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Theresia Heimerl

Matthew Rindge, *Profane Parables.* Film and the American Dream

Baylor University Press, 2016

CONTENT

The book *Profane Parables* assumes a clear twofold thesis: films are parables, and the biblical parables of the New Testament are parables of disorientation that therefore critically question their social context. The author, Matthew S. Rindge, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Gonzaga University, presents this thesis within the first three pages of the book along with his goal – to demonstrate the functioning of films as parables of disorientation on the basis of three examples. The first main chapter deals with the context of these modern parables, which are critically challenged and hence, according to Rindge's thesis, become parables of disorientation. The author identifies the "American Dream" as this context, beginning with the statement, "The dominant religion in America is America itself" (p. 5).

To substantiate this thesis Rindge juxtaposes the – in his opinion – constitutive elements of religion (i.e. sacred text, sacred symbol, sacred ritual, sacred hymn, sacred days, myths of origins, sacred values) in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and finds parallels for each of them in the "Religion America". He sees the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence as equivalent to the holy text, the flag as a sacred symbol, and the Pledge of Allegiance as sacred ritual. The Star-Spangled Banner takes the place of the hymn. With regard to holy days, he mentions several, such as Memorial Day, Veterans Day, Presidents Day, and Independence Day. According to Rindge, the narrative about the Pilgrim Fathers, connected to the leitmotif of freedom, corresponds to the myth of origin. At this point, the author proceeds to a critique of this Religion America and its leitmotif by mentioning its unmasking in the course of countless military interventions abroad in the name of freedom. According to Rindge, sacred value corresponds to the American Dream itself, although he admits how difficult it is to define this concept.

The two approaches for the critique of the American Dream quoted in the first chapter are quite well known: racial critique on one hand; a psychoanalytical perspective on the other hand. These two seem to have been chosen rather arbitrarily, with

the far more obvious approach of social critique lacking. The first main chapter concludes with two subchapters, “The American Dream’s Gospel of Success” and “America’s Denial of Death”. The examples from literature and film given on this topic are comprehensible but definitely too short, especially regarding the complex topic of death in American culture. The main thesis of the book mostly follows the well-known thesis of civil religion as the foundation of the United States. The problem lies not in this thesis as such (which has been widely discussed) but in its application by Rindge in detail.

One of the most problematic points of Rindge’s theory is the understanding of religion itself: according to religious studies as part of cultural studies, it is not at all clear that the mentioned elements *are* constitutive for a religious system, a concern especially in the case of the last element, sacred values, which is so important for the interpretation of the films that follows.

The term “value” is not genuinely religious and was not common in any of the three monotheistic religious systems until just a few decades ago. Furthermore, these values and their interpretation depend heavily on historical, cultural, and social context. They are not at all monolithic. A comparison with Religion America should certainly take this into account.

Similarly, a critique from the perspective of religious studies also needs to address the use of the term “myth” and its missing definition. The first sentence of the final chapter makes this very clear: “FIGHT CLUB, AMERICAN BEAUTY, and ABOUT SCHMIDT undermine American cultural values, depicting these cherished myths as meaningless” (p. 95). Are cultural values the same thing as myths? What about the interdependencies between myth and the key elements of monotheistic religions quoted above? Is the American Dream the myth of the Religion America? And, finally, is the term “myth” correctly applied when talking about biblical parables? The interpretation of the biblical parables as disorientating is comprehensible, though conducted rather briefly.

The interpretation of the three films on which the book focuses is rather convincing, if one agrees with the introductory theses. FIGHT CLUB (1999) is interpreted as the lamentation over God’s abandonment and a deconstruction of the American Dream – with success as sufficient sense making. What remains unmentioned in this interpretation as well as in the examination of AMERICAN BEAUTY (1999) is the (de)construction of gender roles, mainly “masculinity”, obvious in both films, an absence already evident in chapter one. Despite a critique from a psychoanalytical perspective – which at least in Europe is tendentially old fashioned – and a critical examination from a racial perspective, the almost classic triad of race, class, and gender is missing. The third film that Rindge interprets is ABOUT SCHMIDT (2002), which, according to Rindge, is the most radical denial of the American Dream, because the leading character finds meaning in a relationship with a person in poverty, thus neglecting or even denying Ameri-

can family values. In the final chapter, Rindge once again explains and summarises the thesis of film as a parable of disorientation and compares it to biblical parables.

CONCLUSION

Profane Parables offers an interesting interpretation of three interesting films that requires both knowledge of the biblical parables as well as a willingness to disregard other interpretations grounded in cultural studies. In my opinion, the most problematic point is the very diffuse application of the term “religion” in this book. The book might offer, however, some interesting impulses for theological work with film.

