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The Religion of *The Matrix* and the Problems of Pluralism

GREGORY BASSHAM

Although Christian themes abound in *The Matrix*, the basic vision it reflects is one of religious pluralism, not Christianity. By “religious pluralism” I mean roughly the view that many or all religions are equally valid or true. In this chapter I shall explore some major Christian and non-Christian themes in *The Matrix* and examine the coherence and plausibility of the particular brand of religious pluralism it reflects.

**Christian Themes in *The Matrix***

It was no accident that *The Matrix* was released on an Easter weekend. There are numerous Christian motifs in the film, some obvious and others quite subtle. Most clear is the theme of the promised deliverer. In the Gospels, Jesus is the promised Messiah, the one “who is to come” (Luke 7:19). In the film, Neo is “the One,” the messianic deliverer whose coming was foretold by the Oracle. “Neo” is an anagram for “one.” Moreover, in Greek *neo* means “new,” signifying the new life into which the risen Neo enters and which, presumably, he will make possible for others.

The name “Thomas Anderson” lends further support. Both first and last names have clear Christian overtones. Like “Doubting Thomas,” the disciple who expresses skepticism about accounts that Jesus had risen from the dead (John 20:24–29), Neo is plagued by inhibiting doubts about the
unreality of the Matrix, his abilities, and his identity as the One. “Anderson” (Swedish for “Andrew’s son”) derives from the Greek root ἀνδρός, meaning “man.” Thus, etymologically “Anderson” means “Son of man,” a designation Jesus often applied to himself. Early in the film, Neo is actually addressed as “Jesus Christ.” After Neo gives him the illegal software, Choi remarks, “Hallelujah. You’re my savior, man. My own personal Jesus Christ.”

Neo’s path has many elements of the Jesus story, including virgin birth. In the scene in which he is rescued from the Matrix, Neo awakens to find himself in a womb-like vat, is unplugged from umbilical-cord-like cables, and slides down a tube that may symbolize the birth canal. Further, since humans are “grown, not born” in the machine-dominated actual world, Neo’s awakening and emergence into that world is almost literally a “virgin birth.” Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan by John the Baptist. Similarly, Neo is “baptized” in the human battery refuse tank by Morpheus and the crew of the Nebuchadnezzar. Just as Jesus was tempted by the devil for forty days in the desert (Luke 4:1–13), Neo is tempted by the Agents to betray Morpheus. In the Gospels, Jesus gave his life as “a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). In the film, Neo knowingly sacrifices his life to save Morpheus.

As Jesus was raised to life on the third day following his death, Neo is restored to life in Room 303 by Trinity’s kiss. That Neo really died and wasn’t merely revived is supported not only by the Christian parallelism but also by a good deal of internal evidence in the film including (1) the Oracle’s prophecy that either Morpheus or Neo would die and (2) the Oracle’s statement that Neo was waiting for something, “maybe your next life.” It is also significant that in an interview with Time magazine, writer-director Larry Wachowski speaks of Neo’s “rebirth.” Further, just as Jesus’s resurrected body was a “glorified” body that wasn’t subject to ordinary physical restrictions (Luke 24:31, John 20:19, Jhn 20:26), Neo possesses remarkable new powers following his restoration to life.

In an epiphanic prior to his death and resurrection, Jesus was transfigured before three of his disciples, his face and garments glowing a dazzling white (Matthew 17:2; Luke 9:29). Similarly, Neo physically glows after his destruction of Agent Smith. And just as Jesus (on a literal reading of the relevant texts) ascended bodily into heaven at the conclusion of his earthly ministry (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9), Neo flies through the sky in the final scene of the movie.

Names in The Matrix are also important Christian connections. In traditional Christian theology, Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, is raised to life, not just by God the Father, but by the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the film, Neo is restored to life by the faith and love of Trinity, his closest companion among the rebels. There are obvious parallels between Cypher, the Mephistophelean character who betrays the rebels, and Judas, the disciple who betrayed Christ. There are clear linkages, too, to Lucifer: Cypher looks like traditional depictions of Lucifer, Cypher sounds a bit like Lucifer, and movie buffs will recall Louis Cyphre, Robert De Niro’s Satanic character in the film Angel Heart. In the film, Zion is the last human city, the final hope of humankind. In the Old Testament, Zion is a poetic and religiously charged name for Jerusalem, and in Christian literature it is often used as a designation for heaven as the spiritual home of the faithful.

