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Integration and Rebirth through Confrontation:
Fight Club and American Beauty as contemporary religious parables

Abstract

In this article, I will discuss the religious significance of two recent American films which raise pertinent questions about the nature and quality of human existence, its anxieties and aspirations, at the turn of the millennium. Both David Fincher's Fight Club and Sam Mendes' American Beauty wrestle with the efficacy of confrontation as a means of attaining redemption from the disconnectedness and estrangement that characterises the lives of the protagonists in each of these pictures. The import that the trajectories of these characters have for the film audience will also be examined, insofar as these films are accredited by some viewers with helping to facilitate a remedy to the malaise and disaffection in their lives that these protagonists exemplify.

Biographical details

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*Integration and Rebirth through Confrontation:
Fight Club and American Beauty as contemporary religious parables*

Following the announcement of the 1999 Academy Award nominations, on 15 February 2000, Charles Henderson, executive director of the Association of Religion and Intellectual Life, declared that he could not "remember a year when God figured so prominently in the [Oscars]." With Best Picture nominations for *The Green Mile* (Frank Darabont, 1999), whose pivotal character could be construed as a Christ-figure, who can heal the sick, resurrect the dying, and who ultimately suffers a wrongful and ignominious death for the sins of another, and *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999), where a young boy is able to communicate with, and even facilitate the redemption of, the tortured souls of the deceased, there is no denying that religious themes were at the forefront of many of this year's films. It is in respect, however, of the debut motion picture of British theatre director Sam Mendes, *American Beauty*, which won a total of five Oscars, including Best Picture, that Henderson's claim has particular resonance. Indeed, the film's protagonist, Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey), provides voice-over narration from a post-mortem perspective, in which he surveys what he has accomplished in his life - the final year of which is documented on screen - and questions whether his earthly existence has been imbued with any real sense of spiritual value, happiness or enlightenment. As with the similarly themed *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), whose somewhat more abrasive and brutal delineation of one man's rebellion against the material culture and lifestyle to which he has become enslaved, and his subsequent spiritual rebirth, effectively sealed its fate in the Oscar stakes (it received just one technical nomination), *American Beauty* is open to a fertile religious reading. In this article, I will demonstrate how both *American Beauty* and *Fight Club* may be said to amount to potent religious parables, which raise vital (and, in commercial cinema at any rate, all-too-infrequently asked) questions about the spiritual landscape and normative values of western society at the turn-of-the-millennium.

Fight Club

In the case of *Fight Club*, the indelible imprint this film has left on the lives of many audience members bears witness to the profound and inescapably religious dimension that lies at the core of what some critics have perceived as a nihilistic and sado-masochistic picture (see www.gospelcom.net/preview/dbresultstest.php3?783). Jason Murphy, film reviewer on the internet site *Christian Spotlight on the Movies*, explains, for instance, that he has not seen any other recent American film "that explores the ills and shortcomings of our society so intelligently and so well" (www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/reviews/fightclub.html), whereby violence is a means of exerting control over the frustration and disenfranchisement faced by many contemporary young American men. Despite its at times explicit and visceral depiction of physical force, *Fight Club* posits that there is something potentially liberating - even, indeed, salvific - in the use of violence. For, it is suggested, violence has the capacity to provide its practitioners with the vehicle and the agency of defining one's self and of ultimately being able to connect and integrate with other

individuals in an otherwise affectless and estranged society. Chuck Palahniuk, the author of the novel on which the film was based, actually found the inspiration for this theme from personal experience, when he became embroiled in a fight for the first time whilst on a camping holiday. In his words, "There's a redeeming value to taking a punch under controlled circumstances", and the incident "made me really curious about what I was capable of" (from *The Guardian* interview, 12 May 2000; see www.guardianunlimited.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4017048,00.html). Accordingly, in the novel's universe, "black eyes and fat lips are signs of spiritual health on the part of otherwise alienated white collar young men" (ibid.), for whom the world of fight clubs affords them the opportunity to escape the alienation and monotony of their daily existence and to (re-)connect through *physical* contact.

