MACIEJ JEMIOŁ

THE COMPLICATED POP-CULTURAL LEGACY OF *FIGURA CHRISTI.* MYTHOLOGIZATION OF THE CHRIST NARRATIVE IN THE CONTEXT OF CURRENT CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY

Abstract. Reflecting on the many challenges facing Christianity as a religion, and particularly Christian philosophy as a way of thinking in modern, strange and unfamiliar times, one encounters time and again the grim realization that many of such challenges are simply provided by the current culture, the cultural sphere. Without idealizing Europe's Christocentric culture and remembering that it was not homogeneous, we must recognize that it once existed, it was the ruling cultural norm. Today, such norms are indeed very different and vary greatly depending on the geographic region we have in mind and change from decade to decade. After the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, modernity and the postmodern era, we observe that what governs our cultural world today is pluralism more than anything else. But there are still some traces of Christocentrism in our culture and in what it has become during this period, namely popular culture. Among other aspects, research has focused on the analysis of one idea – that of the Christ-figure, which has come a long way from theology to culture to pop culture over the centuries. In this article, I will try to show why this complicated legacy can be seen, at least in part, as a challenge to Christianity in light of contemporary Christian philosophy.

Keywords: Christocentricity; Christian philosophy; Christ-figure; pop-culture; mythologization

1. INTRODUCTION

When reflecting on the many challenges that Christianity as a religion and in particular Christian philosophy as a way of thinking face in modern, strange and unfamiliar times we will time and time again encounter the grim realization that a significant portion of such

challenges are supplied simply by the current culture, the cultural sphere. This is especially true in Europe and in the US, that is in what we are used to call the "Western world," where, historically speaking, no such a thing used to be true for a very long time. While the European Middle Ages did not in any way resemble the perfect monolith, absolutely unified and unanimous in every way, that we sometimes today assume them to be, they nonetheless facilitated a mode of production of culture very different to what we have here now. European cultures during the Middle Ages, diverse as they were, remained for a very impressive period prominently and prevailingly Christocentric. Their Christocentricity was total when it comes to its influences: it has greatly influenced politics and law, as observed in detail by historian Walter Ullmann (Ullmann 2010); it has influenced the pre-Galilean sciences, as Michel Henry (Henry 2012) would call them, which were much more speculative than empirical and which in their early period even relied on the Bible when in doubt; and, finally, it has also tremendously influenced art and culture, so much so that the great cathedrals made in the shape of a cross remain as the strongest artistic monument of that time. Today, through a series of events so colossal in their consequences that they can hardly be described here, that medieval, Christocentric world is no more. Modern law and politics are not Christocentric and neither are modern sciences, save maybe for the endeavors of Christian philosophers and for the work of theologians.

While not idealizing this European Christocentric culture and keeping in mind that it was not homogeneous, we must recognize that it once existed, that there was a time and place where "the totality of the Christian," as Ullmann (Ulmann 2010, 7-9) calls it, was a governing cultural norm. Today such norms are very different indeed and differ greatly depending on the geographical region that we have in mind and change from decade to decade. After the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the modernity and the times

of the postmodern we observe that what governs our cultural world today is plurality more than anything else.

But in culture, and in what it became through that period, that is – in popular culture, some traces of Christocentricity still linger. It is a complicated legacy that modern scholars in the field, such as Anton K. Kozlovic (Kozlovic 2002; 2004a; 2004b; 2005; 2007), Christine Downing (Downing 1968) and Robert Detweiler (Detweiler 1964) attempt to untangle and evaluate. A prominent part of such studies consists in the analysis of one idea in particular – the idea of *figura Christi,* which through the centuries made a long way from theology through culture to pop-culture. In this paper I will attempt to demonstrate why this complicated legacy can at least partially be viewed as a challenge to Christianity in the light of the modern Christian philosophy.

2. THE THREE CHRISTS

Let us begin at the source – with the Christ narrative. "The case of Christ," as it was famously called by the journalist Lee Strobel, is a multifaceted one. First and foremost, we have the historical life and death of one Jesus of Nazareth, called Christ, which, as most Christians believe, really happened on this Earth about two thousand years ago and are therefore subject to factual analysis. This aspect of the case of Christ is constantly debated and put to doubt as triumphalist and reductive theories of Christ are contested from inside of Christianity by proponents of the Christ myth theory and outside of it by proponents of the ahistorical theory of Christ.

