

Wrestling with Religion: A Theodramatic Exploration of Morality in Popular Culture

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Abstract : The nature of religion implicit in popular culture is relevant both in and out of the university. The traditional rules-based conception of religion and the ethical systems that emerge from them do not necessarily convey the behavior of daily life as it exists apart from spaces deemed sacred. This paper proposes to examine the religion implicit in the popular culture phenomenon of professional wrestling and how that affects the understanding of popular religion. Pro wrestling, while frequently dismissed, offers a unique manner through which to re-examine religion in popular culture. A global phenomenon, pro wrestling occupies a distinct space in numerous countries and presents a legitimate reflection of human behavior cross-culturally on a scale few other phenomena can equal. Given its global viewership of millions, it should be recognized as a significant means of interpreting the human attraction to violence and its association with religion in general. Hans Urs von Balthasar's theory of Theodrama will be used to interrogate the inchoate religion within pro wrestling. While Balthasar developed theodrama within the confines of Christian theology; theodrama contains remarkable versatility in its potential utility. Since theodrama re-envision reality as drama, the actions of every human actor on the stage contributes to the play's development, and all action contains some transcendent value. It is in this sense that even the "low brow" activity of pro wrestling may be understood in religious terms. Moreover, a pro wrestling storyline acts as a play within a play: the struggles in a pro wrestling match reflect the human attitudes toward life as it exists in the sacred and profane realms. The indistinct lines separating traditionally good (face) from traditionally bad (heel) wrestlers mirror the moral ambiguity in which many people interpret life. This blurred distinction between good and bad, and large segments of an audience's embrace of the heel wrestlers, reveal ethical constraints that guide the everyday values of pro wrestling spectators, a moral ambivalence that is often overlooked by traditional religious systems, and which has hitherto been neglected in the academic literature on pro wrestling. The significance of interpreting the religion implicit in pro wrestling through a the dramatic lens extends beyond pro wrestling specifically and can examine the religion implicit in popular culture in general. The use of theodrama mitigates the rigid separation often ascribed to areas deemed sacred/ profane, or transcendent / immanent, enabling a re-evaluation of religion and ethical systems as practiced in popular culture. The use of theodrama will be expressed by utilizing the pro wrestling match as a literary text that reflects the society from which it emerges. This analysis will also reveal the complex nature of religion in popular culture and provides new directions for the academic study of religion. This project consciously bridges the academic and popular realms. The goal of the research is not to add only to the academic literature on implicit religion in popular culture but to publish it in a form which speaks to those outside the standard academic audiences for such work.

Keywords : ethics, popular religion, professional wrestling, theodrama

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