Of course, the themes of alienation and despair that Fincher addresses in the film are not altogether new in motion pictures. Indeed, *Fight Club* shares many affinities with Martin Scorsese's landmark 1970s film, *Taxi Driver* (1976), about which Colin Westerbeck, in the summer 1976 edition of *Sight and Sound*, attested that it offers its audience "provocation" (Westerbeck in *Sight and Sound*: 135), and manages to tap "into people's emotions at a deeper level than movies are usually able to reach", to the point of inspiring "passionate, sometimes even crazed responses." (ibid.) In a manner akin to *Fight Club*'s protagonist, *Taxi Driver* documents the life of an estranged, even psychopathic, figure, Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro), who attempts to purge and redeem what he perceives as the morally depraved city streets of New York of its sins by means of physical confrontation and violence.¹ In a no less vehement and combative fashion, David Fincher delivers in *Fight Club* a metaphysical treatise on the nature of existence, death and one's place in the grand scheme of things. The film is adroit not only at identifying the location of much of the violence in society, but at dissecting its root causes, and endeavouring to come to terms with that which makes it so attractive to its practitioners. As the film suggests, although we may be raised by television and advertising "to believe that someday we'll be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars... we won't. And we're just learning this fact" (cf. Palahniuk: 166). In Murphy's words, "In the face of this society, many people feel impotent" and "unable to change their lives", and as a consequence "[t]hey feel owed" (www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/reviews/fightclub.html) - and violence is one way of attempting to overturn the status quo, however briefly.

Like *Taxi Driver*, moreover, the manner in which the anonymous protagonist, played by Edward Norton, endeavours to conquer his estranged and alienated condition is imbued with overt religious connotations. Upon coming into contact with the world of fight clubs, the protagonist no longer identifies himself as a slave to materialism, in the form of "IKEA nesting equipment" and as the sort of person who would need to ask the question, "What kind of dining set defines me as a person?" Apprehending that "things you own end up owning you", the physical nature of the fight club experience engenders a spiritual rebirth of not inconsiderable magnitude. In the protagonist's words, "You weren't alive anywhere like you were there", while "Every evening I died and every morning I rose again... Resurrected." He compares the experience to being in a Pentecostal Church - moreover, in the novel, the Support Groups he attends as a forerunner to the establishment of the first fight club takes place in the basement of 'Trinity Episcopal' church (Palahniuk: 17) - "where everybody is speaking in tongues", and, from that point on, "We all started seeing

things differently." Although nothing may have been solved when the fight was over - the tensions and the solitudes of everyday existence had not been eradicated, only alleviated for a short while - it was nevertheless the case, we are informed, that "everyone felt saved."

This notion of redemption through suffering, with its discernible appropriation of Christian vocabulary, may also be seen to underpin Palahniuk's novel. There, the protagonist is taught at one point that "the first step to eternal life is you have to die" (Palahniuk: 11), and the point is frequently advanced that, unless one can "hit bottom", it is impossible to "be saved" (ibid.: 22, 70), or, indeed, to make the first, tentative steps towards attaining redemption. The exemplar here is quite explicitly Jesus Christ. Besides the literal correlations, such as the claim that "Jesus did it with his crucifixion thing" (ibid.: 70), *Fight Club* could be read as an allegory of the suffering, death and subsequent resurrection that lies at the very kernel of Christian belief. In a manner akin to the Prologue of John's Gospel, where the Fourth Evangelist attests that, "In the beginning was the Word... He was in the beginning with God... [a]nd the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1: 1, 2, 14), so in *Fight Club* the narrator affirms in the first chapter, "I've been here from the beginning. I remember everything." (Palahniuk: 15) While too close a correlation would be injudicious - neither the novel nor the film go quite so far as to suggest that the protagonist actually is, or is some kind of functional equivalent of, the pre-existent Logos - there is a suggestion that the Norton character constitutes a Christ-figure along the lines of the Antiochene school of Christology, that originated in the Patristic Church.

