

# “Who You Worship, Where You Worship, What You Worship”: Religion in *Heretic* (2024).

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*The following review contains spoilers for the 2024 film Heretic.*

Why do people have faith? Why do we choose to believe, or not to believe? Is Hugh Grant a good enough actor to make a blueberry candle seem scary?

These are the questions that the 2024 horror film *Heretic* seeks to ask and answer. Two Mormon missionaries - Sister Barnes (Sophie Thatcher) and Sister Paxton (Chloe East) - are seeking to spread the truth of their religion when they find themselves locked inside the home of Mr. Reed (Hugh Grant), an enigmatic and intelligent man with many, *many* questions. The girls quickly become trapped - first, by Mr. Reed's antagonistic theological questions, but, eventually, they become prisoners of the man himself within the walls of his dark and twisted house.

As a writer and avid fan of horror, as well as a sociologist of religion, I was there in the theater on opening night in November of last year. I was cautiously excited to see what writers Scott Beck and Bryan Woods had concocted with this religious horror film. In many ways, the film did exactly what I have come to expect from Hollywood horror: a slow build of tension, a handful of mildly frightening moments, and a few great actors to get people in the seats. Oh, and of course, like most horror movies these days, *Heretic* was guilty of trivializing religion to suit its own needs.

However, while the movie did leave some to be desired, I found myself pleasantly surprised by the relative depth of social and

cultural assumptions that the film addressed, either intentionally or unintentionally. For many of us who study religion in the social sphere, *Heretic* could be an interesting exercise in studying religion in pop culture. While the movie didn't present any new ideas about religion, it does give insight into what assumptions Western culture - primarily Hollywood - makes about religion. Three key assumptions are apparent in the movie: (1) that religion is primarily about belief, (2) that religion changes merely as a result of competition and popularity, (3) and that religion functions as a system of control. In this review, I analyze these three assumptions, comparing them to contemporary scholarship in the field to examine how the film reflects, reinforces, or misinterprets religious life.

## RELIGION AS BELIEF

The first assumption that *Heretic* makes is one that is unfortunately a very familiar one. For both Mr. Reed and the missionaries, religion is all about belief and ontological truth. Their conversations throughout the movie center on whether Mormonism, and religion in general, can be proven as truth. When the girls first take a seat in Mr. Reed's living room, before they are aware of the danger they are in, Reed engages in conversation with them about Mormon beliefs regarding polygamy. He points out how the church's stance changed throughout history when they used divine revelation to erase the

practice of polygamy from the church in order to be more palatable to modern times. He insists that the changing of church doctrine in response to culture proves that the doctrine is not *true*:

“And it’s an intellectual barrier for me,” he says, “Because if revelation from God is filtered through man, and man is flawed. And man lies. And man sins. Then how do we know any of it is true?”

This is the thrust of their arguments for the remainder of the movie: how can the “one true religion” be *proven* as true? And, if it can’t be proven, then the religion itself must be false.

The idea that religion is essentially belief and truth is not a foreign idea to Western audiences. Protestant Christian churches, especially those in America, have long emphasized belief, taking a “right doctrine” approach rather than “right practice.” Many other world religions, when brought to America, began to adopt similar approaches, forming congregations of shared belief and emphasizing their own theological practices (Williams 2007). Many of the early sociologists of religion adopted this same assumption, focusing their studies on institutional religions, prescribed belief, and theological systems.

However, the assumption that belief and truth are central to the motivations of religious people is just that: an assumption. Many scholars now have adopted different approaches, dissolving the institutional boundaries and developing new operational definitions: religion as practice (Smith 2017) and lived religion (McGuire 2008; Ammerman 2020), to name some examples. Despite these growing paths in the field, though, films like *Heretic* prove that popular

Western assumptions about religion as belief continue to dominate discussions outside of academia.

## HOW RELIGION CHANGES

“Are we talking about religion? Or board games? Or music?”

This is a question that Sister Barnes asks of Mr. Reed in the second act of the movie, after the girls have discovered that they are locked in the home and forced to listen to Reed’s ramblings. Reed has just delivered a masterful monologue about the history of the board game Monopoly. Throughout its history, the board game has taken several forms and several names, all greatly varied in popularity and success. Reed compares this history to the history of Abrahamic religions: Judaism, into Christianity, into Islam, and into Mormonism. He also goes on to compare the gospel stories of Christ to other savior-martyr myths from around the world, in the style of Jung or Campbell, to prove that Christ’s story is not unique or even original.

