the politics of the royal court. Rather, most, such as Cersei and Kevan, see it as an obligatory part of formal proceedings but nothing more. Secondly, Kevan refers to the sparrows as “bloody fanatics”, reaffirming that he considers religion as something passive, something that people adhere to but should not be too fanatical about. In other words, religion, or the divine, is not to be prioritized over worldly matters. However, the subject of their conversation, Lancel, disagrees with this and explains his connection to his faith: “[Lancel]: I’m a different person now. I found peace in the light of the Seven. You [Cersei] can too. They [the seven aspects of the deity] watch over all of us, ready to dole out mercy... or justice. Their world is at hand.” (Benioff and Weiss, *Game of Thrones: The wars to come* 2015, 29:06-29:37) In doing so he

highlights a dichotomy of religious mercy and justice that will be prevalent throughout the seasons, and a view quite opposite to that of Kevan and Cersei, namely, that the world belongs, or should belong, to the gods.

The first instance of violence, or justice as it is often referred to by the sparrows, is depicted in episode three of season five. The high Septon of the faith is caught in a brothel by a group of sparrows who drag him out and parade him through the streets naked as punishment for his sins: “[Lancel]: You have profaned our faith, the faith of our fathers and forefathers. [Septon]: I am the high Septon of the—[Lancel]: You are a sinner. And you shall be punished.” (Benioff and Weiss, *Game of Thrones: High Sparrow* 2015, 41:37-41:52) Without much context surrounding the sparrows in these early episodes it seems clear that this violence stems from their interpretation of religious rules, they consider the high Septon a sinner because he does not act in accordance with religious morality. This sense of justice can be traced back to one of the seven aspects of their deity, the father. The father deals out justice, the mother deals out mercy. This seems to indicate that violence, through justice, is an inherent part of the religion of the faith of the seven. The idea that aspects of religion are inherently violent links strongly to Juergensmeyer’s views on religion: “Within the histories of religious traditions – from biblical wars to crusading ventures and great acts of martyrdom – violence has lurked as a shadowy presence. It has colored religion’s darker, more mysterious symbols. Images of death have never been far from the heart of religion’s power to stir the imagination.” (Juergensmeyer 2003, 6) This idea is reinforced by another aspect of the seven, the stranger which represents death itself. (Martin, Garcia and Antonsson 2014) Thus, it seems clear that death and violence are inherent to the dominant faith in this analysis.

As a response to this violence Cersei seeks out the leader of the sparrows. This is the first scene in which it becomes clear that the sparrows also deal in mercy. The High sparrow is helping and feeding the homeless while he speaks with Cersei. Another important note to take away from their conversation is their respective motivation for their actions. Cersei, who earlier displayed no interest in religion, displays a devout interest in religion: “[Cersei]: The faith and the crown are the two pillars that hold up this world. One collapses, so does the other. We must do everything necessary to protect one another.” The High Sparrow illustrates his assumed humbleness: “[High Sparrow]: Well, I tell them [his followers] no one’s special, and they think I’m special for telling them so.” However, he also makes a subtle hint at his goals and true views while referring to the nobility and wealthy: “[High Sparrow]: Hypocrisy is a boil. Lancing a boil is never pleasant.” (Benioff and Weiss, *Game of Thrones: High Sparrow* 2015, 46:43-46:46, 45:21-45:24, 45:52-45:54) Throughout this analysis it will become clear that Cersei uses the sparrows, and thus religion, as a tool for her political goals. The High Sparrow on the other hand seems to have purely religious motivations, however, his goals ultimately seem to be political, or power based, as well. The main difference between the two sides being their view and interpretation of religion. This utilization of religion and the differing interpretations, which will develop further during the seasons, indicates that it is human agency, and not religion which has no agency, that is the cause of the violence depicted in *Game of Thrones*. Cantwell Smith, and in extension Cavanaugh, would agree with this view as he argues that the concept of religion does not represent one independent identifiable entity. For Smith this implies that apart from human agency religion could not do anything on its own. (Cantwell Smith 1962) Cavanaugh agrees with this as he argues that religion, and thus religious violence, needs to be understood in the broader context of human social life. (Cavanaugh 2009)

The next conversation between Cersei and the High Sparrow, now High Septon, continues on the line of the previous. However, much less subtle:

[C]: May I offer you some wine your holiness? [HS]: No. [C]: The old High-Septon would have asked the vintage. [HS]: I could say that our minds are temples to the seven and should be kept pure. But the truth is I don't like the taste. How may I serve? [C]: all over Westeros we hear of septs being burned, silent sisters raped, bodies of holy men piled in the streets. [HS]: Wars teach people to obey the sword, not the gods. [C]: Perhaps the gods need a sword of their own. In the days before the Targaryens [previous dynasty], the faith militant dispensed the justice of the seven. [HS]: well, the faith militant was disarmed more than two centuries ago. [C]: If I explain their holy purpose to my son the king, I have no doubt he will sign a decree arming the believers you felt worthy. [HS]: An army that defends the bodies and souls of the common people? [C]: An army in service to the gods themselves. And to you, of course, as the chosen representative of the seven. [HS]: An honor I never expected. Or, indeed, ever wished for. [C]: Which is why you were chosen. You and I both know how the world works. Too often the wicked are the wealthiest, beyond the reach of justice. The king himself cannot always punish those who deserve it most. [HS]: All sinners are equal before the gods. [C]: What would you say if I told you of a great sinner in our very midst? Shielded by gold and privilege. [HS]: May the father judge him justly. (Benioff and Weiss, Game of Thrones: Sons of the harpy 2015)

Cersei uses religious rhetoric, and the recent violence and chaos in the realm as tools in order to sway the High Sparrow. However, most importantly, she gives him “an army in service to the gods themselves.”, implying that indeed this army is of religious nature. Furthermore, the High Sparrow reiterates his desire for justice for sinners, and mercy for the common people. Here we can subtly see his worldly views. He sees the nobility and the wealthy as sinners, even though they might not be as such, and he sees the common people as needing help and mercy, even though they might be sinners as well. It seems that the High Sparrow uses religious motivations and rhetoric to punish those he, not the gods, feels are evil.

Another noble-woman, Lady Olenna, views the High Sparrow in a similar manner as I have discussed, she attempts to get the High Sparrow to admit his ulterior motives:

[O]: A man of the people, is that your game? It's an old game. Dull and unconvincing. A man of the people who does Cersei's dirty work for her. [HS]: The people always do the dirty work. O: [...] I can smell a fraud from a mile away. [...] I am here for my grandson and granddaughter. [HS]: Your grandson and granddaughter swore sacred vows and lied. The father judges us all. Sons of high lords, sons of fishermen. If you break his laws, you will be punished. [...] [O]: What is it you want? Gold? [...] [HS]: But I'm telling you a simple truth. I serve the gods. The gods demand justice. [O]: how do they communicate their demands? By raven or horse? [HS]: By the holy text, the seven-pointed star. If you don't have one in your library, I'll give you my own. [O]: I've read the seven-pointed star. [HS]: Then you'll remember the passages concerning buggery and perjury. Your grandchildren will be punished in the same manner as anyone who breaks the sacred laws. [O]: Half the men, women, and children in this foul city break the sacred laws. You live among murderers, thieves, and rapists. And yet you punish Loras for shagging some perfumed ponce. And Margaery for defending her brother? [HS]: Tes, the gods laws must be applied to all equally. [O]: If its equality you want, so be it. When house Tyrell stops sending our crops to the capital, everyone here will starve. And ill make sure the

hungry know who's to blame. [HS]: Have you ever sowed the field, lady Olenna? Have you ever reaped the grain? Has anyone in house Tyrell? A lifetime of wealth and power has left you blind in one eye. You are the few.. we are the many. And when the many stop fearing the few... (Benioff and Weiss, Game of Thrones: The gift 2015, 30:44-33:28)

While the High Sparrow continues to use religious rhetoric and a calm demeanor his hypocrisy and political views are slowly but surely seeping through. He claims that the gods judge all equally, however, the violence used by the sparrows is not dispersed equally. It is targeted specifically on those who oppose the sparrows. This shines through in his last remark: "You are the few.. we are the many. And when the many stop fearing the few..." It resembles a socialist, or communist, revolutionary narrative. Furthermore, the religious laws the High Sparrow continues to point out are laws that were written by, and enacted through, humans. The gods do not have agency on their own.

