

## **Learning from The Life of Brian:**

### **Saviors for Seminars<sup>1</sup>**

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Although religious establishment is formally prohibited and unbelievers are not systematically tortured, killed, forcibly converted, or segregated in ghettos, the United States remain saturated with a deeply, sometimes aggressively biblical culture. This characteristic, invisible like water to fish for most Christians, has been noted alike by thoughtful visitors<sup>2</sup> and bemused or outraged natives.<sup>3</sup> "Not only has biblical language continued to be a part of American public and political discourse, the churches have continuously exerted influence on public life right up to the present time."<sup>4</sup> As I write, the Kansas school board is engaged in a merely tactical retreat from its popular position that teaching all children articles of Christian belief about creation in the public schools is a perfectly reasonable thing to do. Attorney General John Ashcroft is

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<sup>1</sup>Thanks for thoughtful comments and helpful suggestions to Barbara R. Smith and Rachel Beaulieu, two critical intellectuals with little patience for the games I describe herein. Thanks also to Richard Walsh for inviting me to participate in this volume and for trusting me with enough rope to hang myself with.

<sup>2</sup>Examples include Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 287-301 and Weber, "Protestant Sects."

<sup>3</sup>An example is Hofstadter, Anti-intellectualism.

<sup>4</sup>Bellah, 220.

holding daily staff prayer meetings in his offices at the Justice Department, the agency responsible for enforcing the establishment clause in the First Amendment.<sup>5</sup> My metropolitan daily newspaper reports with approval that the Principal of the Year in North Carolina public schools has a Christian motto taped to her work computer.<sup>6</sup> And the currency that I use informs me that in God we trust.

In short, Christianity is hegemonic in the United States--part of the common sense grid that marks out the fields of normalcy and deviance on which all inhabitants of this country must play. From a critical perspective, resistances to this hegemony are automatically interesting, and outright counterhegemonic gestures are a holy grail of critical social analysis. This essay's topic is one candidate for assessment as a counterhegemonic gesture: Monty Python's movie The Life of Brian (1979).

In broad outline, the movie is an imaginative reconstruction of the historical lifeworld that produced the Christian gospels. Brian, a nice but altogether ordinary Judean, finds himself drawn by a series of accidents into a void of meaning where his every word and action become deeply significant to a growing accumulation of unwanted disciples. As depicted by the Pythons, he is just one of many messiah candidates as the people of Judea grasp chaotically after either spiritual or political relief from Roman domination. This plot obviously has some deep theological implications. In addition, because the movie is playful at various levels right down to the broadest slapstick and plays into the U.S. bourgeois anglophilia that pays for PBS,

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<sup>5</sup>NPR, May 18, 2001.

<sup>6</sup>Lu, "In the Schools: Principal of the Year Uses Faith, Many Hands."

it can be at least mildly entertaining to just about anyone uninvested in dogmatic religious and social conventions.

I am not interested in casual or formal bases for liking the movie so much as its importance for certain audiences and purposes. Ever since I first saw it, as a teenager, I have thought the movie offers all sorts of useful lessons about the Gospels. This is why I rather unreflectively chose it as my topic for this essay and volume. Reflecting now on how I want to write this essay, I realize how everything I want to say about the movie is bound up in those first impressions. In particular, I realize that for me, the movie always has had important strategic values that have persisted and evolved under the layers of specialized knowledge and sophisticated interpretive operations I can now run it through. It is the movie's strategic values, only tangentially related to the Gospels, that will be the focus of this essay.

Since self-reflection got me to the point of looking at the movie in terms of strategies, I will start with a bit of autobiography. Knowing that the details of my adolescence are not much interest to any reader, I have included only enough of the case to show how I developed an elementary strategic posture toward the movie, and using the movie, toward elements of my social milieu. This discussion will set the stage for more general reflections on the strategic values of the movie with respect to contrasting social positions (including contrasts over the meanings of the Gospels). Here, I will work with Antonio Gramsci's concepts of common sense and hegemony to illustrate one sort of strategic critical reception of the movie. I will then use Pierre Bourdieu's ideas about habitus and class to complicate strategic critical reception by looking at some of its conditions. My hypothesis is that Life of Brian is likely to have special strategic values for the class fraction of critical intellectuals far beyond (or simply other than) its inherent

resources of entertainment, edification, or even counterhegemony.<sup>7</sup> I should say that I do not think there is a single correct strategic reception any more than God could be on the side of only one team in a basketball game. Accordingly, I start with strategic criticisms and end up strategically critical of strategic criticism.

### **I. The Gospels, Tangentially**

My upbringing, mostly insulated from hegemonic Christianity, was ideal to make me an audience for which The Life of Brian would be strategically important. I grew up just beyond the outer commute fringe of Philadelphia in a relatively isolated semi-rural area, around which I frequently wandered alone. We did not socialize substantively with the locals. My parents were both educated and cosmopolitan, even more so after the family spent two years in Italy starting when I was ten. We were a PBS/NPR family. My dad, whose father was a carpet salesman and bartender, had worked a series of very odd jobs in order to afford a series of very right schools. He earned his doctorate in philosophy working on Camus, whose austere existentialist humanism probably attracted Dad as a rebellious a-theistic twist on the austere protestantism of his own New England upbringing.

Needless to say, what for him was a statement was for me taken for granted (as a loved eldest son, I have felt no need to make my own rebellious statement<sup>8</sup>). Perhaps ironically, radi-

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<sup>7</sup>There are several different ways I could have said this. I could have said that the movie supplies critical vocabulary in a 'language game' (Wittgenstein), or discursive power in a 'truth game' (Foucault). I could have joked that the movie is a big gun in the international arms race of ideas (Bourdieu, see below).

