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Controversy and the “culture war”: Exploring tensions between the secular and the sacred in *Noah*, the “least biblical biblical movie ever”

(In Wickham Clayton, ed, *The Bible Onscreen in the New Millennium: New Heart and New Spirit*, Manchester: Manchester UP, 2020, pp143-160)

Introduction

Controversial films, according to Kendall Phillips, are important because they “serve as a kind of barometer for the deeper cultural pressures surrounding issues of, for instance, sex or race or violence” (Phillips 2008, xv). Films, he suggests, become controversial when they appear to “present such a danger that there are those in society who feel the need, perhaps even the obligation, to voice their concerns, to sound the alarm to others” (Phillips 2008, xiv). This is certainly the case with regards to Darren Aronofsky’s 2014 biblical spectacular, *Noah*. The controversy surrounding the film, which began almost eighteen months before its release, demonstrates the extent to which certain members of religious communities – notably Evangelical Christians in America – felt the need to not only denounce *Noah*, but to warn others against it.

Noah was considered controversial for a variety of reasons that can broadly be identified in three ways: representation of Noah, the character; representation of God, the creator; and the way(s) Aronofsky and co-writer Handel interpreted the biblical flood story in Genesis, particularly regarding the perceived focus on and addition of “secular” elements such as environmentalism, vegetarianism, and ecological issues. It should be noted that the film was considered controversial for different reasons in different countries and among different religious communities. It was banned in several countries, including Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain, for example, for contravening Muslim doctrine by visually depicting Noah, a Muslim prophet. The decision by certain Muslim-majority countries to ban the film was widely reported in Western news media outlets, but was the result of religious, cultural, and socially specific factors that are not directly relevant to discussion of the film’s reception elsewhere. In America, offense was caused not by the appearance of Noah, but the way the character was depicted, particularly with regards to his relationship with God, and the moral ambiguity of his actions. The film’s censorship in other countries did, however, help to propagate a narrative of a film mired in religious controversy.

Phillips makes a direct correlation between offense and controversy, but these are not synonymous. He suggests that “the central feature for the notion of controversy is both that people were offended and, more importantly, that they *articulated* this offense in front of others in such a

way as to create a kind of political or cultural spectacle” (Phillips 2008, xvii). For Phillips, the actions taken by people in response to the offense they feel towards a film is a key aspect of understanding controversy as it indicates the depth to which they feel a sense of outrage and disorientation: for these people, there is a “deeply held, if unvoiced, assumption that, in the world they live in, such a subject could not possibly be depicted in a film” (Phillips 2008, xix). For *Noah*’s detractors, arguably the point of contention was not that the subject could not be depicted, but that it *should* not be depicted in a film *in this way*. As this chapter will demonstrate, *Noah*’s most vocal opponents are politically motivated. Their protestations represent opposition and reaction to the threat of increasing secularisation in Western society, and the diminishing power and authority of religion. The controversy surrounding *Noah*, therefore, is representative of deeper cultural tensions surrounding the position of religion in contemporary Western society.

Phillips notes that “crafting a convincing film is hard enough, but when the basis of the narrative is a tale deemed sacred to a large community, that crafting must be done with particular caution” (Phillips 2008, p128). He suggests that many controversies relating to religion and film are the result of divisions between the sacred and the profane/secular. Such tensions are evident throughout *Noah*, both in the text itself and in its reception. However, as this chapter demonstrates, the relationship between the sacred and the secular is more complex and complicated than a reduction to binary opposites would suggest. This is particularly relevant with regards to the interdisciplinary field of religion and film, where the noticeable lack of contribution from film studies scholars is attributed to their acceptance of secularisation, therefore reducing religion to a “peripheral phenomenon in contemporary social organisation, one which, in their studies, they rarely find need to consider” (Wilson, quoted in Martin 1995, p2). As the controversy surrounding *Noah* indicates, however, the underlying assumption that “secular values, forces, and perspectives matter more than religious ones” (Martin 1995, p2) fails to adequately address the complicated interrelations and tensions between the sacred and the secular in contemporary society. *Noah*’s critics consider the film’s secular elements to be evidence of Hollywood’s prioritisation of its own atheist agenda, and therefore inherently offensive to the religiously-orientated viewer. Rather than position Hollywood and the faith-driven viewer in direct opposition, however, I suggest that by acknowledging the intersections of the sacred and the secular, a film like *Noah* can open the possibility for further dialogue between religious and non-religious communities, including those within the academy.