In the film, the rebels’ hovercraft is called the Nebuchadnezzar. In the Biblical book of Daniel, as writer-director Larry Wachowski notes in an interview, Nebuchadnezzar is a Babylonian king who “has a dream he can’t remember but keeps searching for an answer.” In a parallel way, Neo keeps searching for an answer to his vague but persistent questions about the Matrix. Noteworthy, too, is the fact that a plate on the Nebuchadnezzar reads, “Mark III No. 11 / Nebuchadnezzar / Made in USA / Year 2069,” a likely reference to Mark 3:11: “And whenever unclean spirits beheld him, they fell down before him and cried out, ‘You are the Son of God.’”

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2 See, for example, Catechism of the Catholic Church (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1994), p. 258.
5 Corliss and Ressner, “Popular Metaphysics,” p. 76. The story of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream is found in Daniel 2:1–49.
Non-Christian Themes in *The Matrix*

Although *The Matrix* contains many obvious Christian motifs, it is by no means a "Christian movie." Rather, it is a syncretistic tapestry of themes drawn from Tibetan and Zen Buddhism, Gnosticism, classical and contemporary Western epistemology, pop quantum mechanics, Jungian psychology, postmodernism, science fiction, Hong Kong martial arts movies, and other sources.

The film features a decidedly non-Christian conception of the Messiah. According to orthodox Christian belief, Jesus was a sinless God-man who brought salvation to the world, not through violence or power, but through his sacrificial death and resurrection. Neo, by contrast, is a mere human being, he is far from sinless; he employs violence to achieve his ends (including, arguably, the needless killing of the innocent); and although he may bring liberation from physical slavery and mental illusion, he does not bring true salvation.

There is also a non-Christian conception of the human predicament. According to classical Christian belief, the most fundamental human problem is alienation from God that results from human sinfulness. In the film, the fundamental human problem is not sin, but ignorance and illusion, an understanding of the human predicament more consistent with Eastern mysticism or Gnosticism than it is with Christianity.

As Larry Wachowski has acknowledged in an interview, one of the themes *The Matrix* plays into is "the search for the reincarnation of the Buddha." Much as the Dalai Lama is believed by his followers to be the reincarnation of his predecessor and the Buddha of Compassion, Neo is believed by the rebels to be the reincarnation of the Moses-like liberator who had freed them from the Matrix. Although reincarnation was endorsed by some early Church Fathers and is taken seriously by some liberal the-sologists today, it is very difficult to reconcile with Christian Scripture and has consistently been rejected by all major Christian sects.

One of the most prominent themes in *The Matrix* is the "emptiness" or illusoriness of empirical reality as we ordinarily experience it. This theme is sounded most clearly in the Zen-like "there is no spoon" speech of the Buddhist-looking child "potential" in the Oracle's waiting room: "Do not try and bend the spoon. That's impossible. Instead, only try to realize the truth. There is no spoon. Then you'll see that it is not the spoon that bends, it is only yourself." The illusoriness of empirical reality is a fundamental tenet of Hinduism, Buddhism, and other Eastern spiritual traditions. In Christianity, by contrast, the notion that phenomenal reality is an illusion is generally rejected as inconsistent with the existence of an all-powerful and truthful God.

Many Eastern religions view time as cyclical, relative, and ultimately illusory. Somewhat parallel views are reflected in the film. Time is relative and malleable in the Matrix: it can be sped up, slowed down, and even stopped; the temporal "present" is always set (and presumably periodically reset) at the end of the twentieth century; time loops back and repeats itself in experiences of déjà vu; and future events can be foreseen by the psychically gifted. Such notions of time are more consistent with Eastern mysticism and New Age pseudoscience than they are with Christianity. From a Christian perspective, time is real, not illusory; it is progressive, not cyclical; and prophetic foresight is a rare and miraculous gift of God, not a psychic ability of grandmothers "oracles."

In an online chat, writer-directors Larry and Andy Wachowski were asked the following question: "What is the role of faith in the movie? Faith in oneself first and foremost—or in something else?" They responded: "Hmmm... that is a tough question!
Faith in oneself, how's that for an answer?" From a Christian perspective, by contrast, faith and trust are primarily in God, not in oneself.

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, there is a level of violence and profanity in *The Matrix* that is clearly discordant with Christian values.

