

**The Desert of the Real: Christianity, Buddhism & Baudrillard  
in *The Matrix* films and popular culture**

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When asked in an online chat how many more hidden meanings and hidden messages there might be in *The Matrix* than those that have already been identified by fans, the Wachowski brothers replied “More than you’ll ever know”. Now that the first sequel in the trilogy (*Matrix Reloaded*), a collection of short anime films entitled *Animatrix*, and the video-game *Enter the Matrix* (including an hour of additional footage and lots of storyline tie-ins) have appeared, the number of hidden meanings has presumably increased substantially. The significant undertones and overtones that have been identified, analyzed and discussed in philosophy and religion classes in universities around the world, as well as in numerous fan chatrooms, relate to significant issues at the crossroads of philosophy, religion, cyberpunk and popular culture.<sup>1</sup> Although there are other major sources from which *The Matrix* has drawn (such as the literature of ancient Greece), in the present paper I will examine the role of three major traditions or schools of thought in this series of films: Buddhism, Christianity, and the writings of contemporary French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. These are by far the most predominant sources of typology and imagery relating to the films’ core themes. The parallels and symbolism have been presented and discussed so frequently on the web and in recent books that there is probably no need to review these features here.<sup>2</sup> Instead, we may enter directly into the paper’s main question: what is the film doing in combining elements from three seemingly incompatible worldviews, and what if anything does it tell us about contemporary cyberpunk spirituality?<sup>3</sup>

In drawing on elements from the religious stories of various cultures and traditions, these movies reflect the viewpoint of contemporary religious pluralism.<sup>4</sup> In writing about this aspect of the film, Gregory Bassham joins many others in judging that religious pluralism is incoherent - not just in the extreme form popular in our time which says that all religions, with all their contradictory ideas, are equally true, but also in weaker forms like the smorgasbord or ‘cafeteria’ approach which simply adopts elements from anywhere and everywhere, in much the same manner as the writers of the script of *The Matrix*.<sup>5</sup> But to focus on the philosophical coherence of religious pluralism is to miss the genius of the achievement of *The Matrix* and sequels. The Wachowski brothers retell older stories, or rather, use motifs distilled from older stories and myths, and this is clearly something that has been done before – one thinks of Jung’s archetypes, George Lucas’ use of Joseph Campbell’s ideas of universals in world religions and mythology in *Star Wars*.<sup>6</sup> But they also do something significantly different. Unlike Lucas and many authors in the fantasy genre, the Wachowskis find a way to weave ancient myths into a new story which does not involve the same suspension of disbelief that stories of miracles, myths, and monsters usually do. They envisage a scientifically plausible world in which the implausible elements of traditional religious and mythic stories can be retold believably. Within the virtual world of the Matrix, everything can be real, precisely because nothing is real. The Wachowski brothers, by setting the stories in a virtual world, have found a way of enabling contemporary people to experience in a believable manner the ancient stories of Greek mythology, Arthurian legend, and of course Christianity and

Buddhism. In a virtual world, everything can be real. And in a world in which real and unreal not only become indistinguishable but lose all meaning, anything and everything can happen.

*The Matrix*, like popular culture in general, freely draws on anything that appeals and rejects anything that does not, in a rather eclectic manner. But this is not a uniquely postmodern phenomenon: popular piety in most religions has always drawn on elements from other religious traditions and has differed from the orthodoxy of theologians, philosophers and other intellectuals representing the religious establishment. The interesting question from our perspective is what the underlying rationale behind this eclectic use of religious imagery is in this series of films. In setting motifs from various traditions in a virtual world, is the aim to combine these faiths, or merely to show their similarity, or ultimately to undermine them? In light of Baudrillard, these older stories can be recognized as being simulacra, copies which may point to events that did in fact happen, or hide the fact that they never happened, or both. For when it comes to the past, we must always say, like Morpheus, “we only have bits and pieces of information”. Yet the fact that the filmmakers consider these stories worth rewriting and worth retelling is in itself instructive – films like *Star Wars* and *The Matrix* show the hunger of our age for myths which explore timeless issues in a timely manner. On the other hand, in retelling the stories, religious interpretations of the world are also deconstructed in *The Matrix Reloaded*. The Oracle’s prophecy appears to have been merely a deception, a way of getting the One to enter the mainframe and meet the Architect, where the process of stabilizing the Matrix can begin again. As Neo says to Morpheus towards the end of *Reloaded*, “The prophecy was a lie...It was just another system of control”. Having set the viewer up in the first film to assume that Morpheus was right, the sequel calls that into question.<sup>7</sup> Yet the Oracle, quite thought-provokingly, says to Neo, “You’ve made a believer out of me”. Neo was apparently being manipulated by the system rather than fate, yet perhaps he has also managed to do other than that which is expected of him, and so transcend fate and the Matrix. Be that as it may, *Reloaded* suggests that religious beliefs and the promises made by religions may be *experienced* as working and thus *perceived* as true by believers, yet for reasons other than their actual truthfulness. Distinguishing between genuine fulfillment of prophecy, and an elaborate contrivance that works to conform one’s life or events to alleged prophecy, has always been a difficulty faced by religions that incorporate notions of prophecy, fate, and providence. And so *The Matrix* and sequels at once emphasize that living one’s life as though God or Fate is at work can make one’s life more meaningful, and yet at the same time this meaningfulness may be simply an experience, an illusion. Thus, while the religious overtones of the films seem to suggest that there is some possibility of knowledge of higher truths, ones that transcend the political and the mundane, it seems one can still never know whether that knowledge is accurate. Put another way, just as once reality has been authentically simulated one can never know for certain one is not in a Matrix, likewise once religion and religious experience can be simulated, one can never know whether one is in touch with a transcendent reality, or simply experiencing interesting events in one’s brain chemistry.<sup>8</sup>