God is dead/ Is God dead?: Secularisation and counter-secularisation

The secularisation thesis might be “taken for granted” by film studies scholars but, as the growing criticism of the model in recent years indicates, our acceptance is not necessarily shared by scholars in other fields. The belief shared by key thinkers like Comte, Durkheim, Weber, Marx, and Freud – that religion would gradually but inevitably fade in importance and become insignificant with the advent of industrial society – is now “experiencing the most sustained challenge in its long history” (Norris & Inglehart 2011, p3). Early advocates of secularisation are now fierce opponents of it. Peter Berger, for example, argues that “the assumption that we live in a secularised world is false. The world today... is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever. This means that... [secularisation theory] is essentially mistaken” (Berger 1999, p2). Today, particularly within sociology, the debate continues. Most now accept that although religious institutions have less visible power and influence in society, religious values and traditions have not disappeared from the world and are not likely to do so. Mark Chaves, for instance, argues secularisation is “best understood not as the decline of religion, but as the declining scope of religious authority” (Chaves 1994, p750). Here, and elsewhere, a distinction is made between the power/ influence of religious institutions, and individual faith or spirituality (Berger 1999; Casanova 1994; Noonan 2011). It should be noted that how this distinction is used in arguments for or against secularisation largely depends on how secularisation is understood by the author. However, just as definitions of secularisation are dependent on how the relationship between institutional religion and individual faith are understood, so too are claims regarding the tensions between the sacred and the secular in *Noah*, as discussed below.

While some authors explicitly reject the core principles of secularisation, others advocate a variety of revisions. Norris and Inglehart suggest secularisation theory can be amended to emphasise “the extent to which people have a sense of existential security” (Norris & Inglehart 2011, p4). They argue that religion and religiosity persists more among vulnerable populations, while secularisation has occurred most in affluent, secure, post-industrial nations. Acknowledging America’s apparently “exceptional” status among rich nations, they point to the levels of social inequality and economic and personal insecurity as a possible explanation for continuing religiosity (p108). Voas and Chaves, meanwhile, challenge the core assumption that the United States is a counterexample to secularisation, arguing instead that such critics “either deny religious decline [in the USA] or... discount its significance by emphasising the still high levels of American religiosity, the recent start of decline, or the slowness of decline” (Voas & Chaves 2016, p1519). Conversely, Berger suggests that, rather than America be the exception to secularisation, it is Western Europe that is the exception to desecularisation. He further acknowledges that, while the relationship between religion and modernity is “rather complicated,” advocates of secularisation fail to adequately consider the

“counter-secularisation” movement, and points to a rise of conservative, orthodox, or traditional religions, including Evangelical Christianity in America (Berger 1999, pp4-6).

Berger’s assessment of religion and modernity’s relationship being “rather complicated” captures the essence of the secularisation debate. As demonstrated below, this complicated relationship is reflected in the controversy surrounding *Noah*. Although an outright rejection of the secularisation thesis seems to ignore the evident and demonstrable decline of religious influence in society, the power of religious institutions, and a generational decline in religious belief (Voas & Chaves 2016), it is nonetheless still true that, for many, religion continues to play a significant role in their everyday lives. Taking secularisation for granted, therefore, fails to acknowledge the complex interrelations and dynamics between religion, contemporary (Western) society, and individuals within that society.

Berger’s claim that the rise of conservative, traditional forms of religion are subsumed by both the media and the academy under the pejorative category of “fundamentalism” (Berger 1999, p10), indicates a general distaste for, or dismissal of, religion within the two institutions. This is echoed by Steve Bruce, who argues that the unpopularity of religion, its increasingly peripheral/minority position in society, and religious indifference leading to religious ignorance has reduced religion to its simplest principle: to be nice. As a result, there has been a “general decline in understanding of, and sympathy for, religiously-inspired social mores [emphasis added],” which in turn leads to the perception of any conservative positions promoted by Christians seeming “narrow-minded and mean” (Bruce 2016, pp621-624). Religion, and religious adherents, are increasingly Othered, with the more extreme or fundamentalist positions receiving more publicity, leading to a general sense that “religion-taken-too-seriously is troublesome” (Bruce 2016, p623). This argument is inadvertently supported and reinforced by the protestations of conservative Evangelical Christians – a vocal minority – to texts such as *Noah*, and the news media’s tendency to disproportionately emphasise the negative and “extreme” religiously-motivated responses to the film.