<sup>8</sup>See Sulloway, Born to Rebel.

cal personal responsibility was the standard of my moral education. I was trusted to make independent judgments as long as I could give a reflective account of them in which care for others was prominently featured.<sup>9</sup> Critical thinking (I did not learn to call it that until much later) has been part of my unreflective worldview and habitual practice from my earliest memories. It is not something for which I can take credit, and I have gradually learned (by means of it, to be sure) to be suspicious of my reflex to think everyone should do it.

As a child I was dimly aware of organized religion, but in my early years it simply had no relevance to my life. Little friends would occasionally mention church as an ordinary activity, but there are many ordinary activities that may be shared or not shared (I also was not in Boy Scouts or Little League) and this one did not stand out. I do remember enjoying that I had my Sunday mornings free.

When The Life of Brian came out in 1979, I was in local public high school and locked in struggle with packs of born again Christians. This was my first serious encounter with missionary Christianity. The pattern was always the same. Using one stratagem or another they cut me from the herd and isolated me. That I was not fitting stably into any particular herd in high school must have made me look like easy prey. My faith credentials were examined and found to be in deplorable disorder. It usually took a while to convince the missionaries and their gently perplexed spokesman [sic] not only that I was not any variety of Christian, but that I had no religious affiliation whatever nor any sense of a void in my life in this respect. Finally persuaded of my innocence and/or ignorance, the spokesman delivered his joyous good news.

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<sup>9</sup>No doubt readers impatient with my autobiographical approach in this section will discover here the sources of my self-indulgence.

I was dabbling in missionary skepticism in those days (I thought of it as open-mindedness) and always in the mood for a good debate. I also thought I knew genuine good will when I saw it. So even though I had no interest whatever in getting someone else's religion, I generally expressed sincere thanks for the missionaries' care and inquired further as to the sources and outlines of their good news. At this point the conversation became a free-for-all about the content and meaning of both the Bible and Christian history. I knew a little about those things, and so did they. Sooner or later the record of bad behavior by Christians and the list of contradictions, ambiguities, and improbabilities in the Bible itself that I was able to list off on demand produced a stalemate. I had no satisfactory answers for the big questions about Life, the Universe, and the Meaning of It All that religions have always answered best, but I saw no reason to cover my ignorance with metaphysical inventions. I was aware of religions other than Christianity, and they seemed no less (or more) plausible to me. We agreed that it was all a matter of faith; they exhorted me to look within my heart for mine (or to open my heart to Jesus, 'assuming facts not in evidence' as the lawyers say); and we all parted friendly.

In these conversations and their outcomes I was smug. I thought I was a real intellectual, and was certainly training for the part. Like many non-Christians raised among Christians, I thought I knew the holy texts better than the faithful. (This attitude had been especially easy to acquire during my two years in Italian public school, mumbling Hail Marys and Our Fathers every morning along with the rest of the class. Many Italian Catholics cheerfully do not bother to read the Bible directly, since that's what priests are for; and, like U.S. children with the pledge of allegiance, they may drone the prayers phonetically.) Further, like many non-Christians raised among Christians, I also thought I acted more in the spirit of Christian morals than many

Christians, who seemed to me to be substituting ritual practices and attitudes for the hard work of living thoughtfully that Jesus recommended.

When Life of Brian showed up I was just about sick of this little game of hunted-becomes-the-hunter. For one thing, I started to get it that I was not at my most likable when picking at loose threads in other people's beliefs, even when they just darned me over or folded the holes under new wrinkles. For another, that phase in my construction as a critical intellectual was simply over. Demi-secular friends who had no real prospects of getting out of our backwater town kept playing the game with their equally localized religious counterparts in an ongoing cycle of mutually indispensable self-definition. They enjoyed the movie (as I did, and do) for its crude burlesque send-ups of the sorts of status-bearing religious sanctimony and bourgeois propriety they grouched about every day over a beer or three, as well as for the patent of connoisseurship it conferred. I was tracked for college and looking for bigger fish to fry and a hotter stove to fry them on. Although I didn't know it yet, I had started to think counterhegemonically about Christianity.

The Pythons' earlier movie, Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1975), was the lead-in. Its zany irreverence toward various conventions, including those of church religion (as reflected in the title and general plot of the Arthurian quest for the grail), had tickled me by offering legitimation and vocabulary for my own adolescent experiments with intellectual nonconformity. The local PBS station, knowing its audience well, showed the movie during every pledge break. I saw it a dozen or more times. "We are all conformists of some conformism or other," Gramsci says.<sup>10</sup> Indeed. I did not yet see the irony of the oppositional conformity that led me and my

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<sup>10</sup>Prison Notebooks, 324.

cognoscenti friends to memorize and perform long stretches of dialogue. "Strange women lying in ponds distributing swords is no basis for a system of government." Ha. Heading toward the self-consciously more sophisticated university milieu, The Life of Brian became iconic to me as the model of how to rise above using an educated, serious, yet playful critique of the Christian pretentiousness I perceived all around me.