“Iterations,” Reed says. “Over time. Diluting the message. Obscuring the original.”

He seems to believe that all world religions are iterations of an original, and that the only thing that affects belief is marketing. This is the second assumption that he throws at the missionaries: religion develops and evolves simply out of popularity. People only believe what they are told to believe.

You don’t have to be a scholar of religion to notice several major flaws in this step of Reed’s argument. First, he uses the history of Abrahamic religion to criticize all faiths, Abrahamic or otherwise. Second, he draws hard lines between different faith practices as though those lines were just as clear as

different publications of Monopoly, failing to acknowledge the vast amounts of cross-cultural diffusion and shared tradition.

Even Sister Barnes points out some of his more obvious flaws. He only points to similarities between myths, and ignores differences. He states that marketing is the primary causal factor in the size of churches, without mentioning the effects of religious persecution. The film's writers intentionally gave many fatal flaws to Reed's logic here; flaws that were intended for a general audience to see.

However, sociologists of religion would likely recognize another key assumption: the idea that religion can be considered an analytical category separate to other social spheres, such as politics, culture, and economics. This is a critical flaw in the logic of the movie as well as Reed's own logic. For many people around the world and throughout history, it would be impossible to separate religion as an autonomous entity, distinct from culture, history, and context. Talal Asad is one of the scholars critical of this assumption:

Yet the insistence that religion has an autonomous essence—not to be confused with the essence of science, or of politics, or of common sense—invites us to define religion...as a transhistorical and transcultural phenomenon....This definition is at once part of a strategy (for secular liberals) of the confinement, and (for liberal Christians) of the defense of religion (Asad 1993:28).

In addition to the glaring flaws that Sister Barnes pointed out in Reed's argument, his Monopoly analogy operates under an assumption of the autonomy of religion as a separate social sphere. When that assumption is dissolved, it becomes much more clear to see how a variety of political, cultural, and

social factors can affect the popularity of religious belief and practice, and it undermines the idea that "iterations" disprove any religion's beliefs.

## WHAT RELIGION DOES

In the final scenes of the movie, after the real horrors are uncovered and Sister Barnes lays dead on the stone floor, Sister Paxton begins to unravel Reed's grand schemes. She delves into the cellar, discovering the nightmares that lay there, and understands the point that Reed has been trying to make.

"There is not a single moment of this evening that you didn't orchestrate," she says in a moment of epiphany. "I'm not here because I chose to be, I'm here because you made me choose to be. Because you believe the one true religion is... control."

"That's exactly right. Religion is a system of control created by men," Reed replies. "They decide who you worship, where you worship, what you worship. They even dictate the garments you wear under your clothes."

This powerful statement unravels the mystery at the heart of the movie. Reed claimed to have discovered the one, true religion, and now we finally understand what he believes that to be. He believes that the only real purpose religion ever serves is control: a way for those in power (particularly men) to keep those beneath them enslaved. It is certainly a powerful message from the film, and one that challenges the systems of power and patriarchy that plague modern institutions.

While the message is important, however, the underlying assumption about "religion as control" is still an assumption, and one that is challenged by sociological scholarship. For example, Reed's statement that religion

“dictates” how and why people are to worship and behave is not grounded in historical-sociological fact. Many scholars of lived religion have shown how people often use religious belief and practice as a way to *challenge* power structures, not enforce them (McGuire 2008:6-7), and others construct their religious lives by drawing from many different sources without falling under the influence of an institutional church (McGuire 2008:7-8). It seems, then, that while religion does play a monumental role in constructing and enforcing power structures, religion itself may not be so easily boiled down to “control,” despite what Reed (and Marx before him) seem to be convinced of.

In conclusion, *Heretic* is an entertaining trip that takes the missionaries and the audience into the twisted home and twisted mind of Reed, and back out again, in a comfortable 111 minutes. The small cast delivered magnificently large performances, there were a handful of delightfully frightening scenes, and the dialogue was well-crafted and even better-performed. And, while there are numerous flimsy assumptions about the nature and purpose of religion, you would be hard-pressed to find any movie in Hollywood that handles religion with any more care than this. *Heretic* proves to be worth watching for general audiences and sociologists alike, and proves that yes, Hugh Grant can make a blueberry candle seem scary.

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