Secondly, we have the spiritual dimension of Christ, the way in which what we now believe to be his teachings influence our spirituality or the general moral awareness as human beings. Now, what is important to note here is that while all outside of Christianity will understandingly doubt or reject altogether claim that this spiritual influence is transcendental in its nature, none will deny that it exists.

Be it Christ-reductionists, who accept Jesus as a historical figure but deny any of his miracles, or Christ-ahistoricists and Christ-mythologists, who deny his historical existence, they nonetheless have to accept that there is such a thing as the Christian faith. Even if it would be just a collection of neuronal impulses in certain brains, as naturalists would have it, Christian faith and spirituality exists.

Thirdly, regardless of whether one believes in the historicity of Jesus or accepts the moral and spiritual legacy of Christ, there is a third dimension, that is – the Christ narrative, the Christ myth. There is, as Downing (Downing 1968, 13) put it in her critique of the literary studies on the Christ-figure, "a character of the New Testament Christ." It is so because the Bible, besides being treated as a historical account or as a holy text of spiritual wisdom can also be and often is treated as a work of literature. Therefore, Christ is also a literary character, and a pivotal one at that, seeing how his story told in the Gospels is widely accepted as a founding literary text of the later European cultures. This is the Christ narrative – a powerful story, regardless of whether it is considered fictional or factual.

Here we have therefore not one, but three Christs, so to say – Jesus, the man form Nazareth, Jesus, the Savior Son of God and Jesus the literary character. Of those three the first one is sometimes negated altogether and the second is reduced to a neuronal delusion, but the third is still present in our culture, albeit in a much different form, through a kind of cultural transfiguration. It is this third, cultural Christ that is very visibly and demonstrably subject to what André Malraux called "the metamorphosis of the gods" (Malraux 1960).

Each of those three Christs is an object of study of different sciences – the first one of history and archaeology, the second one of theology and the third one of the theory of culture and literature, media studies and narratology. Within these sciences each of the three Christs can be considered separately. But they can also be integrated into a more interdisciplinary framework, which would enable studying

the interactions and relations between these three aspects of Christ. One such framework is proposed by Giuseppe Fornari (Fornari 2021), whose primary object of interest is Christianity itself. Fornari points out that while the Gospels are most certainly a historical account of the actual teachings of Jesus, it would also be hard to deny that they are at the same time works of literature dependent on narratological schemata, that they "retain something of the method of the historians of antiquity that aimed at constructing ideal arguments and episodes" (Fornari 2010, 75). His phenomenological-historical approach to Jesus sees him as "the narratological and theological *figura* on which everything converges and from which everything originates" (Fornari 2010, 75). Fornari's framework provides us not only with a way of organic reintegration of the three Christs in one view of Christianity, but also clearly explains how the transfer between the spiritual message of Christ onto a cultural myth is possible. We see that the Gospels themselves taken in their original context contain not only testimonies about what happened in the Holy Land two thousand years ago and the divine teachings of the Son of God, but also narrative elements characteristic of the writings of their time. We must however recognize that Fornari's framework is oriented on Christianity and that as we shift our point of view outward, towards the secular popular culture, we observe not a clear relation to the Christ of Christianity, but a complicated, diverse legacy that needs to be untangled. This paper will therefore ponder on those interactions between the Christ of theology and the Christ of the theory of culture.

3. FIGURATION IN THEOLOGY AND CULTURE

The general shape and form of the Christ narrative, as countless scholars in the 20th and 21st century have observed, can be found in many modern fictional characters. Examples include Jim Casy from John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (Detweiler 1964, 155;

Dougherty 1962), Superman (Kozlovic 2002), Neo from the *Matrix* movie series (Kozlovic 2004b, 34), Harry Potter (Mohammed 2020), prince Noctis Lucis Caelum from the *Final Fantasy XV* video game (Jemioł 2021, 142-145) and many, many others. Such characters, called Christ-figures, are, for better or worse, a prominent part of the legacy of Jesus Christ, factual or fictional, and a living testament to his influence not only on the hearts and souls of man (if such a thing as a soul exists), but also on their imagination.