## **II. Hegemony and Counterhegemony**

Note the problem of religion taken not in the confessional sense but in the secular sense of a unity of faith between a conception of the world and a corresponding norm of conduct. But why call this unity of faith 'religion' and not 'ideology', or even frankly 'politics'?<sup>11</sup>

I gradually began to realize during college and graduate school that the story I just told makes sense only within a hegemonic Christian regime. The conversations were only apparently between Christians and a non-Christian. The entire ground of legitimate argumentation was Christian history and Christian doctrine; the only way for me to make any headway at all was to operate the tools of my interlocutors more ably than they did. More importantly, at that time I saw no dilemma in this situation--I fully accepted those grounds of debate and, in crucial respects, shared them. Although I found the Bible unconvincing and God/Jesus/Holy Spirit 'unnecessary hypotheses', my own morals were (and are) secular derivatives of the ethical traditions of Christianity. In the terms of Gramsci's quote above, I unreflectively shared the norm of

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<sup>11</sup>Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, 326.

conduct while challenging the corresponding conception of the world; but by working with its texts and terms, I was inside the latter as well. The Life of Brian and I were a perfect fit.

Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), a leading Marxist theorist and one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party, thought hard about the relationship between religion and politics because the revolution wasn't happening and he needed to figure out why. He moved beyond the vulgar, polemical Marxist position that religion is merely the opiate of the masses (roughly speaking, the position my friends and I held in high school) to understand the historical solidity and complexity of religion as part of the intricate intellectual and practical apparatus by which consent to relations of domination is created. Accordingly, he distinguished the extraordinary enforcement of domination by brute force from its more ordinary installation as legitimate order in people's conception of the world, or worldview. Hegemony was his term for this ordinary form of domination in which force is generally hidden behind or replaced by common sense conceptual and practical legitimacy.<sup>12</sup>

The key point to grasp about successful gramscian hegemony is that it is permeating and preconscious. In fact, its elements are the foundations that consciousness is built upon. Hegemony is constitutive: there is no prehegemonic, preconsenting 'self' that is then hegemonized. Hegemony is thus both the second nature of normalcy and the first nature of human nature.

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<sup>12</sup>Gramsci's 'hegemony' and Weber's 'legitimate domination' thus have much in common. A complete comparison is obviously beyond the scope of the present essay. Weber used the term 'domination' in a value-neutral sense to describe any situation in which given orders are likely to be obeyed. Whether they should be given and should be obeyed is a different sort of analysis, one that Gramsci's concept of hegemony invites.

"One often hears that a certain habit has become a 'second nature'; but was the 'first nature' really the 'first'?"<sup>13</sup> For Gramsci, then, the first critique is always self-critique.

In modern societies, religion is only one mode of installation and function of this network of consent. The press in particular struck Gramsci as an especially effective "material organization aimed at maintaining, defending and developing the theoretical or ideological 'front' of a dominant class (whether ruling or in opposition). Yet,

[t]he press is the most dynamic part of this ideological structure, but not the only one. Everything which influences or is able to influence public opinion, directly or indirectly, belongs to it: libraries, schools, associations and clubs of various kinds, even architecture and the layout and names of streets. It would be impossible to explain the position retained by the Church in modern society if one were unaware of the constant and patient efforts it makes to develop continuously its particular section of this material structure of ideology.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Quaderni 16, 1875.

<sup>14</sup>Cultural Writings, 389. While Gramsci wrote before the full flowering of popular film, this statement on the special qualities of the press, and many others like it, provide suggestive material for those seeking to extend Gramsci's analysis into a world pervaded with a far greater variety of media such as film. See Hall, Landy, and Williams for various attempts to work this through. See also Quaderni 6, §126, 795 for a very practical little note on providing little readers' guides as resources of critical interpretation for readers of the press in order to elevate their general cultural literacy.

The materiality of the fragmented public consciousness that issues from this multiplicity of sites of formation is perversely solidified by its uncoordinated multi-modality. Without a monolithic target, opposition becomes intricately difficult and must be similarly multi-modal.<sup>15</sup>

Hegemonic processes and practices support relations of domination without ever directly reflecting them. Therefore, counterhegemonic processes and practices must also work subtly, using and twisting hegemonic forms to bring them into question as nature/second nature.<sup>16</sup> Because of this need to work from inside the natural hegemonic order, there is always a certain functional ambiguity about whether the counterhegemonic attack will be delivered or if the Trojan horse will remain sealed and become just another ornament on the public square. As a gesture perhaps countering hegemonic Christianity this is the dilemma that The Life of Brian squarely faces.

Brian is not directly blasphemous.<sup>17</sup> Nor would it have a prayer of mainstream acceptance and effectiveness if it were. It is not a broadside or even a shot across the bows so much as a nudge in the ribs. With respect to Jesus, who makes three brief tangential appearances, the

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<sup>15</sup>This strikes me as an apt enough description of Foucault's sense of the 'microphysics of power'.

<sup>16</sup>In old-fashioned hegelian terms this is an 'immanent' critique. In more newfangled cultural studies terms this is an 'inside/outside' critique. Since the original immanence was God (or Spirit), the advantage of the latter term is that it helps to clean out residues of (patriarchal) theology from the hegelian philosophical system and its marxian descendants.

<sup>17</sup>For an extended discussion, and an illustration of the fine line between religious righteousness and dogmatic prudery, see Hewison (59-95).

movie is downright orthodox. In each case, the message is not that Jesus is wrong, or even that worshipping Jesus is wrong, but that fallible humans find all sorts of creative ways to get worshipping Jesus wrong. As Python John Cleese remarks, reflecting the evolution of the movie's concept from the original Jesus Christ: Lust for Glory through The Gospel According to St. Brian, "I don't really know what we'd find funny about [Jesus]. I think you can only laugh at people if their behavior is basically inappropriate and I don't see that Christ's behavior was inappropriate. So I don't think you could probably be funny about him--only about the way that people subsequently tried to follow his teaching."<sup>18</sup> Small surprise that Jesus' behavior was appropriate when the Christian Jesus' behavior defines the ideal of appropriate behavior within Christian hegemony.