Religious traditions normally identify something as ultimately real<sup>9</sup>. Baudrillard, on the other hand, suggests that all we now have are simulacra and reality has been forever lost to us. Which represents the message of these films? At the end of *The Matrix*

*Reloaded*, Morpheus acknowledges he had “dreamed a dream”, but now that dream was gone from him; he had sacrificed lives for a goal he believed in, and yet that goal now appears to be no more real than the illusion that Cypher wanted to return to. On the other hand, there are still many questions left unanswered, and it is unfortunate that I have to speak about these issues only a few months before the release of the final film in the series, *Matrix: Revolutions*. Presumably in the end we shall find that both the Matrix and the alleged real world, including Zion, are part of a larger computer system, and that all our perceptions of these things up until the end of *Reloaded* have been wrong.<sup>10</sup> It has even been suggested that there may be a different ultimate aim of the Matrix than enslavement of human beings or utilizing them as a power source, but to find out, we shall have to await the final installment in the series. At any rate, if the storyline is true to itself in presenting these issues, then at the end of *Revolutions*, as at the end of *Total Recall*, we shall very likely still be wondering what if anything is ‘real’, indeed whether there is a ‘real world’ at all beyond the Matrix. And in that case, Baudrillard will have won the day, with Christianity and Buddhism perhaps not even tying for second place.

But at this point, let me mention another possibility that ought to be considered seriously, namely that the films may utilize religious symbolism to make a point that is ultimately not religious. God in a Western monotheistic sense is generally agreed to be absent from the films.<sup>11</sup> The films may thus be a parable, not of a religious view of ultimate reality, but a symbolic depiction the way society and its norms domesticate creativity and originality, and define reality for us so that we gradually lose our freedoms, and even surrender them willingly. The powers that be have realized, as did the Architect of the Matrix, that human beings crave choice, and so we will accept a prison for our minds ‘provided we are given a choice, even if we are only aware of the choice on a near-subconscious level’. Like Neo’s relationship to the Oracle and the Architect, or Fox Mulder’s dependence on figures like Deep Throat and X in *The X-Files*, even rogue elements would be blinded to the cover-up unless they had help from within the system. Worse still, we are never entirely sure that Mulder is not simply being used as a pawn, to focus attention on aliens when the ‘real’ cover up is something else. Likewise Neo has to choose whether or not to trust the Oracle, once he discovers that she is part of the system. The Architect seems to suggest that ‘the One’ is not really a rogue element in actual fact, so much as a way the system stabilizes itself in relation to the inevitable anomalous elements that can result in system failure. And so it is probably too early to say whether the message of the trilogy will ultimately be that we can or that we cannot beat the system. But certainly many forms of apparent rebellion against the system are to be evaluated, in light of Baudrillard and *The Matrix Reloaded*, as simply pawns in the system’s game.

*The Matrix* and sequels can thus be understood to be offering something like a Marxist critique of religion – although in this case religion is not so much the opiate of the masses, as an outlet for a disgruntled minority, allowing them to engage in simulated rebellion while still being part of the system, and thereby being prevented from engaging in activities that would bring about genuine change. This is in fact the Baudrillardian assessment of terrorism and protest in the essay ‘On Nihilism’ that is seen in Neo’s copy of the book in the movie. That *The Matrix* is not only asking about future possibilities involving A.I. and virtual reality, but is also an allegory of the present, can be seen in the fact that ‘the Matrix’, while in fact everything Neo has ever experienced up until that

point, is said by Morpheus to be focused around television, work, church, and taxes. And so while in the film the Matrix is 'everything', there are hints that it symbolizes the postmodern understanding of ideology: the language and beliefs which accompany our experience of the world, shaping and interpreting it.<sup>12</sup> And yet, if the main point of *The Matrix* and sequels is not to communicate a religious message at all, it nonetheless does say something about these in relation to their function in society. The films give both positive and negative assessments of traditional religious belief systems, acknowledging that religion can provide transcendent, life-changing enlightenment, or serve the interests of the system. Nonetheless, the choice to use religious imagery in a positive way suggests that the film is asking some of the same questions posed by traditional religions, even if doing so in a rather postmodern or even secular manner. The film's meaning is thus probably not exhausted even once its character as a parable of the postmodern assessment of ideology has been explored. The rabbit hole appears to go deeper still.