Now, of course the term itself did not originate in the field of literary criticism. Its roots are theological in nature and are related with the very long tradition of interpreting Old and New Testaments in bilateral relation to each other. The term "in Christi figura" – "in the figure of Christ" – appears, for example, in *In Canticum canticorum expositio* by Apponius, a 7th century Christian exegete, where, as Ludmiła Lach-Bartlik (Lach-Bartlik 2015) points out, it can mean one of three things: an exegetic method for reading the Bible, a metaphor based on comparison and a typology that connects the New Testament to the Old one. Similarly, Sara Butler observes how in his *Summa theologiae* Saint Thomas Aquinas "argues that just as the priest of the Old Law was a figure of Christ by anticipation, the priest of the New Law acts in his person" (Butler 1995, 148). For Aquinas this is, as always, no mere semantic differentiation and neither it is for the modern catholic theology. The "in Christi persona," which in Aquinas' terms is supposed to be a better, more fulfilling "sequel" to the "in Christi figura" is fully recognized in modern Catholic teaching, where it is still to this day claimed that a priest acts truly and fully in the person of Christ when, to use the exact wording of the *Lumen gentium* dogmatic constitution of the Vaticanum II "in the Eucharistic worship or the celebration of the Mass" (Vatican Council II 1964). The term has also established presence in other denominations of Christianity, such as Lutheranism and Anglicanism.

Emanuele Antonelli poses that in biblical studies the notion of *figura* functions as a means of mediation between the individual, ordinary, uncertain life of the reader and the necessary divine realm of Providence and the all-encompassing story of redemption (Antonelli 2018, 268-271). It is therefore a kind of a narrative device that allows us to relate ourselves to the spiritual meaning of the story of Christ and to immerse ourselves in it, and as a result to recontextualize our everyday life. This "essential role [of *figura*] as intermediary" (Antonelli 2018, 271) is supposed to grant us access to a way of judging the world around us based not solely on our own intuition but instead on something bigger than us.

We see then that the idea of figuration of Christ has its roots mainly in the spiritual dimension of "the case of Christ," but somehow it also made its way to the third, cultural dimension employed in cultural and literary studies. It is most likely that exegesis is to blame for that; after all biblical studies have a way of "sipping through" to literary studies, as well as to cultural studies and philosophy. It is most certainly true for hermeneutics, as we observed in the case of Heidegger's and later Gadamer's work in that field. Detweiler suggests something similar, although he emphasizes the author-creator side of things (Detweiler 1964, 114-116). His argument, which somewhat invokes what Fornari says about the narrative component of the Gospels, goes like this: because the Christ narrative is a foundational text of the European cultures, it is no wonder that the creators who operate within those cultures create derivative works based on this narrative, and that is why the exegetic idea of the Christ-figure is useful in literary criticism (Fornari 2021, 75). This is, of course, not to say that biblical studies are to blame for the popularity of the Christ-figure in popular culture and the consequences this yields for the spiritual message of Christ. It is only a sign of how and why the scholarly tools developed specifically for biblical studies turn out to be useful also in studying Western culture in general.

From the point of view of cultural studies there is no significant difference between the status of a reader of the Bible and that of a reader of a modern superhero comic book or a spectator in a movie theater – in that moment they are all simply the recipients of a cultural work. We can therefore expect that figuration will work more or less in the same way in Bible as it does in pop-culture, that in the latter it will also be a narrative device that mediates between some deeper level of reality and the everyday world of the receiver. In a sense that is true, but we will soon see why the mode of communication of figuration in biblical studies differs in important details from the mode of communication of the pop-cultural Christ-figure.

That this shall happen is in line with what Malraux (Malraux 1960; Allan 2009, 193-230; 2013, 51-120) says about the relationship between artworks and time. According to him, to put it very briefly, the meaning of a certain work of art is neither timeless and eternally unchanging nor dependent solely on the context in which such work was created. Rather, it changes across time with different interpretations made in different historical context. In this case the text that was intended to be read either as a historical account or a holy message from God has been later reread as a work of literature that can serve as a source of inspiration. An account of the life of Christ in the Gospel, the "Good News," thus became a narrative – the Christ narrative. In time, then, the meaning of "in Christi figura" transformed in culture, as it is predicted by Malaraux's theory, and became the Christ-figure, which, as we will soon see, is something quite different, as it is a cultural myth.