An additional view that is worth mentioning is that of Qyburn, a prominent member of the royal court: "Believe is so often the death of reason." (Benioff and Weiss, Game of Thrones: Hardhome 2015, 13:48-13:50). A view that we have encountered on multiple occasions during the analysis of *Kingdom of Heaven*. This view is strongly linked to what was discussed at the start of this analysis: the nobility of the royal court see religion as a tool, when it becomes more than that it becomes dangerous and irrational. This opposition between religion as being irrational, and the secular as being rational is something we have encountered in the work of Cavanaugh: "The myth of religious violence helps to construct and marginalize a religious Other, prone to fanaticism, to contrast with the rational, peace-making, secular subject." (Cavanaugh 2009, 4)

In season six the themes of season five are sustained and depicted even more clearly. During a conversation in the Sept of Baelor, the cathedral of the faith, a noble man, Jaime, questions the High Sparrow's motives and argues that the gods, or religion, are much more violent than anything else:

"[J]: You imprisoned and humiliated my sister. [HS]: Your sister sought the gods' mercy and atoned for her sin. [J]: What about my sins? [...] [J threatens the HS] [HS]: You would spill blood in this holy place? [J]: OH, the gods won't mind. They've spilled more blood than the rest of us combined. [HS]: Go on then, I deserve it [death]. We all do. We are weak, vain creatures. We live only by the mother's mercy." (Benioff and Weiss, Game of Thrones: Home 2016)

The High Sparrow acts as if he has no agency in the acts of violence that have taken place, it happened because of the will of the gods. However, earlier he explicitly said that the sparrows would be an army to defend the common people. Jaime seems to agree with the view that the gods, and religion, are responsible for the violence. The High Septon further reinforces the idea that he has no agency in the matter in a confrontation with the child king Tommen: "[HS]: It's not what I want. It's what the gods want. They make their will known to us and it's up to us to either accept or reject it." (Benioff and Weiss, Game of Thrones: Oathbreaker 2016, 36:57-37:07) The only agency that humans have is to reject or accept the will of the gods. However, if one rejects, they are sinners and thus justified targets of violence. Furthermore, this comment illustrates that the sparrows adhere to a black and white interpretation of their faith, you are either for or against it, you deserve justice, or mercy, you are good or evil. This dichotomy resembles that of rationality and irrationality by, among others, Cavanaugh and Asad as discussed in the previous paragraph. (Cavanaugh

2009) (Asad 1993)

One final example I want to share to complement the views on religion in these seasons of *Game of Thrones* is of a Septon that is helping local villagers with the restoration of their village. He takes on a new and different view on religion that focusses on human agency instead of divine knowledge just as we have perceived in *Kingdom of Heaven*:

[Septon]: I don't know much about the gods. [Clegane]: You are in the wrong line of work. [S]: Hh there's plenty of pious sons of bitches who think they know the word of god or gods. I don't. I don't even know their real names. Maybe it is the seven, or maybe it's the old gods. Or maybe it's the lord of light, or maybe they are all the same fucking thing. I don't know. (Benioff and Weiss, *Game of Thrones: The Broken Man* 2016, 05:38-06:45)

The Septon confesses his own sins, he says that he will never forget them. His way of atoning is to bring a little goodness into the world. It's never too late to stop harming people and start helping them, in other words, humans have agency over their own lives: "[S]: It's not even about the gods, it's about you. Learning you have to answer your prayers yourself." (Benioff and Weiss, *Game of Thrones: The Broken Man* 2016, 42:14-42:21)

Discussion

Game of Thrones illustrates multiple concepts and theories that were discussed in the theoretical framework. Most prevalent, and relevant for this thesis are the concepts of religion and religious violence. As we have discussed it is necessary to come to a view on religion in order to argue if we can attribute violence to it. Throughout season five and six of *Game of Thrones* it becomes evident that there are strongly opposing views on religion. On the one side the sparrows, viewing religion as all-encompassing, influencing human action and morality, and on the other side the nobility of the royal court who view religion as a side aspect of human society which can be manipulated for personal gain when necessary. *Game of Thrones* illustrates that both views can lead to violence enacted by and against religion. Both sides seemingly agree on the fact that religion has a violent aspect to it just as Juergensmeyer discusses in his paper *Terror in the Mind of God*. (Juergensmeyer 2003)

However, while on the surface this might seem true, much violence in the name of religion is displayed after all, a closer analysis of the behavior and words of the High Sparrow reveal that actually, religion is not solely to blame for the depicted violence. There are multiple examples where other motivations than religion are illustrated. These motivations are political, and personal of nature. Thus, even though the violence in season five and six of *Game of Thrones* may appear to be the cause of religion, as Cavanaugh and Cantwell-Smith argue, they need to be understood in the broader context of human social life, and the political intrigue that is at play in the show. (Cantwell Smith 1962) (Cavanaugh 2009)

V. Enduring violence in silence

Silence, a historical drama film directed by Martin Scorsese and released in 2016, depicts the story of two Jesuit priests in the 17th century. Set during the Edo era in Japan, the movie follows their journey from Macau with the purpose of locating their missing mentor and spreading the teachings of Catholic Christianity. The screenplay by Jay Cocks and Scorsese draws inspiration from Shūsaku Endō's novel of the same name, published in 1966. The

narrative is told against the backdrop of a time when Japanese Christians were forced to hide their faith due to persecution. To fully comprehend the film's nuances, it is essential to understand the context underlying the analysis. Thus, I will start by summarizing the plot.