Even so, Cleese is too modest. The Pythons' Jesus is not just behaviorally appropriate, He is divine. This is shown in the opening scene, in which the three wise men initially mistake the baby Brian for the baby Jesus, bestowing their gifts lavishly and with much praise. But the heavenly glow issuing from the next manger down leaves no ultimate doubt about where or whether the divine presence is to be located. The unwise wise men show that men are fallible in their worship, but the object of that worship is left unquestioned.

Later, now-adult Jesus himself appears in a scene set during delivery of the Sermon on the Mount. A reverently performed, quietly charismatic Jesus is briefly audible, but as the camera draws back, focus quickly shifts to characters at the fringes of the audience straining to make out his words across great distance and accumulated crowd sounds. Brian and his mother, Mandy, are party to an ordinary public squabble during which Jesus is reported to be saying

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<sup>18</sup>Criterion Collection DVD, The Life of Brian.

"Blessed are the Cheesemakers." With a brawl about to break out, this blessing is questioned and glossed: "What's so special about the cheesemakers?" "It's not meant to be taken literally. Obviously it refers to any manufacturers of dairy products."<sup>19</sup> Further in, they learn that the Greek will inherit the earth. "Did anyone catch his name?"

Returning home, Brian is accosted by a healthy young man begging him to "spare a talent for an old ex-leper, sir." Conversation reveals that the fellow had been in fact a leper, miraculously cured by Jesus. "One minute I'm a leper with a trade, next moment me livelihood's gone. Not so much as a by your leave."<sup>20</sup>

While these episodes are certainly twists on the human reception of Jesus' saving words and miraculous works, those words, works and their divine source are taken as givens. In terms of core Christian beliefs, the movie is reverent and unquestioning. This may be a strategic concession, but if so, it is one that leaves the premises from which the undesirable conclusions have been drawn intact. Accordingly, Brian's directly hegemonic function is strong. So far, the Trojan horse is just a nice statue of a horse.

Academic religionists have had no trouble appreciating the hegemonic spirit and impact of the movie and appropriating it for their own strategic purposes. Biblical scholar Philip R. Davies remarks,

I have long been of the conviction that Monty Python's Life of Brian is an indispensable foundation to any student's career in New Testament studies. In my view, it not only reflects a higher level of historical and biblical research

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<sup>19</sup>Python, 9.

<sup>20</sup>Python, 13.

than nearly all exemplars of the Hollywood genre which count among its targets, but also engages with a number of basic scholarly historical and theological issues.<sup>21</sup>

The authors of Savior on the Silver Screen identify the perspective of the movie as a non-Christian one, but then identify the target of the movie's satire not as Jesus' message but as institutional (church) authority and middle-class convention (I would add blind faith). "Thomas Merton has observed that we must become disillusioned, that is, we must get rid of our illusions if we are to make any progress in the life of Christ. In a sense, and from outside the Christian faith, Life of Brian urges the same" (251). It may be true that the movie is outside the Christian faith formally defined, but only from inside Christian hegemony is it interesting or effort-worthy to urge anything of the sort.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, critique of church institution and wealthy privilege could describe the positions of any of a series of monastic or Protestant sects within Christian history. The Cambridge-trained Pythons were way ahead of their academic interpreters on this one and sanctioned the movie's hegemonic appropriation by religious intellectuals. Python Terry Jones argues that the

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21 "Life of Brian Research," in Exum and Moore, eds., 400-414.

22 'Urging' also seems like a suspiciously modernist thing to do--postmodernists tend to be more resolutely playful or ironic about their moral engagement. The authors seem to think the movie exhibits a postmodern sensibility, but this is at least questionable for the reason just mentioned, and also due to the notorious difficulty of pinning down a definition of postmodernism. The movie is often irreverent, unconventional, and anarchic, but does that make it postmodern?Ž141414

movie is "not blasphemous because it accepts the Christian story; in fact, the film doesn't make sense unless you take the Christian story, but it's heretical in terms of [being] very critical of the Church..." with John Cleese agreeing that "[w]hat we are is quite clearly making fun of the way people follow religion but not of religion itself.... I would defend Life of Brian as being a perfectly religious film."<sup>23</sup>

The Pythons make it clear that as long as the audience gets this about the movie, they are content. In fact, they understand their audience to be a small and sophisticated one. Jones points out that they "never had a mass audience. Python's always been [accepted by] sort of an intelligent, articulate minority, so our audiences would soon cop onto what the film was, really."<sup>24</sup>

They were rather less content with the dismissive or militant opposition Brian received from some church officials and Christian communities when it was released, but this reaction too was strategically hegemonic.<sup>25</sup> Anathemizing the film offered easy opportunities for renewal of church authorities' over-routinized charisma<sup>26</sup> and for exercises of community-affirming collective effervescence.<sup>27</sup> These were not serious receptions of the movie as such (often it was

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<sup>23</sup>Morgan, 247-8.

<sup>24</sup>Morgan, 248.

<sup>25</sup>For details of media broadsides, picketing, petitions, boycotts, and threats of prosecution or violence, see Hewison.

<sup>26</sup>Weber, Economy and Society, 1121ff.

<sup>27</sup>Durkheim, Elementary Forms, 424.

clear that the people in question had not seen it), but rather opportunistic potshots at a convenient target.

