

# Doing Theology in a Globalized World: Religion, Diversity and Conflicts in Films

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**Abstract:** *This essay refers to God-Talk as reflection about lived religion in a media age. Three film—"Cast away," "As it is in Heaven," and "Babel"—are analyzed in order to illustrate forms of God-Talk in modern media. Watching films may stimulate spiritual experiences and theological reflections. If it is true that because of a spiritual need and a need for God-Talk every human being is motivated to theological reflection—because the quest about the last unconditional meaning of life is imposed on all of us—films open up a wide range of theological thinking. The question is whether the framework of Christian tradition provides sufficient room for theological reflection. Popular culture has developed its own reflective framework and basic thinking about fundamental human issues. Films may create a new understanding of these topics. The pluralism that confronts the cinema-goer differs from the uniformity of the belief-system which the traditional church-goer faces. To be in dialogue with others' world views, cultures, languages and theological frameworks of thinking is one of the most compelling challenges in the globalized world of today.*

## **Theology as reflection about lived religion in a media age**

God-Talk is reflection about the deepest interests of human life: how one can discover meaning and coherence in the course of life, and which aspects of one's biography are worth acceptance in spite of all contingency and irrationality. Theology is reflection on the thinking about God. In our human language the word "God" embraces an ultimate reality and gives it a significant interpretation. As Christian theologians we know the biblical interpretation of God's word. It is the word of God as the creator and redeemer in Jesus Christ.

Doing theology in a media age does not mean that the biblical interpretation of the word of God is left behind. It is directed much more to investigate the continuance and the transformation of God-Talk in the wider context of a Christian influenced but at the same time post-Christian, secular and in some aspects also post-secular society. Doing theology in a media age means tracing the reflection on the deepest human interests like love and justice, sin and grace, creativity and fulfilment in works of popular culture. As one example, films are increasingly important for theological thinking because they talk often about God and stimulate theological reflection in the spectators' minds (Marsh 2007).

We begin with the Hollywood film "Cast Away" (directed by Robert Zemeckis, USA 2000) with Tom Hanks as the leading character. This film narrates the story of a manager of a large transport company who is the only survivor of an airplane crash. After more than 4 years on an island in the Pacific Ocean during which he is

personally transformed he is rescued and finds his way back home. When he comes back, however, his wife is remarried. He has to find his way in a new life. The story of this film motivates the viewer to ask, “What does it mean to be thrown back on to myself, to look for things which enable me to carry on living, to reflect on the meaning and the final destination of my life, to look after relationships which give me support?”

The film demonstrates how a person finds new strength in a life crisis. Attention is drawn to the fact that life is not a personal achievement but a gift from outside. What is my relationship to this mysterious dimension which I cannot control but upon which I depend in an absolute sense? In a life crisis it can become obvious that life is a gift, but also that we have to live it in a new and more reflective way—but in which direction and with which goal? Discussing the film “Cast Away,” perhaps with a group in your congregation, may draw people into a conversation about the goals of their lives, about crises in their own lives and how to deal with them.

In some parts of the film we can also find traditional religious symbols, for example wings of an angel that the protagonist finds on a parcel which was originally in the airplane and which he returns to its sender after he has been rescued. Such traditional religious symbols have the function of underlining the message of the film in general. The message is exactly a religious or spiritual one and it tells us that we do not have everything in our own hands. We live under a higher power which determines our fate. We cannot recognize what it is but we believe that it is there. There are good reasons to believe in this divine power because it is the ground of self-confidence in the world. God is the ground of our ability to act. The Bible speaks about this God, identifying him with the power of love and unity, forgiveness and creativity, describing him as concretely human in Jesus Christ, as present in those who believe in Jesus Christ through His activity in the Holy Spirit. The film does not explicitly suggest this kind of theological interpretation of the transcendent power that provides human beings with confidence in their life course, but viewers of the film are capable of such interpretations of this transcendent dimension in their life.

The film motivates viewers to be aware of how contingent life is, how fragmentary it is and yet still related to a higher power outside of us. They are motivated to talk about their own experiences of crises and more, as the film also hints that this higher power is a God of love who provides the strength to survive in hard situations. It further shows that crises have a particular power to help people realize the importance of good relationships to the divine as well as to other persons whom they trust.