The story starts with the introduction of Father Ferreira, a Portuguese Jesuit priest who bears witness to the brutal torture and execution of Japanese converts who refuse to renounce their Christian faith. Several years later in Macau, Father Valignano, an Italian Jesuit priest, receives news that Ferreira has renounced his faith in Japan. Disbelieving this news, two young Jesuit priests of Portuguese descent, Sebastião Rodrigues and Francisco Garupe, embark on a mission to locate their mentor. They are aided by Kichijirō, a fisherman who found himself stranded in Macau and seeks redemption after renouncing his faith to save his own life while his family faced execution.

Upon reaching the Japanese village of Tomogi, Rodrigues and Garupe discover that local Christians have gone into hiding, living in constant fear of an inquisitor. The villagers offer them shelter, but their sanctuary is shattered when representatives of the inquisitor arrive, intent on hunting down concealed Christians and forcing them to trample upon an image of Christ carved on a wooden plaque. Those who refuse are left to drown on the shore, and their bodies are cremated to prevent proper burial. As Garupe departs for Hirado Island, Rodrigues proceeds to Gotō Island, the last known location of Ferreira.

To Rodrigues' shock, he finds the village on Gotō Island in ruins, and Kichijirō betrays him to the authorities, leading to his imprisonment in Nagasaki. There, Rodrigues is subjected to witnessing the torture of converts by the Inquisitor, a lord named Inoue. Shockingly, among the suffering Christians, Rodrigues recognizes Garupe. When the Inquisitor attempts to force Garupe into renouncing his faith, the priest swims out to save a dying woman. The guards hold Garupe underwater while he attempts to save the woman, resulting in his death. This event greatly shakes Rodrigues' unwavering faith in God. Sharing a prison cell with Kichijirō, Rodrigues reluctantly listens to the fisherman's confession.

Eventually, Ferreira, who has assimilated into Japanese society, is brought before Rodrigues. Ferreira explains that he apostatized under torture to spare the lives of other Christians and now believes that Christianity has no place in Japan. During the night, Rodrigues is compelled to witness the torture of five Christians who have already renounced their faith. Their suffering will continue until Rodrigues himself renounces his belief. This moral dilemma forces Rodrigues to contemplate whether refusing to renounce is a selfish act that prolongs the suffering of others. In a moment of introspection, he hears the voice of Jesus granting him permission to step on the symbol. Yielding to the overwhelming pressure, Rodrigues takes this profane step.

Under a new name and having married a Japanese woman, Rodrigues becomes tasked by the Inquisitor with preventing Dutch traders from smuggling Christian religious items into Japan. In another introspective moment, Rodrigues once again hears the voice of Jesus, revealing that Jesus suffered alongside those who were persecuted and killed. Despite his apostasy, Rodrigues is constantly monitored by officials to ensure that he is not secretly practicing Christianity. Kichijirō is arrested after being caught with a Christian amulet, and Rodrigues never sees him again. The former priest spends the remainder of his life in Japan and, upon his death, receives a traditional Japanese funeral. As a symbol of his faith, his wife places a small crucifix, given to him when he first arrived in Tomogi, in his hand, demonstrating that Rodrigues remained a Christian at heart throughout his life. (Scorsese, *Silence* 2016)

Analysis

Religion is the central focus in *Silence*. It is the main driver for the actions of the protagonists of the movie. Therefore, it is difficult to interpret this movie without the lens of religion. Especially when attempting to understand the horrible violence that is depicted in it. However, as we have seen in the previous analyses, violence in a religiously dominated context is not always what it seems. In *Silence* the viewer is confronted with physical harm as well as mental and/or spiritual harm. This analysis will highlight the nature of these forms of harm and their potential connection to religion.