There is, however, one notable exception to Berger’s revised desecularisation theory: an “international subculture composed of people with Western-type education... that is indeed secularised” (Berger 1999, p10). This subculture, he posits, has a disproportionate influence over society because it controls the “institutions that provide the ‘official’ definitions of reality” (p10), notably education and mass media. Religious upsurges – counter-secularisation and the rise of traditional, conservative forms of religion – are, therefore, protest movements against the secular elite: a “purely secular view of reality has its principle social location in an elite culture that, not surprisingly, is resented by large numbers of people who are not part of it but who feel its influence” (Berger 1999, p11). This social elite includes Hollywood as well as the academy, and the so-called

“culture war” in the US is one way that this counter-secularisation protest movement has revealed itself.

Of course, accusations that Hollywood has ignored the religious beliefs of its consumers, promoting instead its own liberal, secular agenda, are not new. Michael Medved’s 1992 book, *Hollywood vs America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values*, captures the sense of resentment among certain communities, and effectively establishes the two perceived factions – Hollywood and the faith-friendly viewer – as binary opposites. Medved, a right-wing, conservative commentator, accuses Hollywood of promoting its own secular, liberal agenda, contra to the beliefs of most Americans. He argues that, because so many of the people who have the power to shape popular culture have rejected the established institutions of organised faith, they are blind to the fact that many Americans (their customers) remain committed to their religious beliefs. The filmmakers present a world that corresponds to their own, rather than their viewers’, because they are themselves non-religious. Those who speak up against “anti-religious” films, meanwhile, are dismissed as a “lunatic fringe of religious fanatics and right-wing extremists” (Medved 1992, p38). As well as supporting Bruce’s comments regarding the Othering of religious adherents, these claims are in line with Berger’s concept of a counter-secularisation movement: Medved believes he is speaking on behalf of a powerless majority, and acts as a representative of the populist protest movement against the secular elite.

Medved is not without his critics (eg, Graham 1997; Deacy 2008), but his claims are echoed by others even today. Much of the criticism of, and opposition to, *Noah* is underpinned by the same arguments indicating that, some twenty-five years after Medved’s comments, the tensions between the secular cultural elite and the faith-driven consumer can still be felt. As Margaret Miles notes, conservative Christians often consider secular culture to be the “enemy” (Miles 1996, p15). At the same time, however, many Americans are “ambivalent about, not uninterested in, religion” (p15). We must be careful, therefore, to avoid assuming the outspoken opponents to *Noah* represent the sentiments of the Christian community at large; examination of the film’s critical reception from Christian commentators reveals a far more varied, ambivalent if not necessarily positive, response.

***Noah*’s pre- and post-release reception**

Noah is an adaptation of the flood narrative, one of the most widely-known Bible stories. Aronofsky, who initially described himself as an atheist from a culturally Jewish background before indicating a more sympathetic approach to spirituality/ faith when he told a reporter for *The Atlantic* “I think I definitely believe” (quoted in Falsani 2014), draws primarily on the relevant chapters in Genesis, but

also consulted a variety of exegetical and extrabiblical texts to develop the biblical story further. The backlash against *Noah* began when screenwriter Brian Godawa's blog post, an analysis of a leaked draft script by Aronofsky and Handel, went viral. Godawa launched a scathing attack on the film, predicting it would be an "uninteresting and unbiblical waste of a hundred and fifty million dollars" that, by subverting the sacred narrative, would be offensive to the faith of "millions of devoted Bible readers" (Godawa 2012).

Pre-release information about *Noah* suggests its production was fraught with conflict and tension. The film's reception was likely influenced by its lack of clear identity. It is: a personal project by an established arthouse auteur, and a \$150million biblical spectacular produced by a mainstream Hollywood studio; a religious film written by two self-confessed "not very religious guys" (quoted in Friend 2014); and a biblical adaptation, based on one of the most familiar stories of the Old Testament that was also proudly described as the "least biblical biblical movie ever" by its writer-director (quoted in Friend 2014). *Noah* occupies an uncomfortable liminal position between the sacred and the secular, exposing the tensions between the two. It is not clear, for example, what the film's central purpose is. Is it aiming for biblical accuracy and scriptural fidelity, as implied by Aronofsky's later assertions regarding the quantity of research and religious consultation, or is it trying to subvert the biblical story and promote an alternative, atheist agenda, as claimed by Godawa?

