

“So we’re just going to ignore the bear”: Imagining Religion at *Midsommar*

***Midsommar*. Written and directed by Ari Aster. B-Reel Films, 2019.**

“An idyllic retreat,” reads the IMDB description of the 2019 “folk horror” film *Midsommar*, “quickly devolves into an increasingly violent and bizarre competition at the hands of a pagan cult.” While we might question the usefulness of the word “cult,” that’s the bare bones of the plot. *Quickly*, however, rather overstates the case, and writer-director Ari Aster will never be convicted of working too much *in media res*. Indeed, *Midsommar* features one of the longest (and, arguably, least relevant) cold opens I can remember in a film of this type, something that signals the principal weaknesses of what could have been a very disturbing film. The reality, though, is that it’s simply too long to carry the story it wants to tell. Now, whether one considers *Midsommar* too long is, of course, a matter of taste. But, for me, it was a 100-minute movie that was close to 150 minutes in length—with the director’s cut adding yet another half-hour to that. Three main reasons account for this: (a) competing storylines; (b) self-indulgent filmmaking; and (c) unnecessary set dressing.

First, while we can certainly feel for Dani’s anguish at the sudden loss of her family, her constant insecurity about Christian’s feelings for her, and the ambivalence she endures from Christian’s friends, we don’t need to be constantly reminded of it throughout the film. Rather than supporting the main storyline, her story becomes a competing narrative that consistently gets in its way. Similarly, although the competition among the three American graduate students for Hälsingland as a thesis project implicates questions about how and why we study religion, it too vies unhelpfully for our attention. Next, with his penchant for lengthy atmospheric cinematography and drawn-out establishing sequences, Aster ignores what is arguably theater’s prime directive: show, don’t tell. While obviously intended to convey the strangeness of the Hälsingland community and their Midsommar festival, unfortunately these extended scenes telegraph most if not all of the major plot points. That is, by the time something horrific does take place—the elderly couple’s grotesque suicide, the highly ritualized mating sequence between Christian and Maja, or the burnt offering that concludes the film—we know exactly what’s going to happen, and our only choice is to watch or not.

Put differently, Aster might consider taking director’s notes from someone like Ridley Scott rather than Peter Jackson. And we know that he *can* do it. Two of the most effective sequences in the film, for example, are brief, vertical drone shots that Aster gradually inverts or shifts in ways that all but induce vertigo in the audience. These unsettling effects, however, are almost immediately muffled by Aster’s return to prolonged atmosphere and mood scenes. Finally, there’s Mark, one of the American grad students who have joined their friend Pelle in his native Sweden. Like an out-of-tune Greek chorus, his sole purpose in the film seems to be pointing out—either explicitly or implicitly, but at every opportunity—how strange things are at Hälsingland. In this, however, he’s simply a superfluous stereotype, a kind of inconsiderate Jar Jar Binks character whose presence onscreen says little more than, “Mesa Mark! Mesa culturally insensitive American!”

All these—an uncertain main story, self-indulgent filmmaking, and pointless set dressing—add up to an overwhelming sense that Aster doesn’t quite trust the intelligence of his audience, either to understand the generic conventions of the film, or to follow the story he’s

setting up if he doesn't lead them by the hand. That's the bad news, but it isn't to say that we can't glean something worthwhile from *Midsommar*.

While scholars of religion may not want to force the entire film on a class, a number of sequences do offer rich ground to explore pop culture examples of religious history, the religious imagination at work in real time, and the problems that often accompany researching less-than-conventional religions. Among other things, aspects of *Midsommar* could be used to consider how we conceptualize the sacred, how we memorialize revelation, and how we reinforce (or, in *Midsommar*'s case, enforce) distinctions between esoteric and exoteric knowledge. The grad student storyline opens up discussion of the phenomenological principle of *époche*, and how we study religions that are distinctly, and often uncomfortably, different from our own. A number of scenes could profitably explore the social construction of ritual, the communal participation in ritual events (cue Durkheim), and even the dynamics of new religious conversion. Finally, together with a film such as Robin Hardy's classic *The Wicker Man*, with which *Midsommar* will inevitably be compared (and to which we might usefully add recent films such as *The Ritual* and *Apostle*), it forces us to consider how we think about the religious imagination in terms of religion's dirty little secret—soteriological scapegoating through human sacrifice.