According to this tradition, although Christ has decisively conquered all hostile powers that impair human life, this has only been achieved at the cost of considerable *human* suffering. Indeed, only a complete human being could perform Christ's function of enabling humankind to undergo a process of redemption from sin and suffering, by virtue of his having already undergone human trials and sufferings, as epitomised by his death upon the Cross. Rather than a completely divine and ethereal figure, he "has been beaten down" and "has descended into the utter depths of weakness" (Fiddes: 126), trembling with human fear and anxiety. It is thus significant that *Fight Club* also explores this understanding of resurrection through human suffering, whereby, to quote from the novel, "Only after disaster can we be resurrected" (Palahniuk: 70), and "only through destroying myself can I discover the greater power of my spirit." (ibid.: 110) An 'army' is even established in *Fight Club*, called 'Project Mayhem', whose mission is to break up civilisation as it presently stands, and to "save" and "make something better out of the world." (ibid.: 125) Significantly, part of the mission is to make "twelve human sacrifices", in language that corresponds to the 'election' of Christ's twelve disciples, while, in the manner of Christ's crucifixion, sacrifice is intrinsic to the setting up of 'Project Mayhem'. Indeed, part of the recruitment exercise is that those who want to join are ritually humiliated, punished, and offered no food or encouragement for a symbolic period of three days before they can be admitted into the fold.

There is, further, an ecclesiastical dimension to the film. In the 'Farewell Discourses' of the Fourth Gospel, Christ announces that the Spirit of Truth, or 'Paraclete', will be sent "from the Father" (John 15: 26) once he has ascended, and is no longer in the physical presence of his disciples, with a view to comforting and

consoling future Christians with the knowledge that he has not deserted them. The abiding presence of the Paraclete could thus be said to exercise the function of Jesus now that he has materially 'gone away', and future Christians are not therefore going to be at a disadvantage. In *Fight Club*, Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) is a figure who, it transpires, is the alter ego of the protagonist, and who effectively sets the wheels of the fight club, and the subsequent 'Project Mayhem', in motion, yet whose disappearance towards the end, following a car wreck, engenders a sense of loss and disillusionment among the community. As the Norton character puts it, "In Tyler we trusted", yet, following Tyler's apparent departure, "I'm all alone." Like the Church, however, in the period following Jesus' ascension, the fight club continues without Tyler's physical presence, though his spiritual influence endures. As the protagonist puts it, indeed - seeing in himself the continuation of Tyler's function as leader, counsellor and mentor (now that the 'separation' between the two aspects of the same personality has been established) - "To everybody there, I am Tyler Durden the Great and Powerful. God and Father." (Palahniuk: 199) In a subtle reference to the dichotomy between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, and of the way in which the Church has evolved in the last two thousand years from its original assembly of apostles, prophets and teachers to the institutional hierarchy of bishops, priests and deacons (epitomised in the Montanist movement of the second century C.E.), so in *Fight Club* it is signalled that, following Tyler Durden, the community that develops is not necessarily congruent with the aims and purposes of its founder. As the protagonist is forced to exclaim, following his disapproval at some of the practices being carried out, effectively in his name, "Fight Club is mine. I wrote these rules. None of you would be here if it wasn't for me." (Palahniuk: 179)

Together with the inclusion of the protagonist's eventual betrayal of his alter ego, the final scene in the novel taking place "in heaven" (ibid.: 207), from where he predicts his Second Coming, and the disclosure of seven 'I am' sayings - ranging from "I am Jack's wasted life" and "I am Jack's broken heart" to "I am Jack's smirking revenge" and "I am Jack's enflamed sense of rejection" - which correspond to the seven 'I am' sayings proclaimed by Christ in John's Gospel, theological motifs evidently lie at the very nucleus of *Fight Club*. Even the fighting itself has an almost sacramental quality, in that it constitutes the channel through which redemption and reintegration is possible. Indeed, notwithstanding the nihilistic ingredients that imbue the film - such as Tyler's claims that "Without pain, without sacrifice, you would have nothing", and that "I don't want to die without any scars" - *Fight Club* could ultimately be interpreted as a film about the *rejection* of nihilism. The Norton character denounces the tactics of 'Project Mayhem' at the end, and foresees that the unleashed anger has the capacity to spiral out of control, resulting in unwarranted death and devastation. The protagonist eventually takes responsibility for his role in the carnage and destruction that the 'army' has set in motion by annihilating his alter ego, and avowing, with contrition, to his hitherto neglected partner, Marla (Helena Bonham Carter), "Trust me. Everything's going to be fine. You met me at a very strange time in my life." Exactly what will happen beyond this point we may only surmise, but the protagonist's tentative acknowledgement of the dangers that attend the use of violence as a means of thwarting and resolving all of life's obstacles - particularly when, as the 'Project Mayhem' exercise has shown, that violence becomes not a means to an end but an end in itself - imbues this film with an albeit tentative redemptive significance.