Steven D. Greydanus captures some of the issues surrounding *Noah* when he asks, "Have Aronofsky... and co-writer Handel made a film that's too religious for secular viewers and too secular for religious ones? Who is the audience?" (Greydanus 2014). Other articles similarly question the film's scope for appeal. James Rocchi, for example, asks whether one must be a "believer" to "enjoy" *Noah* (Rocchi 2014). However, his answer does a disservice to both religious and non-religious viewers, implying the former are so easily gratified by any depiction of faith on screen that they are unconcerned with quality, while the latter will find no potential value in exploring theological issues. It is true, however, that by infusing the sacred biblical story with apparently secular elements, *Noah*'s purpose and target audience is not easily established; Greydanus' question captures the film's ambiguous position and its problematic nature because of that ambiguity.

While Aronofsky appeared to be aligning himself – initially, at least – with atheist viewers through his declarations about *Noah* being the "least biblical biblical movie ever," the studio's actions suggest they hoped the film would appeal to a religious audience. Phillips notes that, historically, Hollywood has tried to avoid ruffling religious feathers – if not for pious reasons, then for financial ones (Phillips 2008, pp129-130). After *Noah* received poor responses from Christian audiences in test screenings, Paramount Studios responded by rejecting Aronofsky's final edit and

subjecting the film to at least another four further revisions without the director's contribution. The studio's final version – an eighty-six minute film beginning with a montage of religious images and concluding with a Christian rock song – was the most explicit attempt to appease the Christian audience by providing them with what the studio assumed they wanted, but the reception was less positive than that of Aronofsky's original version.

As *Noah's* release drew closer, Aronofsky and Handel began emphasising the biblical content of their film, pointing to their extensive scriptural research and consultations with religious scholars as evidence of their efforts to create an adaptation that was sympathetic to the themes and values of the narrative. Paramount, having finally agreed to release Aronofsky's version, attempted to temper any negative response from the Christian community by also emphasising the involvement and approval of the National Religious Broadcasters. An "explanatory message" was included in *Noah's* marketing materials, stressing the interpretative, rather than literal, approach to the biblical story and reassuring Christian viewers that it nonetheless remained respectful and true to the "essence, values, and integrity" of the Genesis story. These efforts to avoid a religious backlash, however, were largely ineffectual. There may be several reasons for this, but I suggest two possible explanations. First, the mixed messages sent by both the filmmaker and the studio suggest both were hoping to appeal to as broad an audience as possible but, by trying to occupy a neutral middle ground, ultimately succeeded in alienating both camps. Second, the studio was anticipating a (negative) response from a majority of Christian viewers that was, in reality, actually held by a vocal *minority* for whom the film was "destined to fail," irrespective of its religious credentials.

Despite securing the support of influential members of the Christian community, *Noah* received further negative publicity when *Variety* reported on the results of a web survey conducted by online Christian pressure group Faith Driven Consumer, which concluded that 98% of over five thousand respondents were not "satisfied" with Hollywood's religious adaptations (Stedman 2014). However, although FDC's survey was framed in the context of *Noah*, with explicit reference to it in the poll's title ("*Noah* Movie Controversy?") and accompanying images, the question posed to supporters – "Are you satisfied with a biblically themed movie – designed to appeal to you – which replaces the Bible's core message with one created by Hollywood?" – was less so. The leading nature of the question was criticised by both Paramount and other Christian commentators. Rebecca Cusey, for example, describes FDC's question as a "push-poll," a loaded question aiming to direct respondents to a specific answer, and accuses FDC of creating a "controversy that did not fully exist before" (Cusey 2014). The question's wording is worth considering, however, because it highlights the fight for power and relevance that epitomises the "culture war." Here, the FDC assumes that: (a) the cultural elite (Hollywood) will prioritise and supplant its own secular worldview over a religious

one, irrespective of the story being told onscreen; and (b), regardless of (a), the faith-driven consumer is still the assumed target audience of these films.