In turn, the Pythons' reaction is tellingly disingenuous--after all, if they were correct in their critical assessment of blind faith, church institutions, and bourgeois convention, they got exactly the responses they should have expected. Although many intellectuals are helplessly flummoxed when their sensible criticisms are not immediately and gratefully embraced by their targets, Jones' candid yet self-serving assessment of the Pythons' core audience shows that it is far more likely that the crafty Pythons too were preaching to their choir rather than naively attempting to convince the opposition.<sup>28</sup>

Overall, by accepting the common sense of Jesus' divinity and ethical authority, The Life of Brian locates itself squarely within the hegemonic network of Christianity. Like any Protestant enlightening, the movie is highly (sometimes savagely) critical of Christian practices and institutions, while leaving the core Christian worldview completely intact. At most, as Savior on the Silver Screen points out, the Pythons make an intellectual bid to transform the murky, unreflective, and self-contradictory morass of Christian common sense into a more thoughtful, systematic (disillusioned, or in Weber's terms disenchanting) ethic: that is, as Gramsci put it, to turn common sense into 'good sense' or even 'philosophy'.<sup>29</sup> But since the audiences for the movie were preselected, as were its oppositions, the movie achieves at best a conventional anti-conventional critical posture that easily fits within and may contribute to reproducing the relations it criticizes.

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<sup>28</sup>On persuasion see Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, 338-9.

<sup>29</sup>Prison Notebooks, 323-30.

While I have focused on Christian hegemony, there are a variety of other ways that the movie is open to question as a counterhegemonic gesture and may simply or functionally be hegemonic. From a feminist standpoint, for example, the movie is frustratingly uncritical. The Pythons are all men, and although they avoid most of the obvious sexism and enjoy playing with gender by casting men as women (or even men as women as men, in the stoning scene), their characterizations of women are few, flat, and stereotyped. While there is some sympathy in the portrayal of the limited roles and opportunities available for women in biblical times, this theme is instrumentalized rather than scrutinized. The Pythons both depict and offer limited roles and opportunities.

From a postcolonial perspective the movie also avoids the obvious orientalism, but at the expense of erasing the Otherness of ancient society in the holy land altogether. Rather than playing on cultural exoticism, the movie uses exotic locales, costumes, and props as a setting for characters and scenarios that are culturally familiar, indeed, completely British. Even in the haggling scene over the fake beard and gourd where Brian, like any ignorant western tourist, seeks to pay the asking price as though it is a ticket price and is completely baffled by the haggling ritual, Harry the merchant is played as a Cockney street vendor. The send-up is accordingly of class struggle, not ethnocentrism.

### **III. Class Habitus and the Critical Faculty**

There was a long time when I would have said that The Life of Brian is important because it is counterhegemonic, placing it (from my perspective) on the side of the angels. As an

established academic professional with a steady job, I now think this is much too simple. It is one thing to find hegemony dialectically embedded within counterhegemony (the Trojan horse turned inside-out, so to speak). It is another to get beyond the kind of analysis that needs to see oppositions in terms of an ultimately binary array of forces, hegemonic and counterhegemonic, dominant and subaltern. Gramsci has already granted that hegemony itself is multi-modal. This is an insight worth exploring without leaping over-hastily to the conclusion that every opposition is a little bit of revolution. If The Life of Brian is not importantly counterhegemonic then how, and to whom, is it important in a more limited sense? For this sort of relational analysis, Pierre Bourdieu's work is especially helpful.

Bourdieu, now a fixture of French academic sociology, started his career as an anthropologist studying the Kabyles of Algeria. By breaking with the objective traditions of colonial anthropology and asking his informants why they acted as they did, he learned that the reasons for apparently identical actions "could vary considerably depending on the agents and also on the circumstances."<sup>30</sup> He concluded that cultural positions and processes, including of course receptions of movies, cannot be reduced to a single set of rules and hierarchical relations. Instead, he sees individuals and groups constructively deploying strategies within structured interactive fields.

Like Gramsci, but without the revolutionary agenda, Bourdieu is concerned with an ethnographic sociology of knowledge in which what we take for granted (our common sense) is brought into analytical focus. This is obviously a lot easier to do to other people than to do to ourselves. His concept of habitus calls attention to the same nature/second nature slide that

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<sup>30</sup>In Other Words, 20.

Gramsci saw as a characteristic of hegemony. Habitus is the 'sense of the possible' or 'feel for the game' picked up as a set of dispositions through a lifetime of immersion in structured relations with others.<sup>31</sup> As an ordinary adaptation to our circumstances we are habitually disposed to think and act in certain ways, in situations and among other thinkers and actors that seem natural to us.

Again, like hegemony, habitus is constitutive--it is not something that is imposed on a preexisting self. "The schemes of the habitus, the primary forms of classification, owe their specific efficacy to the fact that they function below the level of consciousness and language, beyond the reach of introspective scrutiny or control by the will."<sup>32</sup> Nor, unlike the Marxist Gramsci, does Bourdieu think that this basic sense of who one is, what things are, and how things work within existing relations is the mere reflection in the last analysis of a massive system of class domination.<sup>33</sup> Classes, class fractions, and individuals do struggle for relative advantage, but they do so within fields or networks of positions rather than in simple top-down, bottom-up contests for ultimate power.