Watching films may stimulate spiritual experiences and theological reflections. There is also an emotional dimension to this practice. Watching a film may become a ritual-like practice with a symbolic value. If we do not want to constrain theology to the church’s dogmatic reflection and to its function for Christian communities in a narrower sense, analyzing films and other aspects of popular culture should enrich

the theological discussion. If it is true that because of a spiritual need and a need for God-Talk every human being is motivated to theological reflection; the quest about the last unconditional meaning of life is imposed on all of us. Films open up a wide range of theological thinking.

In terms of traditional systematic theology, a theology of film is the continuation of the theology of the word of the triune God in consequence of a postmodern und post-secular society. In the theology of the word of God developed by Karl Barth under the condition of the post-enlightenment-situation, the word of God and therefore his human presence stands for the communicable human word. The presence of this God who is the redeemer in Jesus Christ is communication in the Christian community which is fulfilled with the presence of the Holy Spirit. Yet, in Barth's theology this specific theological topic has a universal significance. God makes us understand each other. Reconciliation is nothing else but communication, as Karl Barth points out in Part IV of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, written in the early 1960s. The basis of communication and understanding between human beings who are in struggle against each other is Jesus Christ the incarnated and crucified God. At the core of his work Karl Barth always intends to explain that proclaiming Jesus Christ as the redeemer means explaining how communication can take place among human beings who are struggling against each other. Reconciliation is just the biblical expression for the principal conditions of human communication and understanding.

The continuation of this post-enlightenment theology of the word of God under the socio-cultural conditions of the media age is a theology reflecting the quest of meaning and God-Talk in the popular media culture, especially in films.

### **Theological reflection in films**

Thinking about what it means to be a human being engages a whole range of issues. We are asking how our identity and our destination as human beings have been formed, how we relate to others, how we relate to nature, what value we attach to the material world, what we think a human being is, how we respond to evil (in ourselves and in the world around us), which groups we attach ourselves to and why, and what will happen when we die.

The consideration of such basic human issues is part of the belief-system of a religion. The Christian tradition gives specific answers to these questions. Continuing to think about these basic human issues from a Christian perspective is a challenge to the church. The churches and Christian congregations are, indeed, still present in the public sphere in terms of bringing people together and educating them to understand the Christian faith and what it means to live in a Christian community. Nevertheless, in what Charles Taylor calls this *Secular Age* there is an enormous gap between the traditional doctrine of the Christian faith on the one hand and the practiced spirituality or ordinary folk on the other hand. Sociological research in the field of religion shows us that in the broader society, outside the institutionalized Church and tight-

knit Christian communities, there is hardly a notion or confident acceptance of the topics of Christian doctrine and its God-Talk. Consequently there are two fields of modern theology. On the one hand, theology is still reflecting on the Christian tradition and on God-Talk within the framework of the Christian tradition. On the other hand, there is a notion of spirituality as a lived experience of a personal relationship with the divine around fundamental human issues in the more private sphere of individual lives. Most important here is the realization that popular culture has developed more effective forms of reflective frameworks for basic thinking about fundamental human issues than Christian theology has. There is also the word of God outside the church. Karl Barth called these traces of reflection “beams of light” into the world which indicates the presence of God’s love and the work of His redeeming acts.

Films in cinemas, on television or available on DVDs produce for the broader society what theology (in its usual form) provides for the institutionalized Church and for the Christian community. Films stimulate the reflection of basic human thinking about what it means to be a human being, about human flourishing and destination, destruction and error, fulfilment and meaning. Films also refer to a broader theological framework but in a way which, in the perspective of the church, may seem heretical. This is the theologically interesting point. Films retell the Christian story and they also reflect theologically but in strange and odd forms. They talk about God by using new and unusual images. They confront us with sin and redemption but by doing so provide us with a new perspective unlike traditional Christian doctrine.