Fight Club is an uncomfortable film to watch, certainly, but it is the film's ability to articulate, and to wrestle with, a number of contemporary problems pertaining to the human condition that makes it such an essential picture. As Edward Norton has said, in relation to the similarly universal dimension to the novel, "This was the first thing I read that said: 'This expresses the depth of the paralysis and the numbness and the despair that I feel in a lot of people I know'" (cited in www.guardianunlimited.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4017048,00.html). And, a cursory glance at some of the (non-professional) 'user comments' on the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com/CommentsShow?0137523) discloses that a number of viewers likewise found that the film tapped into various underlying anxieties and agitations. According to one contributor, from Rome, "This movie is almost a documentary of the modern day man", wherein "Soon you begin to relate to some of Norton's [character's] obsessions and fears... they get inside you until you ask yourself: 'would I go this far?'" Similarly, in the words of one Philadelphia-based reviewer, *Fight Club* "socks the viewer squarely between the eyes" and "throws a mirror in front of our gaze, giving us a glimpse at the forces powering society - even as it delights in tearing that society inside out." While, for a reviewer in Auckland,

Something deep, deep inside found some sort of strange resonance with the idea of beating-and-being-beaten senseless - a physical catharsis that perhaps we *do* lack in our lives... But this is not about people who need to feel brutality - it's about a whole generation needing to feel *something*, anything at all. Fighting is their answer... *Fight Club* screams at you, it bashes your head against a floor like a wild animal, [and] it unsettles you like no other film...

Across the wide spectrum of reviews of Fincher's film that appear on the IMDB, the majority bear witness to the idea that the film is capable of engulfing and overwhelming - even transforming - the audience. As one reviewer puts it, "It toys with your emotions, pushes your softspots and forces you to deal with the issues involved - and not just those on the surface." If one is looking for readymade answers to many of life's pitfalls and tribulations, they will not be found here, but there is a fundamental sense in which, to quote from one reviewer on the *Christian Spotlight on the Movies* site, an audience may come "to relate to some of the confusion and the struggle and certainly that might open some doors of conversation" (www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/reviews/fightclub.html).

American Beauty

Much the same may be said of Sam Mendes' *American Beauty*, which, to date, has received more than 1,200 reviews on the the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com/CommentsIndex?169547), and which has been lauded by many film critics and journalists - both secular and religious - as one of the most insightful and sophisticated films to have come out of Hollywood in recent years. Like *Fight Club*, this picture is also about an 'everyman' - though in this case he is middle-aged - whose suffocation and sense of sterility in what he comes to apprehend as a highly competitive and soulless culture, where people are evaluated in terms of the relative success of the images they are able to project, the size of their homes and of their bank balances, and how adept they are at competing in an increasingly ruthless and insecure employment market, becomes the stimulus and the agency of a radical spiritual odyssey. When Mendes first encountered Alan Ball's screenplay, he explains, "I finished it and read it again", and then contacted his agent to say

that I wanted to make the movie. Then I read it again. Normally it was a trial for me to get through a script once, and I'd read this one three times back to back. I wanted to know why this was. So I read it again. (from Ball: pxi)

One reason why Mendes found the screenplay so enticing is that each time he read it it seemed to operate on a different level, conveying different insights and perceptions about human nature, its orientations and predilections. Ostensibly, *American Beauty* is a dark comedy, set in the American suburbs, about a forty-two year old magazine publisher who relinquishes the job from which he has become tired and withdrawn, confronts his wife Carolyn (Annette Bening) over what he perceives as the sham that their marriage has become, and endeavours to reconnect with the relative spontaneity and exuberance of his youth. In actuality, however, the film also functions as an adroit satire - indeed, a parable - on the values and preoccupations of contemporary western culture, encapsulated in Carolyn's maxim, which we witness her chanting a number of times during the film, that "In order to be successful, one must project an image of success at all times." It is in the light of this parabolic structure and foundation to the film that makes *American Beauty* particularly amenable to a religious reading.