James L. Ford, in his article "Buddhism, Christianity and *The Matrix*",<sup>13</sup> describes the movie *The Matrix* as "a provocative example of modern-day myth-making". Societies construct stories, myths, as part of worldview construction, as outlined by the work of people like Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in the field of sociology of knowledge. Myths analyze and examine fundamental and existential questions about human nature and about the way the world is. That *The Matrix* addresses such basic questions is easily seen. As the Wachowski brothers put it in an interview, myth is a "mirror that is an archetype of our own time and our own life... It's how we understand where we are and where we came from."<sup>14</sup> But if we follow Ford in regarding *The Matrix* and its sequels as an example of 'myth-making', then the choices made by the storyteller regarding what to keep and what to omit from earlier religious stories like those of Christianity can be highly suggestive. The fact that thus far there is no transcendent deity in *The Matrix*, while typical of Hollywood, might be said to be more Buddhist or Baudrillardian than Christian, although even within Christianity there is the idea of God as *deus absconditus* – a God who is hidden from view, and yet nonetheless there and active. The closest one gets to any kind of mention of a 'higher power' is in the frequent references to 'fate'. But is fate in *The Matrix* 'real', or simply another example of manipulation by 'higher powers' that are really intelligent programs running the whole known world?

At any rate, myths "are the by-product of a dialectical process that often yields internally conflictive elements."<sup>15</sup> This means that one possible explanation for the apparently contradictory emphases in *The Matrix* and its sequels is precisely the process of mythmaking. To contextualize religious stories and seek to retell them for a new era involves not only the preservation of tradition, but its enculturation in new contexts which may add elements or suggest interpretations that are in tension with elements of the traditional story. For example, a version of *The Matrix* which ignored Buddhism would be ignoring a religious tradition whose popularity in the West in our time is ever-increasing.<sup>16</sup> A version of *The Matrix* which included no violence would not be an early 21<sup>st</sup> century Hollywood movie. A version that did not address some of the specific questions raised by contemporary technology and by postmodern philosophy would be preserving the traditional at the expense of the contemporary and contextual. Thus many of the elements that are felt to be in tension are perhaps part of the very nature of the enterprise.<sup>17</sup> Yet the divergent elements also pinpoint a potential problem within popular spirituality, which emphasizes the individual's freedom to choose and to mix and match

from various religious traditions. Does such ‘mixing and matching’ produce a meaningful, much less a coherent lifestyle choice that can provide genuine inspiration and guidance to people today in anything other than a superficial manner? The questions about the relationship between Buddhist, Christian, and postmodern in *The Matrix* and sequels are thus questions that pop spirituality has always needed to ask itself. To the extent that the apparent contradictions do not appear to invalidate these movies or its message, it may be suggested that *The Matrix* films may perhaps not just raise the question, but also answer it and affirm this contemporary approach to spirituality.<sup>18</sup> And certainly it cannot be denied that a very high percentage of people in Western Europe and North America stand under the influence of the very same three traditions we have highlighted in this paper: Christianity, Buddhism, and postmodernism. Indeed, not only is the combination *not* incoherent, as Bassham claims, but it is practically *inevitable* in any person exploring popular spirituality in our time anywhere in the Western world.<sup>19</sup>

Let us return now to our initial question: What is the perspective of the film vis-à-vis reality? Is it Baudrillardian, Christian, Buddhist, or somehow all of the above simultaneously? This is not an easy question to answer without the final installment in the trilogy, and attempting to read the story in light of any one of these traditions can provide you with a different understanding of the films’ message. From both Christian and Buddhist perspectives, Neo is the hero of the films. Yet if Baudrillard represents the primary viewpoint of the Wachowski brothers and of the film, then Cypher would most likely be the one who represents the authorial perspective, in at least one important respect: there is no longer a ‘real world’ to which one can return from the illusion of the Matrix.<sup>20</sup> The Matrix is a copy of a world that no longer exists. The question the character of Cypher raises is this: Why should one choose to live in a post-apocalyptic nightmare rather than a simulation of an earlier, better age? The question is raised by the movie but without yet being answered, unless one has an innate preference for ‘reality’. Several articles have been written asking what is so bad about the Matrix, and whether Cypher was not in fact right. If Cypher represents the film’s viewpoint, then the movie could perhaps be renamed *Neo Superstar*, since it is being told from the point of view of ‘Judas’.

Neo in his hyperreal world is himself a simulacrum of Jesus, of Socrates, of Christians, of Buddhists, of Gnostics, of other originals that no longer exist except in the simulacra form in which they are to be found in today’s society or in our piecemeal knowledge of the past - copies of originals that either no longer exist or are no longer accessible, and which may never have existed in a form much like the simulacra that take their place today.<sup>21</sup> And yet, interestingly enough, while we cannot know what Jesus or the Buddha would make of *The Matrix*, the same limitation is not in place with respect to Jean Baudrillard. In a 2002 NY Times interview (appropriately conducted via e-mail!), Baudrillard suggested that any ‘borrowings’ from his book in *The Matrix* stemmed from misunderstandings. And yet, the only Baudrillard most people will ever know is what they have understood from and/or in light of *The Matrix*. Somehow it seems fundamentally appropriate, albeit also rather disturbing, that the philosopher who warned us of the dangers of technological simulacra should find himself and his thoughts obscured in precisely the fashion he predicted. “Fate, it seems, is not without a sense of irony.”<sup>22</sup>