For example, in the Swedish film “As it is in Heaven” (directed by Kay Pollak, Sweden 2005) we cannot only find many spiritual motives but also a new formulation of the Christian doctrine of sin and redemption. The Lutheran minister in this film is preaching the doctrine of sin as a moral condemnation of human freedom. In his view sin is not the loss of God who is love and fulfilment of life but a lack of a narrowly defined and traditional morality. With the image of this Lutheran minister the film shows a cold, uninviting church producing a dark and unhappy form of Christianity. However, under the veneer of this theology of sin the real evil in the community and hypocrisy among the people is happening. Eventually a redeemer from outside is able to show the community how to recognize the true misery among them, the real sin. He shows the community how to escape evil and how to experience grace, love and unconditional acceptance. Here the experience of love and partnership is identified with the relationship to the divine. Those who live their relationship with God and, therefore, feel His love can become self-confident human beings. The redeemer from outside helps the villagers to discover their inner voice, to perceive the value of their personal lives, to realize their destination and to find a supportive community. There is the example of a woman which suffers under domestic violence and who rediscovers her own human dignity.

The redeemer is the famous conductor Daniel Dareus (Michael Myquist). He returns to his childhood village in search of peace and rest. Yet, he stirs up painful memories and jealousies when he takes on the role of the choir master in the tiny community. The choir is a platform for bringing characters together but also for revealing the chasms within the village and its relationships. The rural setting underlines the isolation of the village, focusing the drama on its core elements: the nature and the danger of community.

The danger ranges from domestic violence to intolerance of all kinds, often seething under the surface of genteel neighbourliness. The screenplay digs even deeper still when the pastor's wife Inger (Ingela Olsson) confronts her husband (Niklas Falk) with her buried secret of 20 years: she doesn't believe there is sin ... it's an invention by the church, she says, which has an interest in offering absolution. The confrontation is triggered by the sweeping changes that Daniel's passion for music has brought to the community, and feelings about religion are not the only kind of emotions Inger has been repressing.

The title embraces the basic human need for happiness and its spiritual equivalent, themes with which the film deals in subtle but powerful ways. The movie stimulates the viewer to pose questions regarding the place of the established religion, the Lutheran Church standing for law and order, violence and masks. The answer offered by the film seems to lie in mustering up the personal courage needed to confront one's personal hypocrisy, to strive for authenticity and for a community which strives for peace and justice, in which each person can find their personal identity, dignity and integrity.

The film "As it is in Heaven" corresponds to many other films, especially those directed by the Swedish director Ingmar Bergman. In his films Bergman, son of a Lutheran pastor in the Swedish State-Church, reflects on the gap between the essence of the Christian faith—the belief in God who is love and mercy—and a Church that represents law and order based on a narrow understanding of God's will. These films have to be understood as a critique of the Church but they also try to indicate that in secular societies in which people become distanced from the church there is still a religious and spiritual need, a search for human destination and for a deeper meaning of life. There is a need to find God who stands for the fulfilment of life, the recognition of the highest good. The point of God-Talk is the search for a social and cultural environment in which the dignity of each human being can be acknowledged.

Today there are many films which engage religious thinking of that kind. We can observe that films can address ethical issues, e.g., helping someone to die in "One Million Dollar Baby" (directed by Clint Eastwood, USA 2004), environmental matters in "Jurassic Park" (directed by Steven Spielberg, USA 1993) or regarding the quest for peace and justice in several critical films about war and totalitarian

regimes. Through films religious topics in their Christian understanding are made manifest in the public sphere and even in the minds and hearts of people who are not involved in Christian communities and their ritual practices.

Today religions find themselves in a situation of pluralism, confronted with different and sometimes conflicting world-views and religious affiliations. Individuals as well as different communities are confronted with this pluralism but they still need to find some ways of working out who they are and where they think they are heading. We have to look to film-watching, the part of people's leisure in which religious practice is also located for many. Watching films in cinemas or at home on TV or on-line is a kind of activity which often provokes critical reflection without being intended as such. This is how philosophical and theological reflection often occurs: in response to the practice of living and the search for meaning as a constitutive dimension of this practice. Film is part of the "package" of available media that people access in order to create meaning. Film primarily functions through emotions, while at the same time it influences the senses. It has the capacities as a medium to get viewers experientially involved in the subject matter of the narratives it presents.

