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## RESERVOIR GODS: QUENTIN TARANTINO'S PREMODERN THEOLOGY

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Despite being one of the most critically lauded directors in cinema; despite winning two Oscars for screenwriting and the Palme d'Or; despite being continually successful at the box office; despite talking explicitly with God in his movies; despite centering his most famous film around a theological discussion; despite all these things, Quentin Tarantino is rarely seriously discussed in Christian journalism. *And this is completely understandable.*

### PULP FRICTION: TARANTINO'S CHALLENGE

Talking about Tarantino's theology is hard to do in a Christian context because many of his most memorable scenes are riddled with racial epithets, profanity, or *outré* acts of violence. I'd guess that there are many thoughtful, cultured people who subscribe to this journal who have either skipped over this article entirely out of polite distaste or who are now reading it with morbid curiosity to see if I'll besmirch the journal's good reputation with an R-rated quote.

More importantly, Tarantino is a highly divisive filmmaker. His movies often cause moral anxiety in different sets of people. He's sometimes scorned both by the secular left (for his playful treatment of race and historic injustice) and from the religious right (for his intense violence and profanity). Tarantino's recent entries into the historical action genre (*Inglourious Basterds* and *Django Unchained*) engage the

problem of racist persecution of Jews and African Americans respectively, but in a way that unsettles coastal critics.

On the flipside, though there are many Christian filmgoers who like historical action movies partly *because* they portray violent struggles for justice, it isn't uncommon to find that these same people dislike Tarantino *because* his movies are too violent. What makes a movie like *Braveheart* good suddenly makes Tarantino's films bad. I believe there's a unified reason for both these reactions, and I'll get to it soon. For now, though, it's enough to note that Tarantino's films don't just divide audiences but also divide *different audiences for different reasons*. Even in the first book-length theological discussion of QT (*Tarantino and Theology*), the authors are by no means uniform in their evaluation of the morality of his movies.<sup>1</sup>

Let me be clear: I love Tarantino's movies. This doesn't mean I think they're the moral equivalent of *Babette's Feast*. But they all, without exception, set off a megaton-level nuclear explosion of cinematic pleasure inside my limbic system. Watching *Pulp Fiction* when I was eighteen was probably the single greatest reason I became interested in cinema.

But I still understand why Tarantino has so many detractors. Tarantino is divisive partly because he's confusing. And what's especially confusing about Tarantino is whether he's postmodern or not.

## IS TARANTINO POSTMODERN?

On the surface, Tarantino would seem to be a quintessentially *postmodern* filmmaker. He's playful, self-aware, and interested in showing his characters actively interpreting events and texts in widely varying ways. The striving of competing interpretations is a hallmark of postmodern thought, which rejects any overarching "metanarrative" in favor of smaller narratives determined by local forms of discourse. All grand language of truth becomes a kind of local dialect, unable to communicate fully with those two towns over. To borrow from *Reservoir Dogs*, reality is as inscrutable as a Madonna song, which can yield wildly variant schemes of interpretation. Or, to cite *Pulp Fiction*, ethics is as subjective as whether it seems OK to give another man's wife a foot massage, a subject over which Vince and Jules (two hitmen) argue without resolution.

*Pulp Fiction* is the film that bears the strongest stylistic kinship to postmodernism. Its fragmented narrative often winks knowingly about its existence as an artwork. The most significant example of this is the repeated robbery scene, in which the dialogue notably changes the second time we see the same event.<sup>2</sup> But the most famous scene in the film, and one that implicitly suggests that Tarantino sees objective

truth as hopelessly beyond our grasp, is the miracle (or “freak occurrence”) witnessed near the end of the film. After their foot-massage argument, Jules and Vincent carry out a dramatic and cold-blooded hit on some small-time crooks. They’re surprised, however, by an additional young crook hiding in the bathroom with a huge revolver. The hapless crook unloads the “hand cannon’s” ammo on Jules and Vincent at close range, yet they’re unharmed. Bullet holes cover the wall all around them, and we even see holes in the wall *behind* Jules when he moves.