In the New Testament, parables, as employed by Jesus, were short, essentially fictional narratives, used to reveal religious, symbolic and transcendental truths and values about the human condition, its aspirations and potentialities. Whereas 'myth' characteristically constructs a world through story, by attempting to mediate the seemingly irreconcilable, and thereby establishing the possibility of reconciliation and resolution (cf. May in *Horizons*: 15), *parable* is meant to provoke us, challenge us and transform us, reminding us of our limits and limitations, and laying the groundwork for the possibility of *transcendence*. Jesus' parables, such as those of the sower (Matthew 13:3-23) and the fig tree (Mark 13:28-31, Luke 21:29-33), are undeniably religious in nature, even though they tend to omit specific reference to God and to the divine. They are, rather, *human* renderings and allegories of stories that encapsulate, stimulate and pave the way for transcendental insight. There is thus a powerful sense in which *American Beauty* may be seen to comprise a contemporary parable, since it delineates a fictional, though representative, dysfunctional American family at the turn-of-the-millennium, which, as many of the reviews and critiques that the film has received would suggest, provides the audience with the opportunity to undergo a period of self-questioning, re-evaluation, and, ultimately, to embark upon a spiritual journey. As Joshua Hornbeck attests on the *Christian Spotlight on the Movies* site, "the audience comes through a kind of emotional catharsis along with the hero" (www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/movies/pre2000/i-americanbeauty.html), and, in the words of Cosmo Landesman of *The Sunday Times*, Alan Ball's screenplay "has that rare ability to make you stop and think about your own life" (<http://www.the-times.co.uk/news/pages/sti/2000/04/16/sticulfil02002.html>).

The film has the rare distinction of beginning with the protagonist's voice-over told from a period after his death. How a seemingly ordinary man, with an ordinary job, living in an ordinary neighbourhood, manages to wind up murdered - with the attendant mystery as to who could have perpetrated the deed - has the effect of involving the viewer in the narrative from the outset. On another level, however, *American Beauty* is more than a detective story, thriller or murder mystery - but a theological treatise on the nature of existence. After all, as Lester explains from the outset, "I'm forty-two years old. In less than a year, I'll be dead. Of course, I don't

know that yet. And in a way, I'm dead already." It is the protagonist's spiritual death and his attempts to extricate himself from his plight, with the eventual, tragic and somewhat unexpected (despite having been signposted from the very beginning) physical cessation at just the point that Lester's spiritual odyssey would seem to be complete, that makes *American Beauty* so amenable to a reading in religious-parabolic terms.

As Lester explains to his wife and daughter, "I am sick and tired of being treated like I don't exist." Upon deciding to give up his job, Lester has opted to begin to actually *live* his life rather than simply go through the motions of what has amounted to a stale and stagnant existence. By contrast, Carolyn is so absorbed in and obsessed with propagating the image of success that she has become spiritually blind and insensitive to the needs of her family. As Michael Elliott puts it, "She concentrates so much on the image, she loses sight of the reality" (www.christiancritic.com/movies/amerbeau.html). She cannot bring herself to concede failure - so much so that she would rather 'merge' with a rival real estate agent than admit to being anything less than successful in her career. As she affirms to herself, while fighting back the tears and even slapping herself in the face, "I will sell this house today", no matter how hard the bargain. At home, too, Carolyn is "a woman so devoted to keeping up appearances that she has disappeared" (<http://www.the-times.co.uk/news/pages/sti/2000/01/30/sticulfil02006.html>). Indeed, she is more interested in the condition of her furniture than in trying to salvage their lacklustre and, to use Lester's term, "joyless" marriage, as exemplified by a scene when she interrupts his attempt to seduce her by exclaiming, "Lester, you're going to spill beer on the couch." When he responds, "So what? It's just a couch", she corrects him - "This is a four thousand dollar sofa upholstered in Italian silk. This is not 'just a couch'." Gesturing to all the other material items in the room, Lester confronts her directly - "This isn't *life*. This is just *stuff*. And it's become more important to you than living." The scenario is not very far removed from the largely empty, cynical and materialistic values of 1980s America, deftly (and sardonically) epitomised in Bret Easton Ellis' 1991 novel *American Psycho* (recently filmed by Mary Harron) and in Danny De Vito's 1989 film *The War of the Roses*, where wealth and possessions are presented as being so integral to the social and economic status of the characters that any attack on these possessions is construed as a direct and physical assault on the possessor. Indeed, *The War of the Roses* features an estranged husband and wife who die fighting for the ownership of their deluxe suburban home, with its figurines, gourmet kitchen range and chandeliers, and it is a combat one can imagine Carolyn would readily engage in as a matter of honour and integrity.