The Matrix, like the X-Files, is at once quintessentially postmodern science fiction, and yet it expresses the hunger of the postmodern spirit for modernity's certainties. Everything is true, everything is possible in these worlds: werewolves and vampires and haunted houses are real, because they are (a) part of the government conspiracy to hide the truth that is out there in the *X-Files*, or (b) older renegade programs inhabiting our virtual computer world in *The Matrix* series of films. In assenting to postmodernism's acceptance of premodern truths, both these works of science fiction nonetheless continue to feel the need to provide an implicit overarching 'matrix', a scientific metanarrative, which can make sense of humanity's multiple and contradictory experiences of life. Although the X-Files has been regarded by some (notably Richard Dawkins) as anti-scientific, in one sense it is not: everything is possible because there is an explanation, and one that is (at least theoretically) scientifically-verifiable at that, and the only reason scientists doubt it is because of their preconceptions or because the powers that be are hiding the evidence. So also *The Matrix* expresses a desire for that which postmodernism claimed to abolish, namely an overarching 'matrix' which provides the context in which all things are possible and explicable. Even though we may never find it, "The truth *is* out there". Perhaps this is why *The Matrix* takes us back to Descartes, to the 'brain in a vat' scenario, in which an evil scientist or demon deceives all our senses.<sup>23</sup> It brings the viewer back, in order to retrace the steps which lead from modernity to postmodernism, from foundationalism to postfoundationalism, not necessarily in order to point the way forward, but like all those who retrace their steps, *The Matrix* also seeks to discover whether the foundation whose absence we so noticeably feel is not recoverable somewhere along the way. But in returning to reexamine Descartes' discarded foundation, "I think therefore I am", will *The Matrix*, through the questions it raises, recover that foundation's significance, or will it rather cause even our own existence to fall into uncertainty?<sup>24</sup> Also noteworthy is that, by focusing on Descartes' question, *The Matrix* expresses popular culture's ongoing commitment to the modern, Western belief in and emphasis on the reality of the individual self. In spite of Buddhism's popularity in the West in our day, the idea of 'no-self' has yet to find many who are willing to adopt it and leave behind our cultural heritage of radical individualism. The notion may be entertained that 'there is no spoon'; the idea that 'there is no permanent distinct self' is a harder pill to swallow. In addition, the fact that in *The Matrix* artificially intelligent machines can demonstrate simulated selfhood leaves even the self itself subject to the Baudrillardian analysis that, once something can be perfectly simulated, the reality of the original over against the copy is called into question and eventually lost forever. We thus find that the films have, at this stage, raised an old question, but have not yet decided which of three answers it prefers: the conclusion of Descartes in the Christian tradition, "I think therefore I am"; the Buddhist answer, "I think and yet ultimately I am not"<sup>25</sup>; and Baudrillard's analysis, which suggests that if my thoughts can be simulated by a machine or in a virtual world, then even my own existence as the real me rather than a copy can never be certain. Presumably the final installment will provide an answer, even if only to say 'There is no answer'.

Baudrillard distinguishes between different orders of simulacra. But in the case of religion, they are indistinguishable, since no one can see beyond them to the transcendent, unknowable ultimate reality they signify. And so the question of whether

the religious imagery of *The Matrix* is of the order of simulacra that point beyond themselves to an inexpressible divine reality, or of the order of simulacra that hide the face that there is no such divine reality, cannot be known. But this series of films tells us that the simulacra, the icons and symbols of religion, continue to be meaningful to us, as signifiers of transcendence, even if it turns out in the end to be 'merely' our own transcendence that they symbolize. That in itself means something to pop culture today, which finding itself without foundations, is retracing its steps to see if it can recover the babies that have been thrown out with the bathwater, an image that we can best encapsulate by thinking of the scene from *The Matrix* where Neo is discarded with the 'bathwater' of his pod. In that which our age has discarded, therein may lie some of the answers.

Although *The Matrix* is ostensibly about people who inhabit a Matrix, it presumably includes a message for people who don't, or at least who probably don't. And so in concluding this paper, I want to ask what the movie's message to cyberculture is. Certainly the image of a virtual world into which one can escape the tediousness of everyday life and the prison of bodily existence and become a hero is a key element in cyberpunk science fiction, going back to William Gibson's *Neuromancer*. *The Matrix* and sequels explore the same theme as films like *Total Recall* and *eXistenZ*, about the blurring of the lines between real and virtual, but *The Matrix* also goes further, showing how these sorts of technological developments could have potential not only for great entertainment and broadened horizons, or for blurring the real and the virtual, but also to become a prison and mode of enslavement. The films clearly are on one level a parable of present-day cyberculture, and the willingness of people to escape into a virtual world and interact with others without being bound by the limitations of one's bodily identity. And so let us return briefly to the message of Cypher's preference in relation to cyber-society as it stands today. Cypher's belief that the illusion of the Matrix can be more real than the 'real world' sounds like the claims of many who engage in virtual dating, online chatrooms, and other elements of cyberculture in our time. One can be happier and more powerful in cyberspace than in real life. When I play the video game *Enter the Matrix* I am powerful; when I am in a classroom teaching I am less so! In *The Matrix*, Neo the computer nerd not only gets the girl but also learns kung fu without effort or exercise – the Matrix is, at least in part, the fantasy of every computer geek become reality! The dual life of Thomas Anderson/Neo is paralleled by the double life of Neo in the Matrix and in the supposedly real world. This represents the double identity of many today who show their true selves, or a false self, when they don their nick and enter cyberspace. From the perspective of *The Matrix* and sequels, there is no particular reason why the allegedly real world is preferable to cyberspace, although if neither is 'really real', then the converse is also true, and one's inability to be happy in only one of them presumably shows up a problem not with the world, but with ourselves. We may inhabit differing 'realities' that we find preferable, but what matters most is how we live our lives within them.