Consider just a few of these.

It's a basic principle of religious studies that *nothing is inherently sacred*, but becomes so only by agreement among the community that regards it as sacred. For the Hälsingland group, the hundreds of volumes of carefully guarded sacred texts are a living revelation of their most profound beliefs, and are communicated in an almost shamanic manner through a severely disabled young man named Ruben. When one of the American grad students asks about this, an old man explains that Ruben has been disabled "since birth. He draws, and we, the elders, interpret. You see, Josh, Ruben is unclouded by normal cognition. It makes him open to the Source." The community's process asks, who is more open to what William James called "the unseen order" than those who are not cumbered with mundane concerns? "What happens when Ruben... dies?" asks Josh. "Do you just wait for a baby that is... not clouded?" The elder smiles as though what he is about to say is the most natural thing in the world. "No, no, no. Ruben was a product of inbreeding. All of our oracles are the deliberate products of inbreeding." Though, earlier in the film, the visitors are told that the Hälsinglanders "respect the incest taboo," apparently, they respect it unless they don't, that is, unless it serves the sacred needs of the group.

Although some people may exchange one religious worldview for another on the basis of belief, the study of new religious movements over the last generation has demonstrated fairly conclusively that movement toward conversion as a function of shifting social ties is far more common. That is, intellectual assent to a particular suite of doctrinal positions is a second-order process, one that is preceded by growing attachment to a new group in the face of attenuating connection with an old group. At some point, converts may retroactively interpret their experience to conform to particular doctrines and teachings (this is common among converts to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saint, for example, who only much later in their conversion careers speak in earnest about the so-called burning in the bosom), but the origins of conversion lie in the establishment of different social and personal relationships. Abandoned in the world by the murder-suicides of her family, and keenly aware that her boyfriend is only marginally committed to her, Dani finds what amounts to a new primary group, a new clan at Hälsingland. The important scene in this respect is not the dance competition for the honour of being May Queen, but Dani's earlier invitation to cook with the rest of the women in the

community. That is, they take an ordinary, mundane interest in her, offering her a place in their midst as they share the most routine of daily tasks. Rather than being a fifth wheel to the American grad students, she begins to feel as though there is a place she might belong.

Finally, as with any film that involves a non-traditional religious group, there is the issue of what I call “the good, moral, and decent fallacy” (which is also known as *approbation bias*). This is the mistaken belief that religions can be defined according to what we commonly consider goodness, morality, and decency, and that if they display qualities other than these, then they cannot be “real” religions. In those cases, and in what often amounts to an astonishing act of theological hubris, religions that are sufficiently different from the “norm” are regularly denigrated and dismissed as “false religion,” “religion gone wrong or done badly,” or, per IMDB’s conventional piety, a “violent,” bizarre,” “pagan cult.” The problem here is the enormous swath of religious history (and religious present) that one has to willfully ignore in order to maintain this position. “Religion is not nice,” declared the late Jonathan Z. Smith, and the sooner we realize this, the sooner we can get on with the business of understanding the religious imagination in more depth. Films such as *Midsommar* and its genre horror cousins provide excellent ground to problematize these terms and concepts, rather than simply accept them as part of cultural stock of knowledge on which the horror genre regularly draws.

One of the most difficult aspects of studying religious traditions different from our own is bracketing our own assumptions about those traditions in order to understand (or at least appreciate) them in terms of their own internal systems of meaning. What do the stages of life that Pelle describes mean for those raised as part of the Hälsingland community, and for whom they are as natural as traffic noise and intermittent cell service for the rest of us? When Josh asks the Hälsingland elder if he can photograph their sacred texts, the old man recoils in utter horror, appalled at the thought of such sacrilege. In an explicit nod to the perennial insider/outsider problem in religious studies, this asks the question of how someone who is not a part of the community can even pretend to understand the depth of feeling that group members have for their sacred traditions, beliefs, and artifacts. And how do we proceed if we can’t? Unfortunately, these questions notwithstanding, late modern culture’s profound religious illiteracy almost ensures that the religious communities depicted in such films as *Midsommar* will remain indexed under the label, “pagan cult.” More’s the pity, because, for all its shortcomings, there is much for us to learn at *Midsommar*.

And, yes, we’re just going to ignore the bear.

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