Yet, despite the apparent miraculousness of the event, Vincent and Jules immediately begin to argue about its meaning, standing among the corpses of the men they’ve killed. Vincent plays the skeptic, saying, “This \$#%& happens.” Jules adamantly opposes this view: “Wrong! This \$#%& doesn’t just happen... We just witnessed a &%\$#\*#@# miracle!” Their argument is cut short when Vincent concedes for the moment, just so they can leave, and won’t have to continue their “theological conversation” in the jailhouse. Later, Vincent reverts back to referring to the miracle as a “freak occurrence.”

Now, it might seem like the centrality of this unresolved question is exactly the playful deferral of truth we would expect from a postmodern filmmaker — except for the *many* suggestions that Jules is *right*, and Vincent is *wrong*. It *is* a miracle. For starters, everything begins to go wrong for Vincent after his refusal to take the miracle seriously. His gun accidentally goes off in the car, blowing off their informant’s head. Vince’s heroin is mistaken for cocaine by his boss’s wife, sending her into overdose. He’s in the bathroom during the diner robbery, and then in the bathroom again (chronologically later in the film), when Butch returns to get his golden watch, allowing Butch to get the drop on Vincent and shoot him with his own gun. Jules interprets the miracle to mean that he should leave his life of crime. And Vincent’s subsequent misfortunes and death suggest *this was the message for him as well*.

There’s also the visual evidence in the scene itself. We see that the bullets likely passed right through Jules and Vincent. The most reasonable conclusion from the cinematic evidence is that the “miracle” *was* a miracle.

And here I come, at long last, to a crucial point about Tarantino’s cinematic theology: the fact that the presence of the hand of God is construed as intractably *ambiguous* in the film suggests a problem more with us as viewers than it does with Tarantino as a filmmaker. It suggests that *we* interpret any intentional ambiguity as an attempt at an infinite deferral of meaning. What is at stake in Tarantino’s film is *whether God is active within this fictional world*. Some of his characters deny this, but that doesn’t mean they’re right. And to take any disagreement as a larger statement about the ambiguity of truth itself is to concede the whole game to postmodernism at the start.

Against this, I want to offer a counterproposal: Tarantino's movies are often *postmodern* on the surface but *premodern* at their core.

### TARANTINO'S PAGAN PHILOSOPHY

The films are aesthetically *postmodern* in their playfulness, allusions to other films, and frequent cinematic reminders that this is a movie. But they're philosophically *premodern* in their ethics and religion: which is to say, Tarantino's worldview is more at home in ancient Greece, or feudal Japan, than in twenty-first-century Los Angeles. Tarantino is as unembarrassed about killing as he is about God (or gods). And this is why, I think, Tarantino divides *different audiences* for *different reasons*. His characters don't feel guilty for their *sins*, as good Christians do. But they also don't feel guilty for their *strengths*, as good postmoderns do.

Take the scene in *Kill Bill, vol. 1*, where The Bride takes revenge on her former fellow-assassin-turned-betrayer Vernita Green. After putting a knife through Vernita's heart, The Bride turns to see Nikki, Vernita's daughter, gazing calmly on the scene. The Bride cleans off her knife in frustration, and then says, "It was not my intention to do this in front of you. For that, I'm sorry. But you can take my word for it; your mother had it coming. When you grow up, if you still feel raw about it, I'll be waiting." Note here that The Bride isn't apologizing for the killing but merely that the killing was seen by Nikki. And her offered recompense? If Nikki still feels anger years from now, she can come find The Bride, at which point, we have every reason to believe, The Bride will then *kill Nikki, too*.

