

The Relationship of the Christian Faith to Certain Cultural Themes

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Introduction:

In the book *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used To Be*, Middleton and Walsh suggest that Postmodern culture raises questions in at least three ways: 1) What is the nature of reality? 2) Who am I? 3) How do I understand the nature of evil and redemption (Middleton and Walsh 1995, 28-63)? These three cultural themes reoccur in popular movies and music. This paper will discuss how these three themes surface in the weekly TV show *West Wing*, in the movies *Pleasantville*, *The Truman Show*, and *Matrix*, and in the album *Human Clay* by Creed.

The Nature of Reality

The Truman Show depicts a postmodern view of reality. Truman Burbank doesn't know it but he has been televised every second of every day, from the moment he was born. Though he does not know it, for thirty years he has been the star of the longest running, most popular documentary-soap opera in history. He lives in what is actually a gigantic soundstage. All of his friends and family are actors. He lives every moment being watched by 5,000 hidden TV cameras. His name means "true man" and Burbank is where the famous Burbank Studios, Warner Bros., Disney, NBC-TV etc. are located in California. Christof, the creator of the show is asked, "Why has Truman not found the truth?" He responds, "We accept the reality of the world we are presented with." The seed is sown in every viewer concerning whether their view of reality is an illusion that culture had created for them.

In *Pleasantville*, the idea is that the ideal world is one that is past when everyone lived the same way and believed the same thing. However that ideal world is an illusion – it's only a TV show. When the main characters are taken back through time into this TV show, we find that the key to reality is to “do your own thing” even if that means transgressing social values.

The *Matrix* introduces the idea that people can live in a computer-generated world and assume that it's real. Even more so, they may learn that it's not real, yet prefer the unreality to the truth. *West Wing* offers a picture of the world where everyone is intelligent, likeable, and concerned about making a difference in the world. The Creed's latest album *Human Clay* reveals disillusionment with a reality that was imposed but at the same time discloses a hopeful search for something more.

The Search for Identity

In the search for identity, Truman's name (true man) and his pursuit perhaps indicate a cultural answer to the question “who am I?” To be truly human one must examine the “presented reality” which has defined him and, if found wanting, he must break out of the illusion in order to find “truth.”

In *Matrix* Neo (the new man) is on a pursuit that leads him to find out who he really is. *Pleasantville* is about letting out the “real you” in whatever way you need to.

Interestingly, one's identity in *West Wing* is tied to a community of people who share beliefs and purposes. The President and his staff are a team working together for the good of the nation. Even Ainsley, a staunch Republican lawyer, is willing to put aside her partisanship in order to become part of this Democratic community.

Creed's song *Faceless Man* evidences a quest for finding identity as the songwriter speaks of finding oneself in the reality of nature and in a reflection in the water. It's possible, considering the lead singer's evangelical background that the reflection in the water (the Faceless Man) is Jesus Christ (*his yoke is easy and His burden light*).

*I spent a day by the river
It was quiet and the wind stood still
I spent some time with nature
To remind me of all that's real
It's funny how silence speaks sometimes when you're alone
And remember that you feel
Again I stand against the Faceless Man
Now I saw a face on the water
It looked humble but willing to fight
I saw the will of a warrior
His yoke is easy and His burden is light
He looked me right in the eyes
Direct and concise to remind me
To always do what's right
Again I stand against the Faceless Man
'Cause if the face inside can't see the light
I know I'll have to walk alone
And if I walk alone to the other side
I know I might not make it home
Again I stand against the Faceless Man
Next time I see this face
I'll say I choose to live for always
So won't you come inside And never go away*

Even more revealing of the confusion and disillusionment in finding one's identity is found in the words of *Say I* by Creed.

Say I
*The dust has finally settled on the field of human clay
Just enough light has shown through
To tell the night from the day
We are incomplete and hollow
For our maker has gone away
Who is to blame?*

*We'll surely melt in the rain
Say I
The stillness is so lifeless with no spirit in your soul
Like children with no vision do exactly what they're told
Being led into the desert
For your strength will surely fade
Who is to blame?
We'll surely melt in the rain
Say I
Frantic, faction, focus
The world breathes
And out forms this misconception we call man
But I don't know him
No, I don't know him
Because he lies
Say I*

The song reveals both despair and disappointment with man. Man is but a *misconception*.

Evil and Redemption

The nature of evil and redemption comes across in these cultural artifacts in various ways. In *The Truman Show* being controlled and given a false reality is evil, while redemption breaking out of the world that others have created for you. Similarly in *Matrix* making of a computer-generated world is evil and redemption is idealized in a messiah like figure who finds his real potential through the New-age enlightening process overseen by Morpheus. The ultimate redemption is when Neo experiences death and resurrection coinciding with a kiss from Trinity.