Prior to and just after *Noah*'s release, the news media continued to report on the controversy surrounding Aronofsky's film. This appears to have been largely initiated by the two aforementioned sources – Godawa's initial and subsequent blog posts, and FDC's survey – as well as condemnation by key conservative commentators like Glenn Beck. Many critics had not yet seen the film when they voiced their disapproval; subsequent reviews generally ranged from ambivalent to positive. Greydanus, for example, describes *Noah* as a "vital, surprising and confounding" film that should be commended for taking Genesis "seriously as a landmark of world literature and ancient moral reflection" (Greydanus 2014). Having initially denounced *Noah* as "strongly anti-human" with "no redeeming value," Beck retracted some of his claims, admitting that although it was "awful," it was not the anti-religious, pro-environmentalist propaganda he had expected (quoted in Bond 2014). Godawa maintained his position, declaring *Noah* to be a "subversion of the Judeo-Christian story of the Biblical Noah with an atheist humanistic environmentalism accented with Kabbalah-light" (Godawa 2014). Ultimately, however, the news media's reporting of the film's pre-release reception disproportionately emphasised the negative and "extreme" responses by a minority of outspoken, conservative, evangelical Christians, without adequately acknowledging the many Christians who were encouraged by either or both the film's handling of religious themes, and the theological discussion it had the potential to generate. The news media thus helped to propagate a narrative of opposition and division between the (secular) film industry and (Christian) consumers, polarising the debate and Othering the religious community. There is far more evidence of Christian commentators, leaders, and adherents praising the film than deriding it: many find the complexity of the character of Noah to be emotionally appealing and provocative; the focus on family is seen to promote positive values; and others consider the film to demonstrate the Bible's continuing relevance through its enduring relatability to contemporary issues of public concern, such as the environment.

Undoubtedly, *Noah* inspired much debate among the religious community, with commentators representing a range of Judeo-Christian beliefs finding ways to engage with the film and its contents. Even the responses by critics like Godawa and Beck indicate the film's ability to inspire dialogue and theological debate; its ambiguity allows for a variety of possible interpretations, which in turn encourages discussion. This is, according to Kosior, a feature of biblical narratives themselves, which are "inherently ambiguous to the point where it is less and less justified to speak about its hypothetical original meaning" (Kosior 2016, p18). The flood story in Genesis, for example, is short, repetitive, at times contradictory, and often scant on detail, allowing for plenty of scope for

interpretation and exegetical commentary. Considering the adaptation of biblical stories for cinema, Kosior suggests that every biblical film is “more of an individual creation... than a veracious recreation of the scriptural account” (p18), inviting the question of what the “correct” version might be perceived as. This is particularly pertinent when considering the response and controversy surrounding *Noah*. For the film’s most vociferous detractors, this apparently atheist, environmentalist interpretation of the biblical story did not align with their own interpretation, was thus incorrect, and therefore offensive to their faith.

The aim of this chapter is not to argue for or against any specific theological response to the film; there are other authors who are more qualified and motivated to do so, and several interesting analyses of *Noah* have already been published (Kosior 2016; Pegg 2015; McAteer 2014; Greydanus 2014, 2014b). These articles, however, suggest that the discourse surrounding *Noah* has been dominated by efforts to argue the theological value, or lack thereof, of the film. Both supporters and detractors tend to adopt similar approaches, drawing from their own interpretation of the biblical verse. This interpretation is itself influenced by the individual’s religious position – in particular their level of religious fundamentalism and the extent to which they believe the Bible should be taken literally – and their knowledge and/or acceptance of extrabiblical sources, with the film then judged against this exegesis in order to ascertain its perceived “correctness.” Kosior suggests, for example, that the negative response to *Noah* is evidence of a “rather limited familiarity with the biblical and extra-biblical narratives as well as the unwillingness to accept the interpretational openness inherent to the Bible” (Kosior 2016, p20). However, many of the critiques – from both academic and non-academic authors – are rather complex and nuanced. Most acknowledge the sparseness of the biblical verse and accept that some creative liberties will be taken. Most also accept the more inherently problematic or contentious aspects of the flood story, such as Noah getting drunk and cursing his son, Ham. Aronofsky’s interpretation offers a challenge to the sentimental, family-friendly, simplified version of the flood story that many are familiar with – irrespective of religious affiliation – but this does not mean *Noah*’s critics are inevitably writing from a position of limited religious and/or biblical knowledge. Rather, we need to look elsewhere for a possible explanation for such vocal, vociferous opposition to Aronofsky’s film. Indeed, given that many of the film’s detractors voiced their disapproval *prior* to the film’s release, perhaps their opposition is less concerned with how the biblical story has been adapted, than who has adapted it.