The first scene the viewer is confronted with is an immediate illustration of the main focus of this movie, violent religious repression:

[Ferreira]: The officials told our padres to abandon God and the gospel of his love. But they not only refused to apostatize. They asked to be tortured, so they could demonstrate the strength of their faith. The presence of God within them. Some remained on the mountain for 33 days. The story of their courage gives hope to us priests who remain here in secret. We will not abandon our hidden Christians, who live in fear. We only grow stronger in his love. (Scorsese, *Silence* 2016, 03:52-04:39)

This exposition by father Ferreira, and the accompanying images of torture, illustrates more than the main focus of this movie. Additionally, it reveals the two main themes of this analysis, the motivation, or nature of the violence committed by the Japanese against the Christians, and the seeming inherent connection of that violence to the Christian faith of the Christians depicted here. Firstly, the motivations behind the violence. The motivations matter as Cantwell-Smith, Cavanaugh and even Juergensmeyer argue that action, and thus violence, need to be understood in a broad context of human social life (Cantwell Smith 1962) (Cavanaugh 2009): “[...] religion is not innocent. But it does not ordinarily lead to violence. That happens only with the coalescence of a peculiar set of circumstances – political, social, and ideological [...]” (Juergensmeyer 2003, 10) The fact that the priests, the teachers, and preachers of Christianity, are not outright killed but given the chance to convert or apostatize can be understood as a first subtle hint at broader motivations than just those of theological, or religious of nature. The Japanese want them to stop spreading the faith, they are not outright evil because of their faith. Secondly, the apparent inherent link between violence and the Christian faith in this movie: “They asked to be tortured, so they could demonstrate the strength of their faith. The presence of God within them.” It hints at a strong connection between being tortured, or in other words, suffering, and someone their piousness. In this instance it is illustrated through physical suffering, however throughout the movie we will encounter multiple examples of physical and mental harm that is somehow understood as being part of a devout Christian’s life. Bain-Selbo is one of the main authors we discussed that argues that indeed “religion and violence are intertwined” (Bain-Selbo 2012, 72), or religion incorporates aspects that are inherently linked to violence in whatever form that may be.

When Rodrigues and Garupe hear about their teacher’s apostasy they immediately want to set out to save him. Not necessarily because they believe him to be in physical danger, but if it is true that he lost his faith, they fear for his spiritual health: “[G] Even if the slander is true then Father Ferreira is damned. [R] Yes, then we have no choice but to save his soul.” They know their journey to find Ferreira will be very dangerous, because of the persecution they are the last two priests to go to Japan, to save Ferreira’s soul and to “fight”

for Christianity: “[Valiagnano] An army of two.” (Scorsese, *Silence* 2016, 08:00-08:04, 08:33-08:35) These ideas of saving souls from damnation, and fighting for Christianity through their mission to convert, and thus save, the Japanese people to Christianity are seeped with notions of violence, or war. Juergensmeyer and Bain-Selbo would refer to these seemingly inherent ideas of violence and war in religion as cosmic war. The concept of cosmic war refers to the idea that religions, or religious actors, are locked in an endless battle on a metaphysical scale, a battle between good and evil:

This is an instance where religion and war are fused. This fusion creates a powerful construct of human imagination that elsewhere I have called “cosmic war.” It refers to the idea of a radical divine intervention in human history, an existential battle between religion and irreligion, good and evil, order and chaos. It is a remarkable combination of the concept of religion and the idea of war that is often expressed in real war and not just in its literary and legendary representations. When it takes on a life of its own and is not contained within the symbolic language of religion, it can present a whole new kind of alternative reality that is both religious and bellicose. (Juergensmeyer 2020, 76)

While Rodrigues and Garupe are not engaged in any actual violence, be that physical or mental/spiritual, it does seem that their ideas or reasoning behind their actions are part of this grander narrative that resembles the idea of cosmic war.

When they arrive in their first village in Japan it becomes clear that even though the living conditions for the Christians there are horrible, they survive, partly because of their great commitment to their faith. They suffer but survive through God’s love. Throughout the movie there is a strong theme of suffering and love discernable. The Christians suffer greatly under the persecution. However, this suffering is part of Christianity, it is the same as the suffering that Jesus Christ went through, and many Christians after him. As the priest mentioned at the start of the movie, through the endurance of suffering they can display their connection to God. Through it they receive God’s love which makes them stronger. Rodrigues knew this to be true in theory, but now that he witnesses it for himself, he questions it:

[R]: I was overwhelmed by the love I felt from these people. Even though their faces could not show it. Long years of secrecy have made their faces into masks. Why do they have to suffer so much? Why did God pick them to bear such a burden? (Scorsese, *Silence* 2016, 0:22:31-0:22:51)

