Only the movies have kept the faith

A generation of European filmmakers explored Christianity as belief elsewhere all but vanished

JONATHAN GAISMAN

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Victor Sjostrom in "Wild Strawberries", 1957

In Mark Le Fanu's book *Believing in Film: Christianity and Classic European Cinema* (I.B. Tauris, £72), he highlights a resonant scene from a well-known film. A group of people—a professor, his daughter-in-law and a trio of hitch-hikers—are lunching on the terrace of a countryside restaurant. Over port and coffee, the professor begins to recite a poem, which is evidently known to the other members of the party, for when he falters, they take up the recitation. The film is Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*, and the poem is by a 19th-century Swedish archbishop, Johan Olof Wallin. It begins:

Where is the Friend I seek where'er I'm going?
At break of dawn my need for him is growing.
At night he is not there to still my yearning.
My heart is burning.

The love of the poet's Friend is in the air which he breathes; His voice is heard "where summer breezes quiver"; and the last stanza exclaims:

Oh when such beauty everywhere is showing,
In every aspect of creation glowing,
How bright must be the source of this reflection!
What pure perfection!

The traces of the Deity invoked in this passionate declaration are printed everywhere in nature, but He is also withdrawn, hidden, a transcendent Being immanent but not directly encountered—in short, a God lost to modern man.

In the beginning, the gods walked with men on earth; their voices were as ▶

Critique

clearly heard as the Hebrew God's voice was audible to Adam and Eve walking in the garden. Then, for anthropological or psychological reasons which are obscure, the relationship changed. The first chapter of God's disappearance from the world is recounted by Julian Jaynes in his controversial (and catchily-titled) book *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. According to him, the process began as early as the 13th century BC in Assyria, from which period we read the engraved lines: "My god has forsaken me and disappeared . . . my god has not come to the rescue in taking me by the hand, nor has my goddess shown pity on me by going at my side." The seventh-century BC epic of Gilgamesh records the celestialisation of once-earthly gods. Ziggurats which had formerly been designed as a terrestrial home for the gods became pedestals to facilitate their hoped-for return from heaven. From here to the Book of Psalms is no great journey; many of these are saturated with the psalmist's hankering after a departed God: "Hide not thy face far from me; put not thy servant away in anger: thou hast been my help; leave me not, neither forsake me, O God of my salvation."

This first loss was followed by a much later and more familiar one. For even if the gods had long since retreated into transcendent spaces, sacred texts, and promises the fulfilment of which were indefinitely postponed, mankind continued to adopt rituals and forms of worship which cohered around what was considered to be an authentic core of belief. This state of affairs lasted until a succession of blows brought the ages of faith towards a close: the destruction of the Aristotelian view of the cosmos, the Renaissance's emphasis on the centrality of the human person, the elevation of reason in the Enlightenment, and the rise of a form of scientific inquiry seen as antithetic to religion, culminating in the shattering revelations of Darwinism. Ten years or so before the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, Matthew Arnold had already stood on Dover Beach and heard the melancholy withdrawing roar as the tide went out on the Sea of Faith.

Even so, the Christian religion continued through much of the 20th century to provide structures, narratives, communities and rituals to the countries of Western Europe. In Britain, all the principal events

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of its calendar (not just two) were acknowledged: within living memory, many newspapers elected not to publish a Good Friday edition; some schools observed holidays on Ascension Day. Churchmen remained figures of authority: they could debate with members of Monty Python on whether *Life of Brian* was offensive to believers, and evidently assumed the support of a large part of their audience. Indeed, the fact that following its release in 1979 the film was shunned by broadcasters and banned by several councils points to a continuing recognition (now accorded only to Islam) that religious belief deserved respect if not protection.

In the present era, however, atheists and agnostics swarm over the public arena, and to practise the Christian religion is to invite contempt. Those for whom the religious dimension in life remains important creep about like Old Narnians during the minority of Prince Caspian. More damaging even than the disdain of ardent secularists is the ignorance and indifference of the generations who have grown up in an age when captions in art galleries have to explain who St Mark was and what an Evangelist might be. Religion generally plays no more part in the existence of millennials than sexual recreation featured in the life of the young Philip Larkin, who memorably said that he grew up to regard it as a socially remote thing, like baccarat or clog-dancing.