Godawa’s objections to Aronofsky’s treatment of the biblical story, for example, are underpinned by the screenwriter’s wider concerns regarding Hollywood’s approach to (Christian) faith-friendly viewers. He argues that, following the unexpected success of *The Passion of the Christ* (Gibson 2004), films are “being developed for [a religious] audience by people who don’t understand

it and are thus destined to fail” (Godawa 2012). He acknowledges that, in theory, “atheists, agnostics and other secularists can logically be consistent with a sacred story’s original intent and reproduce it accurately,” but believes that, in practice, they will “rewrite the story through their own non-believing paradigm” (Godawa 2012). With regards to *Noah*, that non-believing paradigm is identified as environmentalism, with a particularly pro-vegetarian, pro-animal, anti-human, anti-God angle. Given Aronofsky’s (initial) claims of atheism, and following Godawa’s argument to its logical conclusion, the film could therefore only *ever* be a subversion of the biblical story that prioritises worldly elements over the divine.

Somewhat ironically, Godawa’s argument that fidelity to the descriptive details is less important than fidelity to the “*meaning* of the story and its *God* [emphasis in original]” (Godawa 2015) is echoed by Aronofsky himself (in Falsani 2014). Both argue that staying true to the essence and values of the biblical verse is more important than historical accuracy. However, Godawa’s criticism of *Noah* is underpinned by the belief that only an “insider” – a person writing from a position of religious commitment – has the experience, knowledge and, crucially, the authority to engage with and adapt religious content. He says, for example: “You wouldn’t want a homophobe telling the story of Harvey Milk, or a racist telling the story of Martin Luther King, would you? So why is it acceptable for an atheist to tell a sacred story about the God they hate or don’t believe exists?” (Godawa 2015). The antagonistic language positions atheists in direct opposition to religion, assuming individuals will either (and only) love God, or hate Him. However, just as not all heterosexuals are homophobes and not all white people are racists, we should not assume that everyone who describes themselves as *non-religious* is *anti-religion*.

Textual tensions between the sacred and the secular in *Noah*

Examining online reviews and literature surrounding *Noah* indicates the film was regularly described as atheist or secular; Aronofsky’s own comment regarding *Noah* being the “least biblical biblical movie ever” is frequently cited. Even those reviews and critiques supporting the film’s theological value tend to frame their discussion within this broader context. Most often cited as evidence of secularisation of the sacred story are claims regarding the relationship between Noah and God, and the apparent absence of God generally; and the addition of an environmentalist, pro-vegetarian context for the flood narrative.

For its critics, *Noah* represents a subversion of Genesis; a sacred story exploited and warped to promote an atheist agenda. When God “speaks” to Noah through visions and dreams, rather than appearing as a physical manifestation and/or uttering actual lines of dialogue (as presented in the

original literary source), for example, this is considered to be evidence of a secularist interpretation because “a non-speaking god is... the same practical thing as a non-existent God” (Godawa 2014). Admittedly, this is a more nuanced argument than the initial semantic dispute regarding the alleged absence of the word “God” in the film – a claim easily debunked, as not only do characters repeatedly refer to “the Creator,” Ham also states at one point, “My father [Noah] says there can be no king; the creator is God” – but arguably fails to adequately consider the medium specificity of film, and the opportunities the audio-visual qualities of cinema offers to literary adaptation. It is also interesting that attempts to discuss the alleged secularisation of the sacred narrative are inevitably forced to confront theological issues. It is difficult to agree with *Noah*’s critics regarding the apparent absence of God, for example, when His presence is apparent throughout the film: when Noah struggles to accept his mission, Methuselah tells him, “He [the Creator; God] speaks to you. You must trust that He speaks to you in a way that you can understand.” Indeed, there is never any suggestion the characters – even adversary Tubal-Cain – doubt the divine source of Noah’s visions. Arguably, by depicting God as “speaking” to Noah through visions and dreams, rather than presenting Him in a form perceived through the limits of human comprehension, Aronofsky maintains His divine inconceivability, rather than reproducing Him in man’s image. Noah receives the prophecy in more ambiguous ways than suggested in Genesis, and as a result the film raises complex theological questions about faith itself, which is by definition characterised by conviction, not proof. Ultimately, however, the film appears to confirm the existence and righteousness of God through the unfolding events: Noah’s faith is validated and, with that, so too is the non-verbal “word of God.”