It is true that, as in the movie *You've Got Mail*, people can get along in cyberspace who might not in everyday life. Yet this is simply an advantage of the artificiality and anonymity of interaction via electronic interfaces: the truth is that there is in our time no cyberculture: there are only *cybercultures* in the plural. Those who are regularly present in the classical music IRC chatrooms I often frequent are to be found

almost exclusively in such virtual places. The paths of people cross – and fail to cross - in cyberspace in much the same ways that they do in the ‘real world’: through things that they have in common. Yet virtual chatting and interaction does not eliminate linguistic and cultural differences. Like meeting someone from around the globe in a church or at a Star Trek convention, you may be united in certain common beliefs or in a common passion for a particular interest or hobby, but in order to get beyond these initial commonalities (assuming one wants to do so), one must still confront the same elements one meets in cases of personal interaction in the ‘real world’, namely differences of personality, of language, of culture, etc. And so as of yet, there are only virtual and cybernetic extensions of our own cultures and subcultures in all their diversity and specificity. There is unlikely to be a single cyberculture any sooner than there will be a single human culture. On the other hand, we can be in regular contact and conversations with other parts of the world in ways never before possible, and so if the world is not becoming entirely homogeneous through the web, it is at least becoming ‘smaller’. And if the need to engage in such communication across great distances as well as cultural and linguistic divides causes the evolution of a universal *lingua franca* of cyberspace, presumably that would be great.<sup>26</sup> But at present these too derive almost entirely from English and show that things that unite some in cyberspace also divide them from others. Whether in the Matrix or in Zion, people – regardless whether they are ‘real’ beings or virtual projections – still face the same obstacles to getting along that we always have.

And yet, this cultural diversity may prove precisely what we need in order to answer these postmodern questions in an age of increasing uncertainty about what is real. This is because the scenario envisaged by Descartes and by the Wachowski brothers is an inherently improbable one, in which all the senses of every one of us are actively deceived. The question this scenario poses is an interesting and important one from a philosophical perspective. However, ‘in the real world’, we may be deceived about some things and just plain wrong about others, but those points on which we agree across cultural and other boundaries of perception are likely to bear some semblance to the ‘real’. In this case, those things that different religious traditions agree on become important – those very commonalities that underpin the storyline of *The Matrix*. The problem of the reference of our religious symbols remains, but at they very least they reflect deep-seated human instincts and sentiments which cross many cultural divides. And to paraphrase Mouse, to deny our deepest religious instincts is to deny one of the things that makes us truly human. By drawing on Baudrillard, Buddhism, and Christianity, the Wachowski brothers have managed to focus popular attention on questions that are at the heart of our postmodern cultures and our religious heritage, and also to highlight the very human diversity that may, perhaps, at times, enable us to ‘free our minds’ and catch a glimpse of what is ‘really real’.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The fact that this is probably the first major film to have a philosophy section on its official website, and to require one to play the video game in order to understand certain details of the plot, suggests that we are dealing with a unique and striking phenomenon in contemporary cinema and culture, although one imagines it will probably not be unique in this respect for long.

<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing a rather exhaustive list of possible ways of reading *The Matrix* as a Christian parable can be found at [http://awesomehouse.com/matrix/The\\_Matrix.PDF](http://awesomehouse.com/matrix/The_Matrix.PDF). See also Gregory Bassham, “The Religion of *The Matrix* and the Problems of Pluralism”, in *The Matrix and Philosophy*, ed. William Irwin, Chicago: Open Court, 2002, pp.111-113; “Finding God in *The Matrix*”, in *Taking the Red Pill*:

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*Science, Philosophy, and Religion in The Matrix*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth, Dallas: BenBella, 2003, pp.161-180. It is perhaps noteworthy that Cypher betrays *Morpheus* rather than Neo, and Morpheus is presented as suffering in a manner reminiscent of the depictions of Jesus' sufferings in art. On Buddhism and *The Matrix* see Michael Brannigan, "There Is No Spoon: A Buddhist Mirror", in *The Matrix and Philosophy*, ed. William Irwin, Chicago: Open Court, 2002, p.103; James L. Ford, "Buddhism, Christianity and *The Matrix*", *Journal of Religion & Film* Vol.4 No.2 (October 2000)

[<http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/thematrix.htm>] – now also available in a modified version as "Buddhism, Mythology, and *The Matrix*" in *Taking the Red Pill: Science, Philosophy and The Matrix*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth, Dallas: BenBella, 2003, pp.125-144. Note not only the emphasis on the illusory nature of what most people accept as 'real', but also the need to perceive beyond it, and the emphasis on waking up, which also feature prominently in the movie. It should be noted as well that, in *Animatrix*, the major world religions also get a negative portrayal in "The Second Renaissance", since they give their sanction to the attempt to destroy the newly-formed A.I. civilization. Evangelical Protestants, Muslims, and Buddhists are depicted as making common cause against the machines. Baudrillard features as author of the book Neo uses to hide his illegal software, and is the creator of the phrase Morpheus uses, "the desert of the real". Baudrillard was explicitly mentioned in the movie dialogue in an earlier version of the script.