As illustrated this suffering, in other words, enduring violence, seems to be a important aspect of Christianity in this movie. A scene shortly after expands on this idea. Rodrigues goes to another village, villagers from all over come to this village to join in his mass. Rodrigues is clearly taken aback by appearance and way of life of the villagers. He reflects on the nature of the faith and existence of these people:

[R]: Their lives here are so hard. They live like beasts and die like beasts. But Christ did not die for the good and beautiful. That is easy enough. The hard thing is to die for the miserable and corrupt. But here I knew I was one of them. I shared the hunger of their spirit. (Scorsese, *Silence* 2016, 0:36:40-0:37:04)

We can link these examples of suffering, and even dying, to the arguments of Juergensmeyer and Bain-Selbo, who argue that that violence is inherent part of religion. (Juergensmeyer 2003) (Bain-Selbo 2012)

Kichijiro, the man who guided the priests to Japan, is a Christian himself, although his relationship with his faith and God is one of the most complicated in the movie. He renounced his faith by symbolically stepping on an image of Christ in order to escape death by the inquisitor. By doing so he abandoned not only his family, who did not renounce their faith and died, but also God himself. As discussed by Rachel Wagner such images and symbols can be perceived as sacred. Therefore, stepping on it is an act of profanity that violates the sacred and can thus be seen as an act of symbolic violence. (Wagner 2012) However, more importantly, Kichijiro functions as a symbolic representation of the difficulty of being a “good” christian in such difficult circumstances. On multiple occasions he renounces his faith in order to save his own life. However, he keeps coming back to confess to Rodrigues in order to wash his sins away. It seems that Kichijiro takes the easy way out and is not a true christian. However, it becomes clear that he suffers horribly as well when Rodrigues offers him a bead of his rosary. Kichijiro denies the bead because he is not a worthy christian:

[R]: You did not take the rosary. [K]: I did not deserve it. [R]: Why because you denied God? [K]: Yes. But only to live. My whole family, the inquisitor wanted us to give up our faith. Stamp on Jesus with our foot. Just once, just fast. But they [his family] would not. But I did. But I could not abandon them. Even if I abandoned God. So, I watched them die. Wherever I go, I see the fire and smell the flesh. When I saw you and padre Garupe... for the first time I started to believe that God might take me back. Because in my dreams... the fire was no longer so bright! [R]: You want me to hear your confession now?” (Scorsese, *Silence* 2016, 0:39:10-0:40:20)

It seems that Kichijiro is a faithful christian in the end, however, he does not have the capability to suffer or die for God as others around him have. Still he keeps asking for forgiveness for being “weak”. Kichijiro suffers horribly as well, he suffers through his difficult relationship with God. Thus, it seems that even through such suffering he is redeemed, continuing the theme of suffering and salvation that illustrates their inherent relation with religion.

Father Rodrigues’s sense of faith undergoes changes throughout the movie because of all the suffering and violence he witnesses. He starts to question whether these aspects are truly worth it, he does not understand why the Japanese christians need to suffer so much:

These people are the most devoted of god’s creatures on earth. Father Valignano, I confess I began to wonder, God sends us trails to test us and everything he does is good. And I prayed to undergo trails like his son. But why must their trail be so terrible? And why when I look into my own heart, do the answers I give them seem so weak? [...]

Father Valignano, I know you will say that their death is not meaningless. Surely God heard their prayers as they died. But did he hear their screams? How can I explain his silence to these people who have endured so much. I need all my strength to understand it myself. (Scorsese, *Silence* 2016, 0:51:16:0:51:57, 1:01:06:1:01:42)

Rodrigues struggles with the fact that Jesus, and God, remain silent to him. He seeks for them to make sense of the horror. Because of their silence Rodrigues, and Garupe similarly, begin to wonder if the villagers are dying because of them, that the violence is their fault for persisting with their faith. In an attempt to make sense of all the violence and suffering

Rodrigues begins to connect his trials in Japan, and that of the Japanese Christians, with the trials of Christ himself who suffered greatly to save humanity. This theme is reinforced by symbolic images of Christ throughout the movie. After he is captured, on multiple occasions Rodrigues is brought into Nagasaki in a parade on the back of a donkey. On two separate occasions Rodrigues sees Christ's face appear, once being in his own reflection in the water, when shortly after Kichijiro seems to betray Rodrigues in exchange for silver, just as Judas did to Christ.