Likewise, in *Kill Bill, vol. 2*, another one of The Bride's betrayers, Budd, exclaims, "That woman deserves her revenge, and we deserve to die. But then again, so does she." These are killers, pitted against one another on a morally neutral playing field. The ethical world of Quentin Tarantino's films is simplified to a minimalistic warrior's code, with heroes facing off against opponents, and violence and divine favor as the only deciding factors. As The Bride says, "When fortune smiles on something as violent and ugly as revenge, it seems proof like no other, that not only does God exist, you're doing His will." As Lawson Stone has helpfully pointed out in his essay, "The Old Testament and Kill Bill," Tarantino's world strongly resembles the world of Homer's epics, *Beowulf*, and the Old Testament book of Judges. All are chaotic, violent places where the best and last hope is the strength of the berserker-warrior, be it Achilles, Odysseus, Beowulf, Gideon, or Samson.<sup>3</sup>

After the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus, it's difficult for the Christian imagination to identify easily with the moral minimalism of the warrior code. As The Bride says, "It's mercy, compassion, and forgiveness I lack." It's as good a

statement of the mindset of an ancient warrior as any, but one that requires a temporary suspension of Christian value judgments to enter into.

Likewise, the Jewish recruits of *Inglourious Basterds* are told to behave like Apache fighters as they carry out a guerrilla incursion into occupied France, scalping at least a hundred Nazi soldiers. All this talk makes contemporary audiences queasy. It goes against the Geneva Conventions and our highest moral instincts. And it makes Tarantino seem amoral. But that's just the point. The morality is there—it's just more *arcane* than anything we're used to seeing. It's defined by a kind of tribal loyalty, which views those opposing "our" group as undeserving of life, even if they aren't combatants. (Cf. Django's killing Calvin Candie's sister, and the "Reservoir Dogs" refusal to recognize cops as "real people.")

Turning to the second aspect of Tarantino's pagan premodernism, it's noteworthy that although Jules recognizes that he has to change his ways, to cease perpetuating "the tyranny of evil men," his only model for what it means to be a righteous man is to be "like Caine in *Kung Fu*." In all four of Tarantino's epic action films (*Kill Bill 1 and 2*, *Inglourious Basterds*, and *Django Unchained*), the background heroic models are all polytheistic religious figures. From *Kill Bill*'s Asian hero-priest Pai Mei to *Django Unchained*'s frequent allusions to Sigurd and Brunhild of Norse mythology, the religious world of Quentin Tarantino is fueled by the models of pagan religion. None of Tarantino's works are marked by any attempt at syncretism (to meld these into a coherent system) or pluralism (to say that all religions are really the same thing). It bears more resemblance to the *polytheism* of the ancient Greeks: a medley of competing and striving *finite* gods. The Lord God or Buddha may exist in Tarantino's world, but even they can be cut by a Hattori Hanso sword.

## TOWARD AN APOLOGETIC RESPONSE

By thinking of Tarantino's "theology" in these premodern terms, we can liberate it from the chains of contemporary categories and allow it to speak clearly. This is important, as cultural apologetics requires *good listening*. The question remaining for the thoughtful Christian, of course, is how to respond to Tarantino's premodern, and even pre-Christian polytheistic, cinematic theology. What would be theology's "first word" to these imaginary characters?

As I've suggested, Tarantino's characters do not seem to suffer from the pains of guilt. But they do still suffer death. Like pagan heroes of old, their problems aren't internal struggles but rather external obstacles. The answer the early church found close at hand, in speaking to the wider pagan world, was to show how the death and resurrection of Jesus was a victory over death and the Devil. Gustav Aulen called this

the “dramatic motif,” but we could also construe it as the “epic motif.” In figuring Christ as the ultimate victor, it positioned itself to speak well to a pagan culture that valorized such heroes. Unlike Achilles, however, Christ did not have to choose between glory and life. Like Odysseus, Christ’s homecoming defeated the usurping powers; not just once, but forever.

No gospel will have purchase on any of these characters unless it speaks with the conviction of a Texas sheriff; the true guiltlessness made possible by mercy, compassion, and forgiveness; and the confidence that God has the power to bring us all up miraculously from the lonely grave again and make us death proof.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Jonathan Walls and Jerry Walls, eds. *Tarantino and Theology* (Los Angeles: Gray Matter, 2015).
- 2 See also John McAteer, “Three Stories about One Story: Postmodernism and the Narrative Structure of Pulp Fiction,” in *Tarantino and Theology*.
- 3 I am fond of many essays in *Tarantino and Theology*, but Lawson Stone’s is one of the best, and it is very helpful for understanding the role of the warrior code in Tarantino’s films.