<sup>3</sup> One suggestion, which may be quickly dismissed, is that these movies are 'really' a Christian movie, whether a parable of the Christian faith or an updating of the 'old old story'. There are a number of difficulties with this interpretation of the film, in spite of its initial plausibility (the original movie was, after all, released Easter weekend), and in spite of the many web-sites and sermons that utilize the film as a Christian allegory. While these movies are rich in imagery and symbols drawn from Christianity, the elements drawn from other traditions are not tangential to the film's plot and message. In short, it is precisely the prominent elements incorporated from Buddhism and other traditions that make it impossible to regard *The Matrix* and its sequel(s) as simply a retelling of the Christian story. For example, the fact that Neo is not the first 'One' but there have been previous '(re)incarnations', and that the key thing that binds people to the illusion of the world is not sin, but ignorance. (*Animatrix* in fact uses the word 'sin' in reference to the actions and attitudes that got humanity into this mess in the first place; it also shows the world's religions united in seeking to wipe out the machines by scorching the sky.) Further, the film hints at a cyclical rather than a linear view of history, although the possibility of the genuinely new has not been excluded, and seems to be affirmed at the end of *Reloaded* by Neo's choice. In addition, the fact that the world that transcends the present illusory world is neither Nirvana nor a perfect 'heaven', but a world where a small remnant of humanity is at war, fighting for their very existence, does not fit either the Buddhist or Christian viewpoints. The movie can only with great difficulty be regarded as essentially a retelling of a single earlier story. It is rather a new story based on many older stories, and it is only in taking this fact seriously that we can get at the heart of the meaning and message of *The Matrix* and sequels.

<sup>4</sup> Bassham, "Religion of *The Matrix*", pp.111-125.

<sup>5</sup> It is not that individual elements of multiple religions may not be true, Bassham says, but the question that always remains is *how* one could ever hope to know this. In religious pluralism it is common to refer to the famous story of the three blind men and the elephant. Each one feels a part of the elephant, and concludes that an elephant is like a tree, a wall, and a snake respectively. But the only way to know that all of these blind men have part of the truth is to be able to see the whole elephant. And in *The Matrix* and *The Matrix Reloaded*, as yet we do not appear to have anyone who has this privileged perspective. Neo can see what others cannot, but as yet we do not know for certain whether he and his compatriots have the privileged outsider's view, recognizing that their fellow human beings are simply slaves, or whether they have another view that is different but no less limited and virtual. Within the storyline of *The Matrix* and *Reloaded*, we have indications that religious inquiry can lead one closer to transcendent truths, but there has as yet been no suggestion that any or all religions are 'equally true' – in fact they are all presumably judged as equally false, since neither Buddhism nor Christianity teaches that the present world is a computer-generated virtual prison. Within the world of the films, religions may make one more open to the truth about the Matrix and humanity's enslavement, but ultimately none of them actually encapsulates 'the truth' as revealed in the storyline thus far, although beyond the Matrix and beyond Zion there may be other levels of simulation and/or reality as yet unrevealed. At any rate, to the extent that the film may be regarded as drawing on elements of *Gnostic* Christianity and Buddhism, the two traditions have somewhat closer affinities, since both regard the main problem of human beings as ignorance. See Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachel Wagner's article, "Wake Up! Gnosticism and Buddhism in The Matrix"

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[<http://www.unomaha.edu/~wwwjrf/gnostic.htm>]. See also the *Gospel of Truth* 29-30. Nevertheless, when we find out in the final installment whether humans escape to a higher reality, or to non-existence, or whether we can never know, that is when we shall be able to definitively pronounce on the fundamentally Gnostic, Buddhist, or Baudrillardian character of the film's message. However, the very inclusion of Baudrillard's idea may always leave the perception of truth by the main characters in question, hence forever undermining a genuinely Gnostic perspective, with its emphasis on knowledge.

<sup>6</sup> Andy Wachowski in an interview in the Chicago Tribune mentions Jungian archetypes (quoted by Lloyd in his online article "Glitches Reloaded"), and Larry says "Mythology lets you talk to old cultures and future ones" [quoted at <http://www.matrixfans.net/thematrix/rev-time.html>]. The fact that the film draws not only on religious terminology, but on symbols and motifs that are found in multiple religions, suggests that they see importance not in one particular religious tradition, but moreso in the things they have in common, an idea to which we shall return later in this study.

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to see how the plot of the trilogy parallels the development in the original *Star Wars* trilogy. The first movie seems complete in itself, a hero flick. The second film complicates matters and ends on a darker note. Will the parallels continue in *Revolutions*?

<sup>8</sup> A famous example is William James, who was convinced that he was having a deep religious experience as an effect of anesthesia.

<sup>9</sup> Even if what is ultimately real is *sunyata* (emptiness), as is the case in Buddhism.