In many respects, *American Beauty* bears witness to one of the central insights of the Christian tradition. In the Fall narrative in Genesis 3, we learn that Adam's sin and subsequent spiritual death have been inherited by all humans from generation to generation. As Augustine puts it, "for by [Adam and Eve] so great a sin was committed, that by it the human nature was altered for the worse, and was transmitted to their posterity, liable to sin and subject to death" (from *City of God* XIV, ch1). However, within Christianity, and especially through the role of Christ as the 'Second Adam', humankind is nevertheless believed to possess an innate sensibility that *integration* is better than *disintegration* and that *harmony* is better than *cacophony*. As Thomas Hegel pointed out, indeed, although the Fall bears witness to humankind's "continuance in misery" (Livingston: 151), we have in the Fall narrative an

announcement and a prediction of *reconciliation*. And, as Kierkegaard wrote in the second volume of *Either-Or*, "Every man who has not tasted the bitterness of despair has missed the significance of life" (quoted in *ibid*). Although, for Kierkegaard, despair is a universal human experience, the only way in which one can overcome despair is by first acknowledging and coming to terms with that despair. For redemption to be a viable proposition, the suffering and the hardships we undergo are thus, in a fundamental sense, a necessary and basic prerequisite of human experience. In *American Beauty*, Lester, unlike Carolyn, undergoes a redemptive experience in this regard, since he succeeds in extricating himself from the emotional deadness and alienation that hitherto characterised his existence, and restoring and recovering the joy he once (in a prelapsarian sense) knew.

Lester has finally reconnected with his former self, epitomised by what transpires is the last moment of his physical life, when he looks at an old photograph of himself, Carolyn and their daughter, Jane, at an amusement park, and is startled to observe just how happy they all look. Although Lester has, in the course of his 'rebellion', been guilty of lust towards his daughter's best friend, Angela (Mena Suvari), of rage against his wife, and blackmail against his employer (and as a result he manages to leave his job with a sizeable payoff, in a manner akin to the Norton character in *Fight Club* who also blackmails his boss), he undergoes a transfiguration in the end scene. It could even be said that Lester has, albeit for a moment, *transcended* the limitations² of his broken and fractured world and brought to bear a remarkable tenderness and compassion. However, the same cannot be said of Carolyn, whose final words are inspired from a 'motivational tape' that she is listening to on the car stereo - "I refuse to be a victim. I refuse to be a victim." She has retreated even further into a self-contained, somewhat narcissistic world where all that matters is the image, and, since he dared to challenge her mindset, she has nothing but contempt for her husband, and is even contemplating homicide. By contrast, to quote Landesman, Lester has succeeded in "trying to find a little beauty and meaning in that great modern gap between images and reality, surfaces and substance" (<http://www.the-times.co.uk/news/pages/sti/2000/01/30/sticulfil02006.html>). As he explains on the voice-over at the end,

I guess I could be pretty pissed off about what happened to me... but it's hard to stay mad, when there's so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I'm seeing it all at once, and it's too much, my heart fills up like a balloon that's about to burst... and then I remember to relax, and stop trying to hold on to it, and then it flows through me like rain and I can't feel anything but gratitude for every single moment of my stupid little life.

Conclusion

Like Fincher's film, *American Beauty* may thus be said to mirror and to bear witness to the sense of disconnectedness and dislocation - in this case, specifically from the point of view of family and friends - that may be found to imbue so many of the values and norms of contemporary western culture. In many respects, this concurs with the spirit of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes which posits the unconventional and, in essence, un-Hebraic notion that there is no more to human existence than the apparent meaninglessness and irrationality we observe all around us, wherein "What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered" (Ecclesiastes 1: 15). Yet, despite this somewhat entrenched, cynical