One final example of the apparent link between suffering and Christianity occurs when Rodrigues is first brought to the inquisitor together with other Christians. Rodrigues believes that his choice is to either renounce his faith or die. However, it seems that he does not mind to die and boldly remarks: "[R]: The blood of martyrs is the seed of the church. Just like the priests you slaughtered in Omara and Nagasaki." (Scorsese, *Silence* 2016, 1:18:18-1:18:29) As the priests at the start of the movie Rodrigues believes that suffering and even death makes Christianity stronger, illustrating the link between violence and Christianity.

During the second half of the movie the motivations of the persecutors become more clear as Rodrigues is captured by them and gets to interact with them. In conversation between Rodrigues and a translator we learn some of the differences between the local faith, Buddhism, and Christianity. This may be one of the reasons the Christians are persecuted but it is said explicitly:

[Translator]: We have our own religion padre. Pity you did not notice it. [R]: No no no, we just think in a different way. [T]: True, you believe buddhas are only men. Just human beings. [R]: Even a buddha dies. Like all men, he is not a creato... [T] You are ignorant. Padre, only a Christian would buddhas simply as men. Our buddha is a being which men can become. Something greater than himself if he can overcome his illusions. But you cling to your illusions and call them faith. [R] No you don't understand. If any man follows God's commandments, then he can live a peaceful and joyous live. [T] I do, I do understand. Padre, it is perfectly simple. Korobu. Have you heard that word? Korobu. It means, fall down, surrender, give up the faith, apostatize as you say. Do it. If you don't apostatize, the prisoners will be hung over the pit until you do. Their lives bleeding away, drop by drop, some last for days, some do not. (Scorsese, *Silence* 2016, 1:20:40-1:22:09)

Apart from this one discussion on theological, or religious, reasons for persecution, a broader motivational context is illustrated. A broader context that must always be considered according to Cavanaugh as religion cannot be separated from other aspects of human social life such as politics and economics:

In the first place, it is impossible to separate religious from economic and political motives in such a way that religious motives are innocent of violence. How could one, for example, separate religion from politics in Islam, when most Muslims themselves make no such separation? In my second chapter, I show that the very separation of religion from politics is an invention of the modern West. (Cavanaugh 2009, 5)

The hints at the broader motivational context of their violence are given by the inquisitor. He reiterates that he does not wish to harm Christians and that he does not consider them evil. They simply consider Christianity dangerous for Japan:

[translator]: The doctrine you bring with you may be true in Spain and Portugal. But we have studied it carefully, thought about it over much time and find it is of no use and no value in Japan. We have concluded that it is a danger. (Scorsese, *Silence* 2016, 1:26:57-1:27:24)

In another conversation the inquisitor conveys a metaphor to Rodrigues: A lord has four concubines. They fight among each other which leads to chaos in the castle. The lord banishes the concubines and peace returns. Rodrigues comments that the lord was very wise. The inquisitor reveals the meaning of the metaphor:

[I]: I am glad. That means you understand, the daimyo [lord] is like Japan. And these concubines are Spain, Portugal, Holland, England. Each trying to gain advantage against the other and destroy the house [Japan] in the process. Since you say this man is wise, you will understand why we must outlaw the Christians." (Scorsese, *Silence* 2016, 1:43:36-1:44:07)

Through this statement the inquisitor hints that another main reason for persecution is geopolitical, or perhaps cultural in nature. The Japanese do not want interference from European countries in their affairs. Furthermore, the inquisitor admits he does not consider Christianity to be evil because of its religious aspects. It is simply dangerous for Japan: "[I]: There are those who think of your religion as a curse. I do not. I see it in another way. But still dangerous." (Scorsese, *Silence* 2016, 1:46:19-1:46:34) His reasoning is not merely religious. However, he does think Christianity is dangerous, which can be considered strange since Christians do not use violence, the Buddhists do in this case. The violence seems grounded in both the "secular", and religion.

Discussion

Silence offers the viewer a depiction of severe violence carried out by people who adhere to Buddhism, against the Christians of Japan. The Christians are persecuted specifically because they are Christian. However, as it was in the previous case subjects, it is questionably if the violence depicted is purely religious of nature.

As I have argued before based on the work of scholars such as Cantwell-Smith, Asad, and Cavanaugh, religion in itself is not an entity that has the agency to do anything, let alone enact violence. (Cantwell Smith 1962) Furthermore, in cases where religion is explicitly linked to violence, such as in *Silence* it is important to understand that violence in the broad context of human social life as aspects of that social life cannot be disconnected from each other. (Cavanaugh 2009) Through the examples given in the latter paragraphs of the analysis of *Silence* it becomes clear that indeed there were multiple motivations for the violent persecution of the Christians in Japan. Arguably, political, cultural, and religious motivations, which as mentioned cannot be seen as being separate.