In *Pleasantville* evil is in the repression that society imposes on you. Redemption is freedom from repression. *Pleasantville* is a celebration of permissiveness portraying “eating the forbidden fruit” as a redemptive act.

On the other hand *West Wing* is quite modern in its approach to evil and redemption. Evil is that which isn't good for society as a whole. Intelligent ideas and better information bring deliverance.

In Creed's song *Higher* there's a sense of another world, another place where everything is all right. Yet though there is a desire for that elusive otherworld of comfort there's a stronger desire to find life here. Ultimately, redemption is found in love replacing hate.

Higher

*When dreaming I'm guided through another world
Time and time again
At sunrise I fight to stay asleep
'Cause I don't want to leave the comfort of this place
'Cause there's a hunger, a longing to escape
From the life I live when I'm awake
So let's go there
Let's make our escape
Come on, let's go there
Let's ask can we stay?
Can you take me higher?
To the place where blind men see
Can you take me higher?
To the place with golden streets
Although I would like our world to change
It helps me to appreciate
Those nights and those dreams
But, my friend, I'd sacrifice all those nights
If I could make the Earth and my dreams the same
The only difference is
To let love replace all our hate
So let's go there
Let's make our escape
Come on, let's go there
Let's ask can we stay?
Up high I feel like I'm alive for the very first time
Up high I'm strong enough to take these dreams
And make them mine*

Even in *The Truman Show* there is redemptive quality in love. Love is the compelling force that ultimately drives Truman to face and conquer his greatest fear. Truman falls in love with Sylvia in a library. They kiss on the beach with the pounding surf in the background. She tells him that everything around him is a lie and that he should come find her. She is banished from the show. Truman is told she moved across the sea. He is now determined to leave Seahaven to find her.

The Bible Speaks

The Bible speaks directly to these three themes raised in these movies and songs. Truth is elusive and hard to find. And, it is very possible that our view of the world, often given to us by others, is not true. We can be deceived and live in environments and with friends and family who confirm our illusions. Certainly, Satan is at work to keep us bound in darkness.

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. 2 Cor 4:3-4

All humanity is like Truman at some point in their life. He sat on the beach wondering what lie beyond the water, but remembering the drowning of his father which produced in him a fear of the water. His fears kept him from pursuing his quest for something more. His life was counterfeit, yet it was safe. The world of the *Matrix* was computer-generated but it seemed real and was enjoyable. Yet, there's that intermittent uneasiness that makes us believe there is something more. We are lacking peace, like the troubled sea. We need truth but truth that speaks to both the mind and heart. As Blaise

Pascal said: “We know truth through our reason but also through our hearts.... The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing.”

Because the Triune God is seeking troubled souls, we all hear a voice calling to our hearts and minds, a voice similar to Sylvia’s, saying, “Come and find me.” As with Creed’s song *What If*, we all think of possibilities that lie beyond our present experience in life.

What If

*I can't find the rhyme in all my reason
I've lost sense of time and all seasons
I feel I've been beaten down
By the words of men who have no grounds
I can't sleep beneath the trees of wisdom
When your ax has cut the roots that feed them
Forked tongues in bitter mouths
Can drive a man to bleed from inside out
What if you did?
What if you lied?
What if I avenge?
What if eye for an eye?
I've seen the wicked fruit of your vine
Destroy the man who lacks a strong mind
Human pride sings a vengeful song
Inspired by the times you've been walked on
My stage is shared by many millions
Who lift their hands up high because they feel this
We are one We are strong
The more you hold us down the more we press on
What if you did?
What if you lied?
What if I avenge?
What if eye for an eye?
I know I can't hold the hate inside my mind
'Cause what consumes your thoughts controls your life
So I'll just ask a question
What if?
What if your words could be judged like a crime?*

The “what if “ of life is what makes all humans eschatological in their outlook. There might be, must be, something more. In some sense these movies and songs

approach the answer as they speak about the redemptive character of love. But where is this perfect love? Is it not found in the Triune God?

9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. I John 4:9-12

God's love redeems. His love redeems our view of reality as we come to know Him. His love redeems our identity as we our found in living fellowship with Him. God loves.

The answer for the human quest is not found in *West Wing* sophistication and intelligence or in the false sense of freedom that one gains as he breaks the rules in *Pleasantville*. The answer involves an unending pursuit such as Truman who goes against his fears. The answer ultimately is a death to life experience, such as Neo had. Not one driven by a process of new age enlightenment, but one sovereignly brought about by the Holy Spirit. The answer is the belief and the search for something more as evidenced in the music of Creed.

You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.
Jeremiah 29:13