We can therefore understand now how this legacy of the Christ narrative originates within pop-culture. What still needs to be explained, however, is where the complication of this legacy comes from and why it can be problematic for modern Christian thought. In order to do so I will now attempt to elaborate on the inner workings of the pop-cultural Christ-figure by using two concepts – the myth

and the meme. I will then contrast it with Christian philosophy, in particular with Michel Henry's account of culture.

Before proceeding, let me just briefly note that among some scholars, such as Kozlovic, there is a certain optimism about the idea of the pop-cultural Christ-figure and its massive popularity in the new media and the old alike. This way, they argue, the spiritual dimension of the story of Christ can be introduced to the pop-culture-immersed youth in such a way that it will catch their attention. Kozlovic expresses this attitude perfectly when he says that: "Christ-figures… are a legitimate pop culture phenomenon whose artistic permutations are delightful and increasingly understandable in this age of the moving image. … Its future utility for secular film studies and a postmodern religious education looks very promising, especially as a means of teaching and honing students' video exegesis skills. More importantly, it is a cheap, dramatically engaging and readily accessible means of reintroducing the foundational myths of our Western society back to ourselves, but this time in media garb more easily recognized by the proverbial children of the media" (Kozlovic 2005, 8).

We will sadly soon see why the opposite is more likely to be true and why the pop-cultural Christ-figure is at the very least as much a challenge for Christianity as it can be an opportunity.

4. MYTH AS A CONCEPT DESCRIBING THE CHRIST NARRATIVE

There is much controversy about calling the Christ narrative as it is presented in the text of the Gospels a myth, but it should also be noted that much of that ado is due to the ever-so common misconception that arises from the ambiguity of the very term "myth." As explained by John G. Cawelti in his seminal work about the formulaic nature of pop-culture, the term "myth" has at least two common meanings that are often confused (Cawelti 2006, 185-186). In the first sense a myth is "a common belief which is demonstrably false," and

in the second one it is synonymous with "the concept of theme" that is prevalent in culture; examples include the myth of progress or the myth of success. Roland Barthes called collections of such myths "mythologies" and closely studied how they affect our modern societies trough the incorporation of double-meaning symbols (Barthes 1991, 109-164). Let us apply his analysis of mythologies to the case of Christ.

While the Christ narrative as told in the Gospels can be viewed as a myth in the first sense only if we believe it to be fictional from start to finish (as the Christ-ahistoricists and the Christ myth theory proponents do), there is little doubt that the Christ narrative became mythologized in our culture and is therefore a myth in the second sense of the word. This process of mythologization was described by Downing in the following way: "There is an interesting parallel here to what has happened in the popular retellings and elaboration of the Old Testament legends. In these folk versions the biblical text is disengaged from its original intention; it is revised and enriched by faith and fantasy in a way that often brings about a reversion to the ancient heathen myths that had served as material for the scriptural authors. … he mythological and archetypal elements are recreated. The same thing seems to have happened in the extracanonical retellings and reinterpretations of Christ, for instance in the Gospel of Thomas. Christ, too, becomes a myth, one representative of the hero with a thousand faces, the one with which our culture happens to have made us most familiar" (Downing 1968, 22).

It is significant that Downing mentions here the monomyth theory of Joseph Campbell.

Let us now consider the concept of a myth in greater detail. Following Cawelti, there certainly is some discussion to be had about the precise use of this term, elsewhere as well as within this paper. Myth, in the second meaning of Cawelti – that of a theme in culture – is still a broadly defined phenomenon, one that can be

interpreted in various ways. While myth in the first sense of the word is something "demonstrably false" (Cawelti 2006, 185), in the second sense its status in relation to truth, for example, is not so determined. Indeed, a cultural myth may yet be very closely related to truth, even as an expression of it. Why, then, Downing sees it as a process that makes it possible to "ignore precisely what seems most important to the New Testament kerygma"? (Downing 1968, 22).