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps their existence is aimed not at enslaving actual human beings, but seeking to produce among simulated beings who inhabit it a real 'One' who can hope and be 'truly human'. If this is the case, then the movie may have a more genuinely Buddhist outlook than I have suggested up until this point, with successive 'reincarnations' of the program seeking to produce a truly enlightened being. This is a fascinating suggestion made on a web site [<http://matrixessays.blogspot.com/rss/matrixessays.xml>].

Comparison may usefully be made to some of the ideas and premises in *The Thirteenth Floor*. The short story "Matriculated" in *Animatrix* also hints at this possibility by presenting humans as plugging machines into a virtual world in order to evoke from them the choice to show compassion and help the humans in their cause. For machines, it is observed, 'all reality is virtual reality'.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Fontana disputes this, however, arguing quite plausibly that while humanity is in 'exile' and thus experiences a sense of God-forsakenness, nevertheless God can be discerned to be providentially active behind the scenes, much as in the Book of Esther in the Bible. See his article, "Finding God in *The Matrix*", in *Taking the Red Pill*, pp.161,177-179.

<sup>12</sup> Felluga, "*The Matrix*: Paradigm of Postmodernism...?", p.79; Ford, "Buddhism, Mythology, and *The Matrix*", pp.141-143.

<sup>13</sup> Ford, "Buddhism, Christianity and *The Matrix*"

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/Movies/9903/31/matrix/>

<sup>15</sup> Ford, "Buddhism, Christianity and *The Matrix*". See also my own articles discussing the task of Christian theology as a dialogical endeavor of this sort – e.g. "Change in Christology: New Testament Models and the Contemporary Task," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 63/1 (1998): 39-50.

<sup>16</sup> Although it should be noted that the Buddhism of popular culture might not be recognizable as Buddhism to the keepers of historic Buddhism in other cultural contexts like Tibet. See also the interesting recent article in *Time* about German monasteries which have begun marketing themselves as 'New Age retreat' or 'health and wellness' centers [<http://www.time.com/time/europe/magazine/article/0,13005,901030127-409520,00.html>].

<sup>17</sup> There is probably intentional irony in the fact that these films question and at the same time serve big business, the entertainment industry, and other elements of the 'world that has been pulled over our eyes', the matrix we inhabit. Certainly the irony that the humans in the story who fight the machines are also dependent on machines for survival is intentional.

<sup>18</sup> The Matrix also asks us questions about what sort of people we want to be. In many respects, contemporary culture drives us to be like Cypher, to put our own pleasure first, and the many recent studies of this dilemma have been hard-pressed to explain why Cypher is wrong. Yet most of us would innately agree that we do not want to be like Cypher. We do not want to betray our friends, we do not want to live an illusion. Perhaps, like so much in the *Matrix* movies, this is about choice: Perhaps there is in fact no way to prove that one illusion is better than another, nor to prove that my reality or yours is real and the other false. Nevertheless, we can choose what sort of people we wish to be, regardless of whether our beliefs prove to have been true or false. (This viewpoint expressed by Duo in "Program" in *Animatrix* may, like

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the view of Cypher, represent the Wachowski brothers' viewpoint; a similar kind of statement is made by Neo in an earlier edition of the script for *The Matrix*, as part of his final address to the machines at the movie's conclusion). What we believe will, in our postmodern society, always be debatable; who we are depends on choices we make, and most of us will remain convinced that, although we may not know for certain what is real in many areas, "the Matrix cannot tell you who you are". The choice to hope, to risk, to believe in a dream, to believe that fate might be guiding us, are all choices that can make a vast difference in our lives. *The Matrix Reloaded* suggests that it may be worth 'dreaming the dream', taking the risk, not because it can be proved either right or real, but because otherwise "how is this different from any other day?" Choose the red pill. It may not even offer the truth (apologies to Morpheus), but it may make you more satisfied with your life, and will certainly make it a heck of a lot more interesting! And *The Matrix* assumes that we do in fact have choice, although we often forfeit that choice either willingly and knowingly, or simply by default. Free will may be something that most people rarely practice if at all, but it is still a reality in the world of *The Matrix*. And even if the only choice open to us is, in the words of Fox Mulder on *The X-Files*, "trying to decide which lie to believe", they are still choices and they will define who we are.