In *Believing in Film*, Mark Le Fanu begins and ends with thought-provoking essays, the first of which sketches certain aspects of the cultural retreat of religion, while the second in laconic terms describes his own "conversion" (the term is used reluctantly and the inverted commas are his). His point of departure is to sketch the falling-off in religion as the "paramount driving force" in European civilisation after the age of Dante and the great cathedrals. By the time one reaches the strikingly irreligious canon of Shakespeare, whose most powerful literary and philosophical influences were Seneca, Montaigne and Machiavelli, the change is incontestable. Le Fanu points out that Donne's sermons in the early 17th century were already highlighting the implausibility of Christian fundamentals; and while the great artists of the 16th and 17th centuries were masters in both sacred and profane idioms, the retreat of religious themes in painting was obvious and irreversible.

By the Romantic era, the game was up. Le Fanu correctly identifies the centrality of Wagner, whose music dramas in some instances inflect a Christian element, but only do so in pursuit of a larger aim, which was nothing less than the usurpation of religion by art. As the composer wrote: "It is reserved to art to salvage the kernel of religion, inasmuch as the mythical images which religion would wish to be believed as true are apprehended in art for their symbolic value, and through ideal representation of those symbols art reveals the concealed deep truth within them." Le Fanu might also have quoted Novalis: "Whoever feels unhappy in this world, whoever fails to find what he seeks—then let him enter the world of books, art and nature, this eternal domain which is both ancient and modern simultaneously, and let him live there in this secret church of a better world. There he will surely find a lover and a friend, a fatherland and a God." And so on to the present day—via theatre which places an apparent ban on the availability of metaphysical consolation, the arrival of modernism (of post-modernism it is unnecessary to speak) and to the final breakdown in representative forms, so that the possibility of making a statement of value or of beauty, which might be thought a precondition to any form of religious utterance, is excluded almost as a matter of logic. We have arrived in the atonal and atheistic cacophany of the present.

But of course, the truth is more complicated and more interesting than that. Religion has enjoyed what Le Fanu calls a "long and prosperous afterlife in culture", and nowhere more absorbingly than in film. Like Wordsworth, whose intimations of immortality dwindled as he grew to adulthood, we must "rather find strength in what remains behind". As to what that remnant is, we can at the very least identify the palpable Absence, which R.S. Thomas referred to in his poem of that name:

It is this great absence
that is like a presence, that compels
me to address it without hope
of a reply.

Critique

The substance of *Believing in Film* is an auteurist, country-by-country survey of the place of the Christian religion among the output of European directors during the golden age of art cinema from the time of World War II up to the end of the 1980s. The author's criterion for inclusion is not that a film should exhibit or that a director should possess faith, but only that the film should evidence a sympathy for Christianity and a talent for understanding its inner workings, even when criticising its pretensions. One of the pleasures of tourism for the thinking traveller is the appreciation of different European countries' attitudes to what remains of their religion, and that pleasure is replicated and enhanced in this book by the author's understated and sensitive discussion of favourite films, based on a life-time of critical discernment. For Le Fanu is one of those nuanced and thoughtful people who, while rejecting extremes, is not embarrassed to confess that he remains open to the still-living truths of Christianity. This is not simply a process of equipping oneself to understand what he calls "the faith and spirituality of our ancestors, who are still attached to us by invisible but unbreakable filaments", important as that is.

What more the religious life consists in, the author does not define (beyond saying that he has changed his opinions on crucial metaphysical questions; and that the one way in which not to read the scriptures is literally). It may be that everything that has to do with Christianity can only be understood poetically, as he tentatively suggests. Another possibility is that, in order to follow the inclination to acknowledge God, it is not necessary (or possible) to posit beliefs in the form of truth-propositions about Him, of the sort that we use in our daily lives, for God is encountered, not defined. However these difficult thoughts are expressed, it is important that there should be articulate spokesmen for the condition of devout and attentive scepticism, a recognition of the place of mystery and the importance of the religious dimension in a fulfilled life, and an eschewal of the shrill dogmatism urged from either end of the spectrum. Perhaps, like the country parson depicted in Bernanos's novel and Bresson's film *Journal d'un Curé de Campagne* (*Diary of a Country Priest*), we can end in no other way than by uttering what Le Fanu calls the exquisite cadence *"Tout est grâce."*

Even so, it is thought-provoking to reflect that this is a book written by a man in his sixties about an era of film-making falling rapidly into the distant past. Will films be made about rural priests or communities of nuns 50 years hence? And how will spectators of the future view them, if they are? Will it be with the sympathetic understanding invited by authors such as Le Fanu or directors like Tarkovsky, Zanussi, Rossellini and Bergman—or will it rather be with the detached curiosity about the lives of alien species which we bring to bear on television's latest nature programmes? If this is what the future holds, what shall we put in religion's place? If nothing, how shall we bear the loss; and if, as many suppose, we can easily do so, what sort of people will we have become? S

"Tout est grâce": Claude Laydu and Matine Lemaire in "Diary of a Country Priest", 1951