Bourdieu seeks to identify the practical logics that make class effective as a structure and practice. He argues that cultural fields, such as those containing movies and movie cri-

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<sup>31</sup>Compare this formulation to Wittgenstein's 'language games' (Philosophical Investigations), an inspiration Bourdieu acknowledges (e.g. In Other Words 9); and to George Herbert Mead, who also discovered the genesis and operation of the self in 'fields' of interactive differentiation and used the metaphor of game to illustrate (e.g. Selected Writings 94-104, 267-293).

<sup>32</sup>Distinction, 466.

<sup>33</sup>On this point, compare also to Hall.

tiques, are sites of competition and domination in which practical oppositions of class distinction are played out. Within these fields, social actors position and identify themselves according to symbolic tastes and preferences that contain their practical assessment of the types and weights of capital--economic, political, cultural, intellectual, physical--that they are able to deploy or cash in for social advantage.

Bourdieu shows that classes are internally divided into class fractions by the dispersion of capitals. Once positioned, each class fraction has an interest in fortifying and normalizing its position with respect to other competing positions within differentiated fields, distinguishing itself from others by using them (and being used by them) to describe what it is not. Such distinguishing practices cannot be well understood in isolation, but only in relation to particular social-historical fields of possible positions.

This practical logic of distinction (or classification) with respect to competing positions produces habitus, a sense of the field and the positions in it. All social actors participate actively in their positioning, taking advantage of available space to distinguish themselves creatively. Thus, our selves and conduct are structured and distinguished without being absolutely determined: we are both constrained and free, within limits.<sup>34</sup> Using the present case as an example, very few people have The Life of Brian rammed down their throats without some degree of active selection from a more or less varied menu of alternatives. But not everyone has access to the same menus. And there are some people for whom the movie, or one a lot like it, will make more sense and be more useful than others. When they are also better equipped by their histo-

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<sup>34</sup>Accordingly, Bourdieu thinks that structure/agency debates are a (sometimes revealing) waste of time over a false dichotomy.

ries and circumstances (habitus) with the correct ability to detect that sense and usefulness (taste) the movie moves into a central cluster of likely choices and takes on a different level of meaning as part of a strategy of distinction.<sup>35</sup>

Criticism is a strategy of distinction habitually deployed by a particular class fraction in modern industrial societies, the professional or quasi-professional critical intelligentsia. Plenty of critical thinking happens outside the walls of academe: as Gramsci noted, "all men [sic] are intellectuals... but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals."<sup>36</sup> However, such thinking has very little space to root and flower in the workaday world, and tends regularly to dissipate into grousing, periodic charivaris, or the third beer.<sup>37</sup> It is the professional critical intellectuals who are by habitus and taste the core audience for which The Life of Brian has a chance of being strategically important rather than merely entertaining or momentarily offensive. Who are these people?

Although extravagantly educated and formally part of the upper bourgeoisie, the intelligentsia's dependence for their livelihood on service rather than independent production deals

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<sup>35</sup>Weber called this dynamic of guided choice 'elective affinity'. For a powerful anthropological critique of materialism that avoids the obvious strategies of self-defense, see Sahlins. Bourdieu meets Sahlins half-way through his attention to both structure and construction, field and strategy.

<sup>36</sup>Prison Notebooks, 9.

<sup>37</sup>For a lengthy rebuttal of this offhand dismissal from, I think, the perspective of a highly intellectualized romantic populism (this may just be a mirror trap), see Scott. For explanation of charivari, or carnival, see Scott or Darnton.

them a serious and potentially dissonant status hit. They (we) are, as Bourdieu remarks, the 'dominated fraction of the dominant class'. While the intelligentsia's primary function in society is necessarily to help reproduce elites by ritually conferring educational capital on their children and progressively weeding out the 'bad students' from the lower orders,<sup>38</sup> its distinction comes from knowing and understanding things at a higher level or more in depth, therefore perhaps critically, than people whose lives are consumed with the everyday details of producing wealth.<sup>39</sup> The tension between function and distinction and the fact that neither is strictly necessary to the function or distinction of the wealth-generating elites who pay for it all mark off the primary grid within which members of this class fraction jockey for position.

Within this agonistic field there are a variety of distinctive strategies that will work and reasons to choose among them. Of course, the primary threshold of competitive success is the institutional core of the schools. While there are plenty of successful professional intellectuals outside the schools--doctors, lawyers, engineers, managers, bureaucrats, etc.--whose distinctions do depend on specialized knowledge and understanding, the technical demands and formal requirements of their functions virtually guarantee that they will not become critical intellectuals properly speaking. People who are disposed to be bothered by this generally do not choose these fields, or strategically redefine critical thinking as 'thinking outside the box' while

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<sup>38</sup>See Bourdieu and Passeron; see also George W. Bush; for a caveat about 'reproduction', see Williams, 181-205.

<sup>39</sup>See Bourdieu, Homo Academicus, The State Nobility, Academic Discourse, a series of books in which he has developed this analysis for the French case; for contrast, see Gouldner.

taking the box for granted, as opposed to thinking about whether there ought to be boxes, where they came from, what shape they should be, who should own them, and so on. This is at most a casual audience for The Life of Brian, although they may think fondly of the movie from a time before their career path fully coalesced.