Barthes (Barthes 1991, 110-115) sees cultural myths as semiological systems, similarly to how Antonelli (Antonelli 2018, 268-271) sees figuration. To Barthes myths are a mode of communication, they work as symbols with deeper meaning. That would suggest that the Christ-myth, the narrative story of Christ as it is used in culture should be viewed as an expression of both the historical and spiritual dimensions of Christ, a place where both dimensions meet, an attempt by humans to reconcile them with each other by means of storytelling, a universally human tool. However, Barthes also explains why myths specifically are ill-suited for such tasks: in addition to being quite fragile and depended on the current context, they also parasitizes on its meaning (Barthes 1991, 115-119). To quote him: "The form does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one's disposal. One believes that the meaning is going to die, but it is a death with reprieve; the meaning loses its value, but keeps its life, from which the form of the myth will draw its nourishment" (Barthes 1991, 117).

In another words, for the purposes of this paper a cultural myth should be treated following Barth as a mode of communication based on a rich meaning that is also ultimately unable to convey this meaning, as in the process of communication the form constantly puts itself forward and limits the original meaning to the bare minimum necessary to sustain the form. In the case of the Christ-myth this results in what Downing describes as the fact that "the unique details [of Christ's story] are regarded as mere ornamentation" and "safely put aside" (Downing 1968, 22). Myth is therefore something that

generalizes its content to the point where it becomes unrecognizably universal.

This pessimistic view of what a cultural myth is seems in line with what both Downing and Detweiler state on this subject, as well as other researchers, such as the prominent New Testament scholar James Dunn, who calls for a "demythologization" of the New Testament (Dunn 1977). It is also worth noting how the Scripture itself similarly expresses negative sentiments towards the very word "myth," as it is demonstrated by such passages as 1Tim 1:4, 4:7, 2Tim 4:4, Tit 1:14, and 2Pe 1:16. I therefore believe that the framework proposed by Barth can be usefully employed to discuss the numerous reinterpretations of Christ in popular culture.

What is particularly interesting is that some Christ myth theory proponents after its 1970s revival within Christianity, such as Thomas L. Thompson (Thompson 2005) and Thomas L. Brodie, maintain that the Christ narrative is a myth not only in the second, but also in the first sense of the word. What they attempt to do is preserve the spiritual meaning of Christ in a situation where they believe the historical Jesus is nowhere to be found. It does not matter, they say, that there was no man called Jesus who died on the cross and then returned to life; what matters is that we have the Scripture that tells that story, and from that Scripture we can still derive spiritual meaning that will change our lives regardless of whether the story itself is true and faithful to history or not. Through the vehicle of myth, they try to rescue Christ the Savior Son of God from irrelevance. However, I will argue that it is precisely mythologization that can make the Christ of Christianity irrelevant.

Let us first observe that the reason that Thompson, Brodie and others like them propose in favor of propagating the idea of Christ as a non-historical myth is very unlikely to be true. The historical existence of Jesus of Nazareth has been studied closely by countless scholars and the general consensus is that the claim of Christ mythologists that there were no historical Christ is groundless. On

the contrary, all modern researchers agree not only that Jesus existed but also to a general outline of his biography (Levine, Allison, and Crossan 2006, 21). For most Christians the historical existence of Jesus is in fact tightly, dogmatically connected to his spiritual message, as his actions in this world, especially his death and resurrection are supposed to carry a meaning that is both immanent and transcendental. The factual reality of these events is seen as a necessary for Christian theology to actually convey truth. There is however no reason to fret, as the scientific "quest for historical Jesus," as it is sometimes called (Levine, Allison, and Crossan 2006, 20-34), does reveal to us the authentic existence of Jesus the man, even if many details still are unclear. Accepting the interpretation that Christ should be viewed only as a non-historical myth is not only unnecessary, but can also be harmful to Jesus' spiritual message, contrary to the intent of such claims.