perspective, the author, Qoheleth, affirms that, despite the limits of our knowledge, ability and circumstances, and our transitory life-span, humans can strive to learn to live authentically within the prescribed limitations and boundaries of our existence. While accepting that we are no more in control of our lives than we are of the day of our death, we can nonetheless come to appreciate and value - even enjoy - the satisfactions and joys of life, even though we know we cannot depend on them. There are, then, compensations to be found in life. In Scott's words, "The good of life is the living of it" (Scott: 186), and, as Qoheleth avows, "if a man lives many years, let him rejoice in them all" (Ecclesiastes 11: 8), even if that entails no discernible residue of success and accomplishment. This could be said to encapsulate Lester's trajectory in *American Beauty*, inasmuch as he encounters, and comes to appreciate, moments of real, authentic joy in living. Indeed, acknowledging that "there's so much beauty in the world", Lester ends up far from being spiritually dead ("dead already"), as his voiceover at the start of the picture had testified. Rather, he is able to make the leap of faith towards feeling "nothing but gratitude for every single moment" of what he fully acknowledges is his "stupid little life".³

While there are individual images and lines of dialogue in these two films - particularly in the case of *Fight Club* with its series of 'I am' sayings, and references to "twelve human sacrifices" and, in the novel, to the protagonist's Second Coming - which contain overt Christian significance, the most prolific religious dimension does not actually stem from such explicit surface-level similarities and references. Whatever intellectual gratification there may be from drawing an analogy between, say, what the Edward Norton character in *Fight Club* might say or do and the 'I am' sayings uttered by Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, it is in the deeper, more universal social and psychological undercurrents that permeate *Fight Club* and *American Beauty* that make a religious reading so persuasive. At the very least, what these films convey is that outside of the traditional agency of the Church, film has the capacity to engage and to wrestle with authentic spiritual and religious solicitudes. Significant though parallels between the founding of the 'fight clubs' - and their subsequent development into 'Project Mayhem' - and the origins of the early Christian community may be to the textual scholar, it is the underlying discourse on the dichotomy between material and spiritual values and on the efficacy of violence as a means of achieving one's aims that is of more fundamental value. Indeed, in *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard maintains that death contains "the germ of life" (Girard: 255), and that in

the evolution from ritual to secular institutions men gradually draw away from violence and eventually lose sight of it; but an actual break with violence never takes place. That is why violence can always stage a stunning, catastrophic comeback (p307).

The almost primitive - even primal - interpretation of violence as a means of reconnecting and re-engaging with other human beings from whom one has become estranged is not only, then, at the heart of Fincher's film but is also intrinsic to our understanding of religion in general, and in particular to the concept of redemption.

The world of violence and physical confrontation that imbues *Fight Club* may thus be seen to parallel one of the central dichotomies of religion, wherein violence has often been perceived not as a wholly destructive and disruptive force but as something potentially cohesive and even liberating that somehow manages to reintegrate the estranged and aberrant individual. Indeed, the concept of atonement

both in Judaism (before the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.) and in Christianity may be seen to be inescapably bound up with violence (see Graham in Marsh & Ortiz: 91), insofar as the Jewish system of animal sacrifice on the Day of Atonement - in which Israel's High Priest offered blood sacrifices, or 'sin offerings', to effect a reconciliation between God and his errant people (Leviticus 16: 23-34) - and the figure of Jesus Christ on the Cross, seeking atonement for the sins of humanity, are profoundly violent events, involving bloodletting and, ultimately, physical death.

Furthermore, while acknowledging that there are conflicting interpretations of the use of violence as it pertains to the person of Jesus Christ, scholars such as S.G.F. Brandon (in *Jesus and the Zealots*, pub. 1967) have posited that there was a close association between Christ and the Zealot movement of the first century C.E. This is also a perspective that strongly imbues Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), where Jesus is constantly taunted by Judas over his failure to take a positive stand over the political subjugation of the people of Israel by the Romans, and where Jesus' ministry contains an explicitly revolutionary dimension. In Jesus' words, following the cleansing of the Temple, "I didn't come here to bring peace, I came here to bring a sword". And, knowing that his death is imminent, Jesus pleads with God to let him die not on the Cross but with an axe. This is by no means an interpretation that will be shared by everyone, but what Brandon and Scorsese have at least achieved is a recognition that Jesus' message was not produced in a vacuum, but arose (and was accordingly interpreted - or misinterpreted - by many of his followers) at a time of political and revolutionary fervour, which must have had some bearing not only on Christ himself but on those who responded to his message. Indeed, although Nicholas Ray's rather less controversial Jesus biopic *King of Kings* (1961) presents Jesus as the 'new Messiah of peace' - rather than, as in the case of Barabbas, a 'messiah of war' - who gives the new commandment to his disciples at the Last Supper that they should "love one another", W. Barnes Tatum astutely observes that