Viewers are introduced to a realm of possibilities for developing their own interpretations of their lives and their worldviews, which are theological interpretations in the sense that they reflect on the quest for an ultimate reality. By doing so, they have the freedom to use the images and the stories in their own way, to find their own voice.

In considering film and theology together, the discipline of theology is reminded that it is itself a multi-dimensional discipline. Theology is more than just ideas and beliefs based on biblical texts. It relates to a wide range of human practices and life experiences. Theology must see itself as a discipline that takes account of the affective, aesthetic and ethical aspects of being human, as well as the cognitive side. And all of these aspects of being human occur in embodied form. We feel, sense and act, as well as think as embodied beings. By watching films theologians become involved in all these aspects of human life. So the quest of meaning and the way theology deals with these questions become concrete.

### **How God Talk can happen in a disrupted world**

The Christian framework of thinking based on the biblical issues of creation, sin and redemption embedded in a community of practice embraces all the religious issues: meaning, purpose, how to live and the nature of reality. Therefore it can be argued that cinema and film-watching function in a "religion-like" way. Cinema is religion-like because it is based upon an understanding of the power of stories and the extent to which human beings need stories in order to create meaning. The dramatic visual and aural form in which films present stories makes their narratives more accessible and compelling. At the same time cinema is unlike religion in so far as one is not presented with a single story or a set of stories. In films made for public consumption multiple world-views and ideologies are explicitly and implicitly conveyed. This illustrates the

extent to which a contemporary western person is confronted with a diversity of options and concepts of life. The pluralism with which the cinema-goer is confronted differs from the uniformity of the belief-system which the traditional church-goer faces. This is one of the most important reasons why film-watching is also essential for theologians. It helps to put the Christian story and the frame for thinking theologically in dialogue with others' world views and it also contributes to disclosing the Christian tradition in other stories. To be in dialogue with others' world views, cultures, languages and theological frameworks is one of the most compelling challenges in today's globalized world.

One film that deals with these challenges in a Christian framework is the film "Babel" (directed by González Iñárritu, Japan, Mexico, Morocco, and USA 2007). "Babel" is based upon a handful of verses in the 11th chapter of Genesis which illustrate, among other things, the terrible consequences of unchecked ambitions. As a punishment for trying to build a tower that would reach the heavens, human beings were scattered over the face of the earth in a state of confusion—divided, dislocated and unable to communicate. In the globalized world of today we find ourselves more or less in a similar situation. The film "Babel" tells four distinct stories, disclosing bit by bit the chronology and causality that link them and emphasizing the linguistic, cultural and geographical distances between the characters. The movie travels—often by means of abrupt cuts and tone shifts—from the barren mountains of Morocco where the dominant sound is howling wind, to fluorescent Tokyo where the natural world has been almost entirely supplanted by a technological environment, to the anxious border between the United States and Mexico. Each place has its own aural and visual palette. The languages used by the astonishingly diverse cast include Spanish, Berber, Japanese, sign language and English. The misunderstandings multiply accordingly, though they tend to be most acute between husbands and wives or parents and children, rather than between strangers. Surely, something must hold this world—or, at any rate, this film's vision of the world—together. What is it? "Babel" tells stories which represent a world full of differences, misunderstandings and violence. It tells stories of sin but at the end it gives also hints to something that can be understood as redemption.

What is it that produces differences, misunderstanding, fear and anger, suffering and hopelessness, desire and despair? What are the faces of sin? What makes sin so dominant? The film "Babel" reveals the nature of sin and therefore the reason why the world is so disrupted. Sin is grounded on the inability to see the other human being as a person like oneself with the same basic needs for acceptance, love and mercy. Sin is the loss of the human dimension. Sin is the hubris which does not see the needs of the other as it only realizes one's own need for recognition. Sin is the inability to listen to the other and consequently the inability to understand the other.

There is no God-Talk in "Babel" but allusions to the biblical story of the tower of Babel as a symbol of the human sin are always present. The end of the film opens up

a Christian framework for thinking which makes it possible to identify the inability to communicate with the loss of contact with God, who is the common ground of unity between all human beings and between human beings and the world. In this film sin ultimately damages the possibility to be or become human, while the tension between unity and difference can only be relieved by God.