5. HENRY'S CRITIQUE OF CULTURE AND THE CHRIST-FIGURE

When it comes to Christ, mythologization constitutes reduction and reduction constitutes neutralization, exactly as predicted by Barthes. To explain why it is so I must now refer to Henry's critique of modern culture as barbarism. While Henry is not a typical Christian philo-sopher (if there can be such a thing), many of his thoughts on modern culture and its crisis seem to resonate with the current attitude in Christian thought toward modern societies and cultures, which are constantly described as being "in crisis." For Henry (Henry 2004 20, 57-73) this is the crisis of barbarism, that is, of such a culture in which our natural predispositions for self-development are stifled in a social and historical context that pulls us further and further away from the Absolute Life, which can be interpreted as the spiritual meaning of Christ, as I called it here. Henry (Henry 2004, 5-22, 62) blames it all on post-Galilean science and its search for objective truth in nature that eliminates the subject completely. However barbarism,

according to him, presents itself not only in the sciences, but also very prominently in our everyday cultural rituals by which we fulfill our basic needs.

Of particular use to us here is Henry's critique of the idea of television, not as a technological system *per se* and not as a product of the objectified sciences, but rather as something that is fundamentally devoid of meaning, that is "the negation of all aesthetics" and not by coincidence, but by design (Henry 2004, 107-114). On the images in television, Henry says the following: "The emergence of the image considered as such … is continually reproduced. It is the sketch of a place outlined and opened in order for something to occupy it that can be lost. This disappearance is the disappearance of something, that is, the liberation of the place in order that another thing can slide into its place. Emergence and disappearance are thus only the continually resumed act of life getting rid of the self. It is only in light of such an act that disappearance can become fully intelligible. It presupposes that the content of the image is of no interest in itself and that it is destined to be replaced by another one" (Henry 2004, 111).

Now, of course Henry says this about television. *Barbarism* was first published in 1987, when television was at its peak popularity and relevance, just before the internet began to make big waves. Today, 35 years later, the situation with media is quite different, but the lack of aesthetics, as Henry called it, is even more visible than it was back then. When Henry writes about images that are destined to be constantly replaced, he understandably thinks about different TV shows and programs that can be watched all day; today we would be more inclined to think about memes and social media posts. After all, is not replaceability the main design principle of the idea of a "content feed"?

If Christ is a cultural myth, as is the case with the Christ-figure, then pop-culture can turn him into nothing but memes that are the exemplification of the Barthesian idea of a form that nullifies

its own content. Pop-culture can and pop-culture will. Not because it is some kind of an evil, anticlerical, anti-Christian agent with its own New World Order agenda. Rumors about the terrible cultural Marxists who masterminded and preordained the deconstruction of Christ trough memes are most certainly false. Pop-culture will reduce Christ to a myth and memes simply because this is what pop-culture does, at least at its most popular level. According to Cawelti, the main principle of pop-culture is that it is formulaic, that it depends on the same simple schemata that are being repeated within numerous works with little to no alteration or variation (Cawelti 2006, 187). But if Christ, trough the form of pop-cultural Christ-figure, is being reduced to such a formula, then the original spiritual message of his life is undoubtedly lost. It is so because it simply cannot be transmitted through memes. If we, while watching a movie or playing a video game are left with a Christ-like character like Harry Potter that sacrifices themselves for the good of the many and then comes back from the grave, or who does miracles and funds a religion, or preaches about love while standing on a hill, we may recognize in that character a facsimile of Christ; however, the spiritual sense of his life is by necessity lost. It cannot simply be deduced from the most "memeable" moments of Christ's life, it must be found in its entirety.

6. EXAMPLES OF THE MYTHOLOGIZATION OF CHRIST

To better illustrate this, let us now consider some more tangible examples. Though providing the reader with a detailed analysis of specific pop-cultural Christ-figures lies well beyond the scope of this short paper, it is worth mentioning some related phenomena within popular culture. Especially three such phenomena come to mind: the protagonist in modern adventure stories, the reception of Christianity in Japanese pop-culture, and the memes themselves. Keep also in mind that what will be here described are not cases of intentional anti-Christian parody such as the movies *The Last*

Temptation of Christ, *Donnie Darko* or *The Wrestler* (Walsh 2013); rather, they are cases of thoughtless repeating the propagation of a cultural myth that resembles Christ in only the broadest of terms.