In short, *The Matrix* is a complex amalgam of themes drawn not just from Christianity but from many non-Christian religions and philosophies as well. It is this pluralistic or syncretistic vision of religion or spirituality that I wish to explore in the remainder of this chapter.

**Religious Pluralism and *The Matrix***

With its patchwork of various religious and spiritual traditions, *The Matrix* presents a religious pluralism that many of its viewers may find attractive. It is unclear whether the Wachowski brothers meant to endorse the various religious and philosophical ideas they present in the film. More likely they simply wanted to make a kick-ass intellectual action movie that features some interesting and relevant myths. Nonetheless, since the kind of pluralism the movie depicts is both engaging and appealing, it is worth considering whether such a view could be correct.

Polls show that pluralistic views of religion enjoy fairly wide support today. In one recent survey, for example, 62 percent of American adults agreed with the statement, "It does not matter what religious faith you follow because all faiths teach similar lessons about life." As we shall see, however, it is very difficult to formulate a version of religious pluralism that is both coherent and plausible.

What exactly is religious pluralism? Earlier I said that religious pluralism can roughly be defined as the view that many or all religions are equally valid and true. This definition, however, is neither precise nor strictly accurate. In fact, I suggest, religious pluralism is best understood, not as a single theory, but as a family of related theories. Four major varieties of religious pluralism can be distinguished:

- **Extreme pluralism**: the view that all religious beliefs are equally valid and true; 14

- **Fundamental teachings pluralism**: the view that the essential teachings of all major religions are true;

- **Cafeteria pluralism**: the view that religious truth lies in a mix of beliefs drawn from many different religions;

- **Transcendental pluralism**: the view that all major religious traditions are in contact with the same ultimate divine reality, but this reality is experienced and conceptualized differently within these various traditions.

Let's look briefly at each of these varieties of religious pluralism. Extreme pluralism—the claim that all religious beliefs are true—is plainly incoherent and can be dismissed very quickly. Anthropologist Anthony Wallace has estimated that over the past 10,000 years humans have constructed no less than 100,000 religions. 15 Many of these religions teach views that are logically incompatible with those taught by other religions. Is God trine or not trine? Is God personal or not personal? Is God the creator of the physical universe or the creator of the physical universe? Is or is not Jesus the divine Son of God? Is or is not the Qur'an the definitive revelation of God? Are or are not souls reincarnated? Is or is not polygamy permitted by God? Each of these claims has been defended by some religions and denied by others. Basic logic tells us that two contradictory claims cannot both be true; it follows, therefore, that extreme pluralism is false.

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12 "Matrix Virtual Theatre: Wachowski Brothers Transcript (Nov. 6, 1999)." Available online at www.warnervideo.com/matrixevents/wachowski.html.

13 George Barna, *Absolute Confusion* (Ventura: Regal, 1994), p. 207. Similarly, a 2000 BBC poll found that 32 percent of adults in the U.K. believe "that all religions are equally valid," and only 9 percent of adults in the U.K. are confident that their "own religious tradition is the best path to God." BBC poll cited on "Soul of Britain—with Michael Buerk." Available online at http://www.facingthechallenge.org/soul/htm.


Fundamental teachings pluralism holds, not that all religious beliefs are true, but that the essential teachings of all major religions are true. The idea here is that while the great religions may differ on relatively minor points (such as the permissibility of eating pork or the existence of a purgatory), they agree on all truly important matters, such as the existence of a Supreme Being, the importance of religious piety and virtuous living, and the existence of an afterlife in which good conduct will be rewarded and bad conduct punished. It is these essential or core teachings that fundamental teachings pluralism claims are equally valid and true.

The central problem with this version of religious pluralism is that on any plausible definition of what counts as "fundamental" in religious belief, the great religions clearly do differ on fundamentals. Muslims, for example, believe in the absolute oneness and unity of a personal God, and would insist strongly (and surely rightly) that this doctrine is "fundamental" to Islam. This doctrine, however, conflicts with the core Theravada Buddhist belief that no personal God exists, as well as with the core Christian belief that God is triune. This denial of a personal god may be part of the religion of The Matrix, which has a definite emphasis on the spiritual yet no reference to the divine.

Another popular form of religious pluralism is cafeteria pluralism, the view that religious truth can be found by picking and choosing beliefs from many different religious traditions. The religion of The Matrix is a good example of cafeteria pluralism. Let's call this particular brand of cafeteria pluralism "Neo-pluralism." It is the religion of the new-age seeker, often attractive to those who thirst for the spiritual yet who are uncomfortable with the religion of their upbringing. Despite its appeal to the seeker and the fact that it adds nicely to The Matrix, there are two major difficulties with cafeteria pluralism, and hence with Neo-pluralism.