The film does not explain the doctrine of sin in a scholarly manner. The film narrates different stories that, at first viewing, do not have any connection which each other. In this way the film raises questions about what it is that separates people from each other. If we look to the different languages, cultures and finally to political situations—the dangerous borders between nations, the enormous gap between rich and poor countries, between economically developed areas and those which are less developed—we see nothing else but deep differences and causes of misunderstanding, social distance and hatred between people. Nevertheless, just looking to what makes people different does not reach the core of their feelings, emotions, needs, desires, fears and hopes. The film also gives some hints about what brings people together, that there is something that can grow inside and between individuals that connects them in spite of their differences in language, culture, gender, power and social positions.

“Babel” uses impressive images of human faces to depict the inner feelings of love which bind them together. I think its thesis is that the disrupted world is held together by the non-verbal language of emotions, love and the experience of (physical) proximity. All four stories in “Babel” start with a conflict based on an inability to communicate rooted in some past injury. A past event makes man and woman, father and daughter, father and sons strangers to each other. There is a deep gap between them based on misunderstandings and the unwillingness to listen to each other. Most painful is the inability to listen. The characters in this film are not able access the feelings and the thinking of the other, as though a wall separates the characters in the different stories.

What is the case on the level of personal encounter also occurs between the different cultures, nations and races. The stories play in different parts of the globalized world. What makes these parts of the world—the desert in Morocco, the big city in Japan, the border between the USA and Mexico—so different from each other? Not the behavior and the reactions of the human beings, not the feelings and the thinking of the people, not their desires, their anxieties and hopes. What disrupts the world and divides it into pieces are the national borders, the political statements of power, the differing achievements of civilizations, and the differing levels of economic development. Yet, if we take a closer look the film shows us that human beings in different parts of the world with their different civilizations share the same experiences and the same difficulties in understanding each other. They have the same needs for love and human touch but the same difficulties in recognizing this because they are not in contact with

their feelings. They are not in contact with themselves. In Morocco and Tokyo, in San Diego and Mexico live people with the same inability to listen to each other. They have the same problems in understanding each other because they do not know the language of their emotions; they share the desire for love and acceptance but they do not recognize that. At the end there are some signs that people begin to recognize their equivalent needs for emotional nearness, love and acknowledgement of their human dignity. This is the first step towards reconciliation.

What holds the globalized world together? It is not global travel or the connectivity of international news on television or the World Wide Web. The divided world is unified by human faces with their anger and fear, their tears and laughter. In all the stories which “Babel” narrates we can detect signs of redemption in the unexpected non-verbal movements toward (physical) proximity. The way to reconciliation is through sensitivity for the emotions of others. The feeling of love is the ultimate human reality and symbol of the presence of God in the world.

Some of the pieces of “Babel” are attached to one another by the banal lingua franca of television images as, for example, events in North Africa make the evening news in Tokyo. However, director González Iñárritu’s own visual grammar tries to go deeper, to suggest a common idiom of emotion present in certain gestures and expressions that can immediately be recognized. We may not be able to read minds or decipher words, he suggests, but we can surely decode faces, especially when we see them at close range and in distress. Loss, fear, pain, anguish—none of these emotions, it seems, are likely to be lost in translation.

Can it be that human beings are deeply connected by basic nonverbal emotions? Is, therefore, a theology of basic human feelings the Christian interpretative key for finding a way to overcome what makes us different and to realize what holds the world together and connects all human beings? Is the possibility of understanding each other at the level of feelings a glimpse of how divine redemption works?

What is sin? If sin is the inability to communicate then the first step to redemption is recognizing our need for love, acceptance and nearness and thus creating a better understanding of what human beings have in common. “Babel” suggests that our feelings of love enable a deep connectivity. Hatred or other forms of distance between human beings is a result of culturally performed desires. Basic human emotions such as love and the human need for touch are older than culture or civilization. Those emotions and needs emerge in the early relationships between mother and son or daughter and father—one of the last images of this film. Emotions of hatred and animosity produced by different cultures and religions can be overcome. The basic feelings which all human beings have in common can be recognized. This is the first step that leads to understanding and therefore to redemption. People become able to read between the lines and they realize that listening to the other is the beginning of being understood.

**References:**

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