The alleged inclusion of environmentalist and pro-vegetarian themes is further cited as evidence of Aronofsky’s secularist agenda. Noah’s apparent prioritisation of nature over humanity – as indicated by his willingness to kill people, and to accept that all of humanity will be wiped out, while admonishing his son for picking a flower, for instance – is used as evidence of Aronofsky’s own rejection of the natural hierarchy established in the Bible, whereby God favours humanity over all His other creations. Conversely, however, Aronofsky is also accused of promoting humanism, of elevating humanity above God by depicting Noah as more loving, compassionate, and forgiving than God (Godawa 2014). But it is possible to challenge such a claim. Somewhat facetiously, for example, we could point out that there is no indication that Noah attempts to save all animals – presumably the vast majority will die alongside humans in the flood waters – so one might suggest that despite his vegetarianism, Noah is equally unconcerned with the survival of most humans *and* animals. However, it is worth considering the omissions from the flood story as well as the additions. Indeed, one moment stands out that could quite persuasively be used as evidence of the film’s pro-environmentalism, anti-meat agenda. In Genesis, Noah sacrifices a selection of clean and unclean

animals to God after the flood waters recede. In response, God blesses Noah and his family, and declares their dominion over the rest of nature, including authorising meat-eating for the first time. None of this features in Aronofsky's adaptation. Surprisingly, however, the omission of this key moment in Genesis has remained largely unmentioned. This may be, as Kosior argues, one example of how Aronofsky's film could have been "a far more controversial and unsettling" had it adhered more rigidly to the source material (Kosior 2016, p3). Not only does this development in Genesis challenge people's sentimental recollections of Noah (one objection Beck had to the film, for example, was that it contradicted his understanding of Noah as a "nice, gentle guy" (quoted in Ritz 2014)), perhaps not even *Noah's* most vociferous opponents want to argue in support of a scene of animal slaughter.

Whereas critics and detractors consider *Noah's* inherent ambiguity to be evidence of the director's secular agenda, it is clear this is only one interpretation of the text. Claims of secularisation are often challenged through the various alternative, theological readings of the film. McAteer, for example, argues that *Noah* presents two contrasting possible worldviews – radical humanism and radical environmentalism – but proposes that neither can adequately provide the answers that a Christian worldview offers (McAteer 2014). Pegg offers a direct challenge to Godawa's claims of the film's prioritisation of humanity over divinity by arguing that *Noah* demonstrates how God "works through *humans*, in all their weaknesses, faults and sins [emphasis in original]" (Pegg 2015, p3). It appears that, for every claim of secularisation, a counter-claim exists that argues the film's theological potential. Furthermore, we might even question whether the inclusion of environmentalist themes even constitutes a secular approach in the first place. Ortiz' chapter on theological perspectives on the environment in film (Deacy & Ortiz 2008), indicates that even secular films – those with no explicit reference to religion – can raise important theological questions. If secular films can be – and often are - subjected to theological readings, why is it so objectionable that an adaptation of a sacred narrative might also consider secular themes? Arguably, Aronofsky opens his film, as well as the biblical narrative it is based on, up to a wide range of possible interpretations through both its inherent ambiguity and its attempt to address themes relevant to a secular audience within a narrative held sacred by a religious audience.

Pegg argues that tension is "palpable" throughout *Noah*: tension between Noah's interpretation of God's message and other characters' interpretations of the same signs; tension in being told that humanity has sinned while being shown innocents in fallen cities; and tension in the way that God is portrayed (Pegg 2015, p2). For Pegg, the last point is highly significant, because it "highlights the difficulties many now face in reconciling the seeming differences between the God in the Old Testament and the God in the New Testament" (p2). The decision to not "Christian-ise" the

flood narrative is a bold one that might, in part at least, explain some of the opposition towards the film: for those who consider the Christian God to be the forgiving, loving, compassionate God of the New Testament, the vengeful, erratic, demanding God of the Old Testament can undoubtedly offer a challenge to their faith. There is, however, another tension evident throughout the film: a tension between the sacred and the secular. This tension reveals itself in every moment that has simultaneously been identified as evidence of an atheist interpretation, and an opportunity to engage in theological discussion. The duality of the sacred and the secular in *Noah* is the reason trying to isolate one or the other is so difficult; why it is a challenge to analyse the secular elements without resorting to a theological debate. Arguably, the claims made by *Noah*'s opponents regarding its alleged secularisation agenda have already been explored, and often refuted, by the theological discussion that already exists. More interesting, therefore, is the question of why such opposition exists in the first place.