Firstly, we have the archetypical hero of an adventure story, one exemplified by Neo from *The Matrix* series, Harry Potter from Joanne Rowling's books (lately considered controversial because of certain views of the authoress), numerous superheroes in comic books and on large as well as small screen and countless other characters including Percy Jackson from the books by Rick Riordan, and Dragonborn from the video game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. What they all have in common is the general structure of their story, famously called by Joseph Campbell the monomyth (Campbell 2004). They all resemble Christ in at least some ways and can most certainly be called Christ-figures, especially if we apply the standards suggested by Kozlovic (Kozlovic 2004b). In them, we can observe time and time again how a cultural myth points to a deeper meaning behind it but at the same time blocks our access to it. As Detweiler puts it: "Christ as mythological archetype can be made to serve any number of functions. He can be understood as the embodiment of the good and moral man who suffers for his goodness or as the misguided idealist who cannot survive in a materialistic world; he can be the redeemer on the supernatural level who mediates between God and man or the culture-bringer on the natural level who introduces his people to a better life; he can be the servant of humanity who suffers so that others are taught through him" (Detweiler 1964, 115).

The problem is that the Christ of the New Testament does not "serve any number of functions," as in Christianity his story is intended to be read primarily as the story of redemption of mankind. That is why only the most proclaimed Christ-figures in adventure stories can claim to be something more in that regard than a reuse of the monomyth and to express at least some of the spiritual message of Christ.

As a side note (but an important one) we can also mention how outside of the Western cultural sphere, in places such as Japan where Christianity as a religion and the reception of the spiritual message of Christ is at best scarce the pop-cultural myth of Jesus is still very much present. As noted by Adam Barkman (Barkman 2010), Christian symbolism and references to Christ, the cross and the Church are abundant in Japanese comics (manga) and animations (anime). Here we witness a cultural transfer between two very different and historically distinct societies that not always coexisted peacefully (Christianity was prohibited in Japan for about two hundred years). This demonstrates the exceptional persistence of Jesus Christ as a popular myth – even in a country where less than 2% of the population identifies themselves as Christians. Yet, Christian motives and symbols are still commonplace in its pop-culture. In some cases, this co-occurs with what I have described in the previous paragraph: e.g. in some Japanese video games such as the *Dragon Quest* series, Christian symbolism is presented alongside the monomyth protagonist. Barkman argues that depictions of Christianity in manga and anime are by necessity heretical by Christian standards, as they stem from a religious and philosophical pluralism that is too radical to fit in a Christian framework (Barkman 2010, 43).

Finally, there are also the memes themselves. On the many memes that appear (and disappear) on the internet Jesus is portrayed in a myriad of ways, both positive – as a peaceful sage, a powerful opponent of Satan or just basically as a nice guy – and negative – as a deluded madman, a self-contradictory character or a laughable parody of himself. This "religious figure memes," as Gabrielle Aguilar (Aguilar *et al.* 2017) call them often revoke the image of Jesus derived from religious paintings of the past with a plastered text on top and/or some creative editing work. In them, Jesus is seen either on a context-less background like he is portrayed on the Divine Mercy image, or in the context of one of the more recognizable events of his life, such as the Sermon on the Mount, the *Via Dolorosa* or, ultimately,

his crucifixion and resurrection. Authors postulate that Christ memes, while often used to promote Christianity as a religion in a personal, relatable way cannot be viewed as a part of the orthodoxy, but rather heterodoxy (Aguilar *et al.* 2017, 1518-1519). This in a way resembles what is happening in Japan with a philosophical pluralism that is incompatible with orthodox faith, albeit in a much more subtle manner. In the end memes about Jesus, even the ones that are intended to convey his spiritual meaning, cannot be viewed as a reliable medium.