<sup>19</sup> *The Matrix* suggests that there is something in the human soul that truly wants lives that are meaningful and not simply pleasurable or enjoyable. Cypher represents a small minority who would choose personal pleasure above all else, even friendship, even meaning, even 'reality'. When a blatantly unreal but perfect existence was provided for humans in the first Matrix, 'whole crops were lost' as people's minds rejected it. Likewise Morpheus asks Neo whether he would really want to go back even if he could. Most characters are willing to risk their lives to be free and to be 'real' rather than accept the illusion of the Matrix, however pleasant and comforting it may be in comparison with 'the desert of the real'. This suggests that, with all the commercial images that bombard our senses, the ones that put the 'hype' in 'hyperreal', most of us deep down would still prefer a meaningful if painful existence to the seductive but superficial simulacra of real relationships one is exposed to through the media. See further Peter J. Boettke, "Human Freedom and the Red Pill", in *Taking The Red Pill*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth, Dallas: BenBella, 2003, pp.148-156; Gerald J. Erion and Barry Smith, "Skepticism, Morality, and *The Matrix*" in *The Matrix and Philosophy*, ed. William Irwin, Chicago: Open Court, 2002, pp.25-27. Both these works refer in turn to the writings of Robert Nozick. *The Matrix* has an even more serious side to its message. All of us accept to some degree the inputs we receive from our senses, from the media, from governments, and so on. None of us has direct access to events. None of us here knows what happened in Iraq. Did Saddam Hussein have weapons of mass destruction? Is any of the evidence fabricated? Does the failure of the U.S. to show us 'proof' mean anything? Could George W. Bush be delaying release of information so that the proof of the existence of Weapons of mass destruction comes closer to election day, thereby embarrassing his opponents at a convenient and decisive moment? The truth for probably all of us here is 'We don't know'. We know what we have seen on television, read on the paper, heard about via e-mails and the internet. We live in a matrix, which is a prison for our minds, one from which we can apparently never be free. If we have freedom of choice, we also are and will always be prone to deception by the system. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in attempting to offer humanity a simulated utopia, the artificial intelligences are unable to fool human beings. We are susceptible to deception, but we also have some innate ideas about reality, about freedom. We may sacrifice our freedom too easily and too often, but we are for the most part unwilling to have it simply snatched away from us altogether.

<sup>20</sup> In an earlier (1996) draft of the screenplay, Cypher expresses the view that the war has already been lost, and that Zion is just part of the ongoing madness – ideas that perhaps gave too much away too soon, and thus were dropped from the first movie. Doug Mann and Heidi Hochenedel, in their article "Evil Demons, Saviors and Simulacra in *The Matrix*" [<http://home.attbi.com/%7Ecrapsonline/Library/matrix.html>] state: "Cypher's perspective on hyperreality is quite Baudrillardesque, and is probably the final position held by Larry and Andy Wachowski."

<sup>21</sup> If Baudrillard provides 'the matrix of *The Matrix*', then the offering of simulacra of various religious traditions and ideas is precisely what we might expect. There is no historical Buddha or historical Jesus, nor even an original or authentic form of Christianity or Buddhism, against which we may verify the reality or legitimacy of *The Matrix*. Gnosticism, that form of early Christianity reflected at times in *The Matrix*, was the only or the earliest known form of Christianity in some parts of the world. Is Gnosticism a simulacrum of Christianity, or vice versa? From our standpoint in history, it becomes impossible to say. The Church has standardized the meaning of Christianity again and again, obscuring to a greater degree each time our

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ability to see back through the curtains of history to the places and events of Christianity's birth. Everyone who inquires into the historical figure of Jesus makes him in his or her own image, as Albert Schweitzer famously warned.

<sup>22</sup> Accessible via <http://www.ee.bilkent.edu.tr/ge301/matrixfilm.txt> [original at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F30811F7345C0C778EDDAC0894DA404482>]. On the question of the film's lack of faithfulness to Baudrillard's ideas, see Andrew Gordon, "The Matrix: Paradigm of Postmodernism or Intellectual Poseur? Part II", in *Taking The Red Pill: Science, Philosophy and Religion in The Matrix*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth, Dallas: BenBella, 2003, pp.99-101. If the film's assessment of reality and religious truth is ultimately that of Baudrillard, it is striking that Baudrillard himself does not feel the film gives accurate expression to his thought. Perhaps this is but another confirmation that the idea of authorial intention must be laid to rest forever, but if so, it also means that the question I am asking in this paper is not an objective one, since there is no single meaning of the film.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Thomas S. Hibbs, "Notes from Underground: Nihilism and *The Matrix*", in *The Matrix and Philosophy*, ed. William Irwin, Chicago: Open Court, 2002, p.155.

<sup>24</sup> The latter would be a nice 'Buddhist' result from the film's inquiry. But the question goes further still. If memories can be implanted, as in *Total Recall* and *Dark City*, and perhaps implicitly also in the *Matrix*, then the question is raised whether in knowing the mere fact *that* we exist (because we doubt, think, etc.) allows us to know anything else about *who* we are! We may have memories of love, of murder, of joy, of sorrow, which shape who we are today, and yet these may be recently implanted. Again, it is an emphasis of certain Buddhist traditions that who we *were* (and hence our memories) do not tell us who we *are*. At any rate, as one character in "Matriculated" states, our dreams do not define what is real – they only show that our minds are real, that 'I dream therefore I am'. Even if I may not be sure what is real and what is a dream, I exist.

<sup>25</sup> At least, am not a permanent distinct entity.

<sup>26</sup> Or to use the currently developing internet *lingua franca*: FWIW IMHO tht'd B gr8! ☺ LOL

<sup>27</sup> Another issue on which much discussion focuses in our age is the question of freedom, a theme explored in some detail in *The Matrix* and sequels. The main characters are very much like many postmodern individuals, desiring to fight for 'what is right' and 'the truth', but finding it increasingly difficult to know for certain what 'right' and 'true' really mean. They show themselves again and again seeking to exercise their freedom and fight for the freedom of others, only to find once again that they are not really free after all, just pawns of the same system but in a different way. Yet they, like most of us, hope that they can find a way of understanding their situation and thus recovering some element of genuine freedom of choice.