Here, Berger's concept of the counter-secularisation movement is particularly useful. Godawa, and other critics of *Noah*, present the sacred and the secular, religious and non-religious, as binary opposites. His claims echo those made by Medved in the early 90s, indicating the "culture war" between the secular elite and the faith-driven consumer is still being fought, albeit by a group of people who increasingly constitute the traditional minority, rather than the religious majority. Arguably, as secularisation – in terms of religious institutional influence rather than individual spirituality – increases, those with a more explicitly oppositional, fundamentalist approach will continue to be marginalised, even within the wider religious community, as the more liberal, progressive adherents find a way to negotiate their belief within, rather than in conflict against, secular society. Indeed, Aronofsky's adaptation of the flood story can be seen to be engaging with these issues itself, through its depiction of faith and its interpretation of the traditional biblical verse. *Noah* does not shy away from theological issues, but presents them in ambiguous ways that allow for more personal reflection. It depicts the sacred story in a way that challenges the family-friendly, nostalgic recollections of the familiar tale, while simultaneously not requiring its audience to have any in-depth knowledge of the various biblical and extrabiblical sources and exegeses. Some, like McAteer, consider this to be the film's strength: he argues that "*Noah* opens a space for public theological dialogue and invites unbelievers into a conversation that takes theology seriously" (McAteer 2015). In contrast, Godawa's argument suggests that the fact that this film – a sacred story told by an apparent atheist – exists at all is evidence of secularisation threatening the increasingly marginalised (traditional) religious community.

Conclusion

The controversy surrounding *Noah* demonstrates the tensions between the secular and the sacred, and its pre- and post-release reception indicates the ongoing “culture war” as part of the counter-secularisation movement against a secular, cultural elite. Increasing secularisation – even in America – has seen institutional religious influence decline, personal faith becoming more individualised and spiritually-driven, and religious communities becoming increasingly marginalised, misunderstood, and Othered. However, taking secularisation for granted fails to acknowledge the complex, and complicated, relationship between religion and contemporary society, and risks further marginalising and alienating those for whom religion continues to play a significant role in their everyday lives. Secularisation has not replaced religion, but displaced it, and the power struggle between the two continues. Nonetheless, the changing position of religion in society represents a real and direct threat to religious communities and faith-driven individuals, who respond by adopting more polarised, oppositional, traditional roles.

Examining *Noah* in light of these debates, I propose the film encapsulates the tensions between the secular and the sacred. *Noah*’s identity crisis – its refusal (or inability) to be either an inoffensive biblical adaptation, or a provocatively secular interpretation – is perhaps a reason for its ambivalent, varied reception. By apparently hoping to attract both a religious and non-religious audience, *Noah* ultimately fails to adequately appeal to either. As Greydanus notes, it is arguably too secular for religious audiences, and too religious for atheists. Rather than consider this to be inherently problematic, however, I suggest Aronofsky’s approach has the potential to open up the biblical text to both religious and non-religious audiences. Whether the film is understood to confirm or reject faith will be largely a subjective response, but the theme running throughout *Noah* regarding faith and the struggles associated with it is one that has the potential to resonate with both religious and non-religious viewers. By incorporating contemporary, secular issues like environmentalism and the consequences of human action, *Noah* does not reject religion, but in fact demonstrates how the “ultimate questions” raised in the Bible and other sacred texts continue to be relevant in contemporary, secular society. *Noah* reflects a wider tension between the secular and the sacred, one that is not reduced to binary opposition but instead attempts to negotiate a complex and complicated centre ground that reflects society’s relationship with religion more broadly. *Noah* problematises both the secular and the sacred – it is a film full of tension and polarity – but through this problematisation provides an opportunity for both religious and non-religious viewers to be engaged in theological/ philosophical discussion that takes neither secularisation nor religion for granted.

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