First, it's hard to achieve a coherent mix of beliefs when picking and choosing religious beliefs cafeteria-style. Many religious doctrines transplant poorly outside the native religious framework in which they have evolved. Reincarnation, for example, fits well with Hinduism, with its doctrines of mind-body dualism, a substantial spiritual self, and the eternity of the temporal world. It fits less well with Buddhism, with its rejection of the notion of an enduring, substantial self. And as we have seen, reincarnation coheres poorly with Christianity, with its clear Biblical teaching of a Last Judgment and its understanding of the human person as psychophysical unity.16

Second, even if the cafeteria pluralist does manage to achieve a coherent mix of beliefs, why should he or she (or anyone else) think that those beliefs are true? The issues here are complex, but the basic difficulty can be stated very simply. Most contemporary philosophers and theologians would agree that few, if any, specific religious doctrines can be rationally justified without appeal, ultimately, to divine revelation. But with the presumably nontheistic religion of The Matrix it's hard to see how any such appeal could succeed. There are problems even for theistic cafeteria pluralism. It seems highly unlikely that God would scatter his revelations among the various great religions—revealing this key truth to the ancient Israelites, that key truth to the Hindus, and so forth. So what reasons—other than simply wishful thinking or implausible appeals to personal religious experience—can the cafeteria pluralist give for thinking that his or her personal mix of religious beliefs is the Truth, while all the rest of the world is mistaken?

If cafeteria pluralism in general, and Neo-pluralism in particular, won't work, perhaps there is another alternative. Recently, John Hick has defended transcendental pluralism, a sophisticated quasi-Kantian form of religious pluralism.17 Hick readily admits that the great religious traditions make conflicting truth-claims, and thus cannot all be true. Nevertheless, he argues, there is an important sense in which all the great religions are equally valid and true. His solution turns on the broadly Kantian distinction between things as they exist in themselves and things as they are thought or experienced by us. According to Hick, God (Ultimate Reality, the Real) as it exists in itself is an utterly transcendent and ineffable reality that exceeds all human concepts. The Real is perceived through different religious and


cultural “lenses” by different religions, some experiencing it, for example, as a personal Being (God, Allah, Shiva, Vishnu) and some as an impersonal Absolute (Brahman, the Tao, the Dharmakaya, the Sunyata). In addition, Hick argues, judged by their moral and spiritual fruits, all the great religions appear to be roughly equally effective in the common goal of all religion: salvific transformation from self-centeredness to loving and unselfish Reality-centeredness. Thus, Hick concludes, all the great religions are equally valid and true in two important senses: (1) they all are in contact with the same Ultimate Reality (though they may experience and conceptualize this Reality in radically different ways), and (2) they are all equally effective paths to salvation.

Like Neo-pluralism, Hick’s pluralism confronts serious difficulties. First, it is of dubious coherence. According to Hick, none of our concepts applies to the Real as it exists in itself.18 We can’t say of it that it is “one or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive.”19 But what sense does it make to say of an alleged religious entity that it is neither one nor not one; that it is neither the sustainer of the universe nor not the sustainer of the universe; that it is neither the source of authentic religious experience nor not the source of authentic religious experience? On the face of it, such a concept is simply unintelligible. Second, even if Hick’s completely unknowable Real exists, why should we think that it has any connection with religion?20 If we don’t have the foggiest idea what the Real is like in itself, why should we think that it has any connection with experiences of guilt, forgiveness, conversion, enlightenment, or other phenomena commonly associated with religion, rather than, say, war or racial prejudice?

Finally, Hick’s brand of religious pluralism is self-defeating in two respects. To see this, imagine you are a typical evangelical

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18 More precisely, Hick claims that only purely formal and negative properties apply to the Real. Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, p. 239.

19 Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, p. 246.


or completely right and all other religions go seriously wrong.22 Let's look briefly at three common pluralist objections to religious exclusivism.23

Many pluralists, like Hick, argue that all the great religions appear to be roughly equally effective in transforming individuals from self-centeredness to loving and compassionate Reality-centeredness.24 This is strong evidence, they claim, against the exclusivist claim that salvation and authentic experience of the Real are found only in one religious tradition.