The same is true of those intellectuals who successfully cross over professionally into the schools, but do so marginally as trainers in technical vocational skills and knowledge. Since their strategy is to make a direct exchange of useful cultural capital for livelihood and status, and since the value of their capital tends to be immediately responsive to market selection and fluctuation,<sup>40</sup> they are unlikely to make any sort of posture critical of general social arrangements part of their professional identity. Indeed, such a posture would be foreign to their habitus and would likely never occur to them (it could be 'in bad taste', 'not for the likes of us', or, if

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40As just one example, since golf is an expensive luxury activity subject to the availability of substantial marginal surpluses investable in leisure and optional status reinforcement, status-conferring college training of golf professionals is likely to be both highly attractive in flush times and highly vulnerable to market contraction in lean times. Presumably the contraction of such programs would move from outside in. Programs training members of social groups distinguished primarily by physical capital and moved by good times to just barely within the threshold of 'golf culture' will find their market drying up before programs catering to social groups for which golf is not a luxury but an expected and primordial part of the class profile, that is, part of the habitus. Then again, those people don't need to go to college to learn the golf culture and are tracked for more prestigious careers than 'club pro', which is why the really elite schools may have golf teams but never golf programs.

they make virtue of necessity, even 'immoral'). In the United States and particularly outside the cosmopolitan metropolises they are likely to be Christian, habitually and perhaps even sincerely, granting them entry to the legitimate networks in which right-thinking people do business with each other.<sup>41</sup> Such 'cultural goodwill'<sup>42</sup> may characterize virtually the entire faculty at marginal schools. This can change quickly, however, for those whom the market does not favor and whose trajectory is accordingly downward (Brian is fertile ground for sour grapes).

Historically, in fact, the term 'intelligentsia' applies properly to the stratum of institutionally marginalized, surplus, socially functionless or under-functioned college-educated men in tsarist Russia.<sup>43</sup> This group included sundry anarchists, Bolsheviks, and Raskolnikovs. They were cranky and even dangerous because they had been trained for specialized higher-order thinking in a society that had limited need and appreciation for those intellectual skills.<sup>44</sup> No greater evidence of the extravagant wealth of our present society is needed than its ability not just to produce but institutionally to incorporate and support such people. The ability to keep professional intellectuals whose entire manifest function and distinction is to think deep

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41See Weber, "Protestant Sects"; Bellah.

42Bourdieu, Distinction ch. 6.

43Venturi, esp. 220-31.

44Calling themselves an 'intellectual proletariat', they were caught in the middle of various tsars' more or less unsystematic efforts to modernize Russia from above without significantly changing traditional productive relations from below. So they were optimistically trained at State expense as the technical revolutionaries of a technical revolution that kept not happening. That some of them then shifted their revolutionary focus is small surprise.

thoughts about this'n'that is a luxury previously reserved for only the most wealthy and arrogant kings. The ability durably to institutionalize this arrangement was beyond even kings.

In Europe a few public intellectuals are supported by a residual historical reverence for the nobility of high culture and a nominally far broader and more differentiated political spectrum. Neither of these conditions exists in the United States, where, therefore, public debate is handled by 'pundits' and the critical intelligentsia is an exotic curiosity stashed in the inessential disciplines of the classical liberal arts and social sciences. Without a broad public audience they can often be observed busily making a living biting the hands that feed them, temporarily muddling their students' certainties, publishing their findings in jargony specialized journals and edited volumes read only by each other, and performing useful symbolic functions of legitimation for the openness of the system by doing so.<sup>45</sup>

Despite strategic conservative drumbeating and handwringing in the U.S. culture wars this is a relatively small group, and it is important not to use too broad a brush here.<sup>46</sup> Even in the liberal disciplines whose whole history can be told as a story of emergent critical thinking, solid institutionalization and social mobility have enabled a split between investors in political capital (committee work, program building, administration) and investors in intellectual capital. The former choose a profitable strategy for careerists with nominal investments in intellectual capital, but their functions and prospects also obviously bar them from much of a critical posture even when so disposed (the path from firebrand reformer to jaded administration lackey is

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<sup>45</sup>See Jacoby for a discussion and illustration.

<sup>46</sup>On U.S. anti-intellectualism see Hofstadter; on the comparison of the U.S. to France in this regard, see Lamont.

notoriously well-beaten and strewn with good intentions). The latter are then further split between distinction strategies arranged around technical expertise and distinction strategies arranged around critical gestures.<sup>47</sup> Historians may stake their careers on knowing in great detail what happened and when, or they may earn their spurs in debates that seek to explain why. Philosophers may be logicians or metaphysicians, and as metaphysicians they may be historians. English professors may be grammarians, writers, new critics, or deconstructionists. Quantity/quality, theory/methodology (or theory/practice), fact/interpretation, art/science, rigor/intuition are some of the binaries that get tossed around to grid these fields. That these are false dichotomies (mirror traps) does not minimize their practical structuring effect or lessen their strategic usefulness. Myriad specialized permutations along and across these general axes are possible, as any large academic department will show, while small departments ideally attract, and only happily keep, the strategists of breadth.<sup>48</sup>

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47Yet another familiar split that has little bearing on the present analysis can be seen between researchers and teachers, with their corresponding institutions, ideologies, and imperial claims.