King of Kings recognizes that Roman rule provided the oppressive political framework for the life and death of Jesus, and that Roman rule thereby engendered a potentially violent response among the Jewish populace. (Tatum: 82)

The appropriation of particular religious terms and teachings in *Fight Club* and *American Beauty* thus transcends mere textual analysis, and could, in essence, be construed as the gateway through which an audience can come to a fuller understanding of how to address some of the core problems that pertain to the human condition. As David Bruce puts it, in his review of *American Beauty* on the *Hollywood Jesus* site, "Something is wrong in our culture. The film is a painful reflection of that fact" (www.hollywoodjesus.com/americanbeauty.html). Lester actually addresses the audience in the last words of his voiceover, at the very end of the film, when he says, "You have no idea what I'm talking about, I'm sure. But don't worry... You will someday." It is inevitable, of course, that these films will be open to a multiplicity of readings by different audiences, and many have, indeed, gone further than I have done in this paper by interpreting *American Beauty* in particular through a specifically Christian eschatological lens, believing God to be the source and the inspiration behind the beauty and majesty of creation to which Lester testifies. According to one such contributor on the *Christian Spotlight* site, Lester realises at the end that "the importance lies not in stuff or me but in the relationships and beauty that God has given us." While acknowledging that the film "does not smack the audience over the head with a blatant reference to Christ or the salvation that is

necessary", it does, nonetheless, this reviewer posits, explicitly demand "a belief and trust in a benevolent higher power that is the creator and sustainer of all things" (www.christiananswers.net/spotlight/reviews/fightclub.html). Such a theological reading of the film may not, of course, be palatable to all viewers, but there is, without doubt, whether one subscribes to a specifically Christian interpretation or not, a profound sense in which both *American Beauty* and *Fight Club* not only expose the estrangement and malaise at the heart of society, but also posit a remedy, by way of enabling us to reconnect and re-envision the more tender and beautiful dimension innate both in creation and in humankind's capacity for participating in that creation.

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¹ A fuller discussion of the relationship between redemption and violence as it pertains to *Taxi Driver* can be found in my article on 'The Christian concept of redemption and its application through the films of Martin Scorsese', in *Religious Studies and Theology* 17 (1), 1998: 46-70. I focus in particular on *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980) and *Cape Fear* (1991). This theme is also discussed in my articles on 'Screen Christologies: An evaluation of the role of Christ-figures in film' in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 14 (3), 1999: 325-37, and on 'Redemption and film: Cinema as a contemporary site of religious activity' in *Media Development*, vol. XLVII (1/2000): 50-54.

² This process of transcending limitations may also be found in, among others, *Pleasantville* (Gary Ross, 1998) and *Little Voice* (Mark Herman, 1998). My article 'Fantasy versus redemption: Religious possibility in *Little Voice*', can be found online at the *Journal of Religion and Film* (<http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf>), 4 (2), 2000.

³ Although this discussion has focused on Lester, one of the most spiritually rich insights in the film comes from Ricky Fitts (Wes Bentley), the teenage son of the Burnham's new neighbours, Colonel and Mrs. Fitts, who is initially perceived by Jane as "creepy" and a "psycho", but who may comprise the most adjusted and 'normal' character in the film. Finding beauty in the seemingly most unexpected of places - a plastic bag blowing in the wind - Ricky explains to Jane, as they watch the video of this ostensibly mundane event, "It was one of those days when it's a minute away from snowing. And there's this electricity in the air, you can almost hear it, right? And this bag was just... dancing with me. Like a little kid begging me to play with it. For fifteen minutes. That's the day I realized that there was this entire life behind things, and this incredibly benevolent force that wanted me to know there was no reason to be afraid. Ever." Maybe this scene is most in tune with the spirit of Ecclesiastes.