However, while the violence might not be specifically religious, we did encounter a seemingly inherent link between suffering, or violence, death, and Christianity. Through many reflections on suffering it becomes clear that the priests consider suffering to be a core aspect of their faith, a way to come closer to Christ, and God. Father Rodrigues mainly illustrated this through his resemblance to Christ and his trials. Furthermore, there are some examples that point at the presence of the idea of a cosmic war between good and evil within the faith of the priests. These examples are important because they indicate that

religion can have inherently violent aspects and can thus be considered violent such as Juergensmeyer and Bain-Selbo argue. (Bain-Selbo 2012) (Juergensmeyer 2003)

VI. Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to analyze how religious violence is portrayed in popular culture in order to create a better understanding of the perpetuating myth of religious violence in the public domain. Three popular culture products were analyzed: the cinematic movies *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Silence*, and the extremely popular tv-series *Game of Thrones*. This analysis was done by using a conceptual and theoretical framework consisting of mediatization theory and the concepts of religion, and religious violence.

The three analyses offer three distinct, although in some places similar, results. *Kingdom of Heaven* appears to portray a typical example of religious violence, specifically crusader violence. However, upon closer examination, this film acknowledges that the depicted violent events are not inherently religious in nature. Instead, they are portrayed as acts of violence within the context of a geo-political conflict. Moreover, the movie highlights that human actions, rather than religion itself, are cause of violence. Nevertheless, while it does not attribute the violent actions solely to religion, it suggests that individuals who blindly rely on religion as their only reference to the world tend to be more irrational and thus more susceptible to violence.

In *Game of Thrones*, there are contrasting perspectives on religion. On one side religion is seen as a universal power that shapes human actions and morality. On the other side religion is regarded as a secondary aspect of, one that can be exploited for personal gain when necessary. The show demonstrates that both outlooks can lead to violence associated with religion, as both sides acknowledge its violent dimension. However, through closer examination, it becomes evident that religion is not solely responsible for the depicted violence, despite its prominent role. It becomes clear that other motivations beyond religion drive the acts of violence. These motivations are rooted in politics and personal interests. Therefore, while violence may initially appear to stem from religion, it is crucial to understand it within the broader context of human social life and the politics depicted in *Game of Thrones*.

Silence portrays horrific acts of torture inflicted on Christians solely because of their religious beliefs. At least that is how it seems on the surface. However, explicit exposition in the film reveals that the violent persecution of Christians was motivated by a combination of factors. These motivations include political, cultural, and religious elements that are intertwined. While the violence may not be entirely religious in nature, a significant connection between suffering, war, and thus violence, and Christianity is portrayed. These connections can be found in the reflections on suffering and faith by the main character. This connection holds significance as it indicates that religion can possess inherently violent aspects and can thus be considered to be capable of violence.

While the three media objects are unique in their depiction of violence there are crucial similarities that highlight the manner in which supposed religious violence is illustrated in popular culture. The main similarity between all three objects is the fact that violence is never solely attributed to religion. The contexts may vary but the reasoning is the same. Especially in *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Game of Thrones* it is quite clear that the violence is attributed to political and personal aspirations. Religion seems to be used as a tool. In *Silence* the motivations for violence are less clear, however, it is made clear that

religion is not the sole culprit. Another strong connection between *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Game of Thrones* is that in both we can perceive a modern western take on religion, namely that it is prone to irrationality and can therefore be dangerous. Both objects argue in favor of human rationality as a guide for good action opposed to the dangerous irrationality of religion. *Silence* does not share this view. However, it does share in the idea that there is an inherently violent aspect to religion. In *Silence* this is depicted as an inherent connection between suffering, or violence, (cosmic)war, death, and Christianity. Lastly, and quite importantly, all three objects use religion as a tool for narrative purposes as is discussed in mediatization theory. They depict violence that on the surface seems religious in nature. Because of this I argue that, even though they add a fair share of nuance to this implicit link between violence and religion, they do contribute to the idea of religious violence in the public domain through their power as popular culture products.

Further research into this discussion can be beneficial if it adds additional quantitative research methods such as structured interviews and surveys in order to take the media effects paradigm into account. Additionally, it would be recommendable to broaden the scope of popular media products, both time-period wise and platform wise. Novels and videogames might be interesting objects of analysis since they offer a different narrative structure than the objects analyzed in this thesis.

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