This objection rests on a common confusion about religious exclusivism. There are exclusivists—call them *hard exclusivists*—who claim that salvation/liberation and veridical experience of the Real are found only in a single religion. But there are also *soft exclusivists* (sometimes called *inclusivists*) who reject both of these claims. What exclusivism as such claims is simply that one religion has it mostly or completely right and all other religions go seriously wrong. It is fully consistent with this to admit that both authentic religious experience and salvific transformation take place outside that tradition,25 and this is in fact the most common form of exclusivism today.

Another common pluralist objection to exclusivism is that it is arrogant, egoistical, chauvinistic, or even oppressive and imperialistic to claim that one's own religious tradition is true and all others are seriously mistaken.26 One who says this is claiming that he is epistemically *privileged* with respect to persons of other faiths: that he knows something of great value while they are mired in ignorance or error. And to say this, it is claimed, is to exhibit a kind of intellectual arrogance or worse.

As Timothy O'Connor points out, the central idea behind this objection seems to be something like the following general principle, which we can call "the arrogance principle":

> For any belief of yours, once you become aware that others disagree with it and that you have no argument on its behalf that is likely to convince all reasonable, good-intentioned people who disagree with you, then it would be arrogant of you to continue holding that belief and you should abandon it.27

Though an admirable spirit of tolerance motivates it, this objection has two fatal flaws. First, it is far too sweeping and condemnatory. In this life, all of us *unavoidably* hold beliefs that we know we can't convince all or most reasonable people to accept. Take politics, for instance. I think the next president should be a Democrat; you disagree. I realize I have no knock-down argument that will convince you; it follows from the pluralist's arrogance principle that I should give it up. But how exactly should I "give it up"? There are only two real options here (barring really drastic choices, like shooting myself). I can believe the denial of my original belief, that is, believe the next president should not be a Democrat or I can simply *suspend judgment* on the issue. But notice that regardless of which option I choose, I'm in exactly the same boat I was in before. Reasonable people disagree with both options, and I know I can't convince them to believe otherwise. Thus, the logic underlying the pluralist's arrogance principle implies, implausibly, that *everyone* is intellectually arrogant.28

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22 This definition is adapted from Philip Quinn and Kevin Meeker, "Introduction," in Quinn and Meeker, eds., The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity, p. 3.


25 This assumes, of course, that the one religion the exclusivist claims to be true doesn't include as one of its essential doctrines that salvation and/or authentic experience of the Divine is possible only within that religion. Some conservative Christians would claim that Christianity does clearly include this doctrine (often quoting Acts 4:12: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved"), but this view is no longer widely held.


Second, as Alvin Plantinga points out, "charges of arrogance are a philosophical tar baby: get close enough to use them against the exclusivist, and you are likely to find them stuck fast to yourself." Anyone who accepts the arrogance principle must be aware that there are plenty of reasonable, good-intentioned people who disagree with it. Thus the pluralist is hoist by his own petard; the pluralist's charge of intellectual arrogance is self-refuting.

Finally, the most common pluralist objection to exclusivism is that it is arbitrary to claim that one religion is substantially true while all others go seriously wrong. The basic argument can be briefly stated as follows: There is no objective basis (from Scripture, reason, religious experience, or otherwise) for claiming that one of the great religions is closer to the truth than the others. Thus, it is arbitrary and unjustified to claim that one religion is substantially true and all others, so far as they make claims incompatible with that religion, are substantially false.

The key issue here, clearly, is whether all the great religions are epistemically on a par. Is it really the case that the evidence supporting the truth of, say, Christianity is no stronger than that supporting the truth of, say, Buddhism or Jainism? Unfortunately, as Alvin Plantinga points out, pluralists rarely "produce an argument for the conclusion that no religion could be closer to the truth than others; it is more like a practical postulate, a benevolent and charitable resolution to avoid imperialism and self-aggrandizement." But this strategy is deeply question-begging. The central issue in the debate between exclusivism and pluralism is whether there is or is not good evidence that one and only one religion is substantially or wholly true. In order to make good on their claim that exclusivist claims are arbitrary and unjustified, pluralists need to argue, not merely assume, that there is no good evidence that one religion is substantially closer to the truth than others.

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31 For representative statements of this objection, see Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, p. 235; Hick, God Has Many Names, p. 90.
32 Thanks to Bill Irwin for very helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.