What we observe in those examples – thoughtless rather than thoughtful use of the figure of Christ – is not the whole story. This problem can go even deeper. Even if we want to return to the source and search for Christ in the Bible itself, we have already seen what will happen to him in pop-culture. We have already seen Neo and Superman and there is a risk that we will look at Christ in the same way that we look at them. If so, the spiritual meaning of his life will also be lost on us. This is precisely what Malraux intended through his idea of the relationship between art and time – that today we look at the ancient works of art and see in them what is our *milieu*. In Heracles and other Greek heroes we see superheroes and in Christ, paradoxically, a most perfect Christ-figure and nothing more. In such a case, the original meaning of Christ is lost on us and we no longer have access not only to his later copies, but also to their original model. We would have, to use the terminology of Downing, a Christ-figure that lacks any figuration. This makes him banal and as such not worth looking into. Thus, Christ becomes neutralized.

7. THE POSSIBILITY OF A POSITIVE REPRESENTATION OF CHRIST IN CULTURE

Faced with such a scenario we must also ask, what is the difference between what I have just described and the works of human culture that we would say can convey the historical and spiritual Christ,

such as the great religious paintings of the renaissance, the great cathedrals of the middle-ages or even some more modern works the likes of the movie *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (1964) directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini. Even within popular culture, works such as *Final Fantasy XV*, a Japanese video game with a Christ-figure following the classic monomyth structure of narration, clearly demonstrate how the message of Christ can still be translated quite respectfully and in a deeply reflective (if not downright religious) manner (Langer 2019). What differentiates the works of, say, Giotto di Bondone from the memes that reuse the very same iconography in a different context?

To illustrate the difference between thoughtless and thoughtful use of Christ in pop-culture let us now briefly consider, for example, the case of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, a famous series of books for children by C.S. Lewis that is undoubtedly in an important part of British popular culture, as it was even turned into a movie series (and not just once, but twice). In the first book of that series, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, published originally in 1950, a group of children from the Second World War period travels through a magical wardrobe to the fantasy realm of Narnia, where they eventually meet Aslan, a talking lion who in the culmination of the story scarifies himself and is killed by the evil White Witch. After his demise Aslan is gloriously resurrected, defeats the evil Witch and enthrones the children as Kings and Queens of Narnia. The book is an obvious allegory of Christianity, with Aslan as a straightforward Christ-figure. Yet, the books are written in such a way that they reinforce the spiritual message of Christianity rather than lose it on the way, as it so often happens with fantasy stories. Why is that so?

I would argue that *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is a perfect example of the difference between Christ used as a Barthesian cultural myth and a very different phenomenon, one that could perhaps be called a cultural Christian allegory. The difference lies in the mode of communication, and, ultimately, in the intent. A positive

representation of Christ in culture is possible only when the creative process is dictated from the beginning by the will to artistically convey not the superficial aspects of the story of Christ, such as its "memeable" moments or general patters useful from a narrative standpoint, but the truth of it that lies beneath them. From this follows the choice of the proper narrative tools: for instance, the fact that the first book of C.S. Lewis' series is oriented toward the triumphant scene of the resurrection of Aslan/Christ. Works that fit into what is described here can probably be viewed as part of a broadly defined Christianity, fitting better into the unifying framework proposed by Fornari. However, this happens less often than proposing Christ as a cultural myth, as myths are much easier to create and they disseminate quickly. The reality is, then, that while the positive culture of the Christian allegory does exist and a cautious consumer can still find in modern popular culture works that represent it, finding them is less likely than encountering the myth and the meme of Christ.

8. CONCLUSION

This is one of the grimmest perspectives that a Christian philosopher can have on pop-culture. Fortunately, it is not the only one, as the scenario described here is just one of the many possible, although it seems rather probable given the formulaic nature of pop-culture. All this shows simply that when we encounter a Christ-figure in contemporary fiction, and we most certainly will sooner rather than later, we must withhold our optimism. The case of pop-cultural Christ-figure is unfortunately much more complicated than optimists like Kozlovic make it out to be. Let us be cautious about the whole thing. And if we intend to use a contemporary Christ-figure in order to educate ourselves or others about the spiritual meaning of Christ, let us first double check whether the source material is suitable. If

it is not, we will have, in the words of Michel Henry, "the negation of all aesthetics" (Henry 2004, 111).

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MACIEJ JEMIOŁ
Uniwersytet Ignatianum w Krakowie
(Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow, Poland)
ORCID https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3627-9392
maciej.jemiol.academia@gmail.com