48Regarding the reception of The Life of Brian there is one further distinction to be made. As déclassé purveyors of vulgar popular culture, the Pythons are beneath public notice beyond, perhaps, an indulgent chuckle to the most privileged members of the intellectual elite (and to their more aggressive strategic emulators and groupies). In fact, the intrusion of popular culture studies into the high academy is historically simultaneous with the intrusion and gradual entrenchment during the last forty to fifty years of middle and even working class students and faculty into what had been an upper-class reserve. My dad was the intruder, I am the en-

Even distinguished from the academic technical intelligentsia, critical intellectuals are a motley crew. Again, just about the only thing they share is criticism as their characteristic distinction strategy. So far, so obvious. The consequence of this for the (production and) reception of cultural artifacts like The Life of Brian has to do with their encoding or encodability as signs of mastery in the critical game. Not to put too fine a point on it, criticism would be useless as a strategy of distinction if just anyone could do it.<sup>49</sup> It requires a certain leisure, a room of one's own, and the acquisition of distinctive cognitive equipment, including specialized language, canonical expertise, ways of seeing, and habits of mind, through a lengthy and rigorous apprenticeship--which ideally must then be forgotten, so that the mastery of distinction appears graceful, natural, intuitive.<sup>50</sup> Reception or consumption and decoding of the encoded artifact (or active encoding of the artifact, for example in the cases of pop art or the ironic taste for kitsch) then becomes important as a form of communication, mutual recognition, and reciprocal validation among those in-the-know (connoisseurs, cognoscenti). While part of the pleasure is lamenting, perhaps sincerely, that the full meaning of the artifact is not more widely under-

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trencher. I show my class by this choice of topic, and I suspect I know who my audience is.

Honk if you're first or second generation!

49Note my earlier quick dismissal of barstool critics and my attempt to take criticism back from 'thinking outside the box' vulgarizers.

50Distinction, 3. Failure to perceive this last step of the accomplishment and cover their tracks leads many new class intruders into the high academy to commit the faux pas of treating their degrees and positions as the product of hard work.

stood, mass acceptance takes the distinction out and is likely to cause loss of interest in all senses of the word.

The thrill of The Life of Brian for critical intellectuals like myself is that it is heavily encoded and encodable with messages and jokes about Christian theology and history (among other juicy subjects) that only I and a select few distinguished comrades can decode. Unlike the barbarous popular taste that seeks immediate comprehensibility, immediate pleasure, and immediate usefulness, the educated, critical taste takes chaste, dispassionate pleasure in painstakingly picking through the piece for its secret signs.<sup>51</sup> This is where critical intellectuals have an interest in disinterest and gain symbolic power by their legitimate monopoly of the means of analysis.<sup>52</sup> Where the movie was important for me and my friends in high school in a vulgar, immediately useful kind of way as a shared joke and an unspoken one-up in conversations with Christians about Jesus, as a professional intellectual I get a far more pure pleasure from the movie by being able to see it at many levels, for example by recognizing how it is caught be-

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<sup>51</sup>Distinction, 30-35. This direct decoding is the pleasure I have partially foregone in electing to write the essay not primarily as a reception but as a critique of reception--thereby heightening the pleasure through self-denial and platonic transcendence to metacritique.

<sup>52</sup>In Other Words, 123-39.

tween hegemony and counterhegemony.<sup>53</sup> It is now important as a sign of and playground for my distinctive critical sophistication.<sup>54</sup>

This play of class fraction distinctions is rather less than a heroic counterhegemonic assault and rather more than just playing with ideas. It is 'deep play' because the stakes are much larger than anyone would wager if they were just playing.<sup>55</sup> What it means to be an intellectual, the spaces that intellectuals are able to occupy and the status that they are able to enjoy there are the stakes. In short, intellectual identities and their "titles of cultural nobility"<sup>56</sup> are in play. The play is often especially deep, anxious, and aggressive for the new academics totally invested in

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<sup>53</sup>I am reminded of the nerdy scientist in The Simpsons who uses a toy to demonstrate physical principles to a classfull of children, then refuses to let them play with it because they "can't enjoy it on as many levels" as he can.

<sup>54</sup>There is nothing new in the insight that criticism is often functionally an exercise in strategic positioning or posturing rather than any kind of effective challenge to the structures it addresses. For example, Marx spent much of his early career criticizing critical critics like the Young Hegelians for thinking that once they had ruthlessly criticized something it was all taken care of. He tried to become more effective by attaching his critical posture to an active politics. His total critique of total critiques has certainly positioned him in a privileged place among critical intellectuals, but the lesser lights who have gamely tried to apply his ideas seem to keep missing the nuances (as any university professor who studies these things can explain in great detail), with devastating consequences to humanity.

<sup>55</sup>Geertz, 432-3.

<sup>56</sup>Bourdieu, Distinction, 18.

intellectual capital, whose credentials do not have the distinguished weight of accumulated family cultural, economic, and political capital behind them.

This game can be described using the evaluative language of relative sophistication, culture, quality, even morality. However, such judgments are no less positioning strategies than the training that enables them. The judgments that stick are the ones generated from privileged space. But then, every space offers a little privilege to its holder. The Life of Brian and its interpretation are tools of opposition, but not in any grand sense. They help generate distinctive identity and identifying judgments in a field of oppositions that are all about carving out elbow room. Just as I have mapped my own shifting intellectual identity onto a series of strategic receptions of the movie, the Pythons' core audience (that "intelligent, articulate minority") could be charted as they use the movie to help justify and position themselves in conversations and careers. By their works you will know them.

#### **IV. Concluding Unscientific Porchswing: Appreciating Movies and Gospels**

The original question I was given to write on was, roughly, what did this movie teach me about the Gospels? If I declined to say much about the Christian Gospels, it was in order to explore the ways in which The Life of Brian became important to me--and, I am postulating, a like-minded class fraction of critical intellectuals--as a chapter in a counter-gospel. That is, the movie and its interpretations function (in a small way, to be sure) as anchors for strategic claims to a privileged access to truth and with it, social space, just as the Christian Gospels and their interpretations do for their faithful. In making this comparison and saying I have learned from it, I suppose I cannot help but seem to be demeaning the Holy Word. On the contrary: I have just given it the highest praise I know how.

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