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Reimagining Faith in the Secular Age: Cultural Theology and the Genealogy of Post-Religious Thought in Father Ted, Philomena, Chocolat, and Fleabag

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Abstract

This paper explores the "cultural echoes" and forms of "post-religious theology" of faith within the secularized context of contemporary Anglo-American audiovisual texts. Drawing on John Dewey's conception of art as "social experience," Niklas Luhmann's theory of "religious system communication," and Charles Taylor's reflections in A Secular Age, it argues that although religion's institutional authority has declined in modern society, it has found new modes of expression and existence through film and television culture.

Through close readings of Father Ted, Philomena, Chocolat, and Fleabag (Season 2), this study reveals the transformation of religious belief from doctrinal and institutional discourse to cultural and affective experience. Father Ted employs satire and demystification to deconstruct ecclesiastical authority, opening space for secular self-reflection on religion; Philomena reconstructs faith's ethical dimension through personal confession and pursuit of justice; Chocolat metaphorically reconciles religion and human nature through sensory pleasure, proposing a "theology of the senses"; Fleabag dramatizes faith's internal rebirth through desire, confession, and solitude, completing a shift from "God's gaze" to "self-scrutiny."

These audiovisual texts together form an imagistic genealogy of "cultural theology," replacing doctrinal preaching with narrative, and reviving theological inquiry through human experience. This "post-religious theology" is not oriented toward transcendence but centers on understanding, empathy, and existential authenticity, marking religion's regenerative mechanisms and new grammar of faith within modern culture.

In an age of "God's silence," audiovisual art becomes a new form of prayer—rearticulating faith's possibilities through laughter, tears, sweetness, and silence.

Keywords: Religious Modernity; Cultural Theology; Post-Religious Theology; Audiovisual Narrative; Faith and Secularism

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1. Introduction: The Modern Echoes of Faith

On January 21, 2025, beneath the solemn dome of the Washington National Cathedral, Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde delivered a sermon at the "Prayer Service for the Nation," facing President Donald Trump and Vice President J.D. Vance seated in the front row. She pleaded with the president to "have mercy on those trembling in fear—among them, children who are gay, bisexual, and transgender." At that moment, the altar became a site of public politics, and religious language no longer belonged solely to the realm of salvation but became a moral summons directed at power. Bishop Budde's voice seemed to give visible form to a transformation quietly advancing within contemporary Christianity—a posture of faith courageously confronting social conflicts and rediscovering humanity and compassion.

Several months later, another symbolic religious reformer—Pope Francis, the 266th pontiff—passed away in Rome at the age of 88. His life and papacy nearly constituted an allegory of contemporary religious modernization: rejecting luxury, embracing the poor, accommodating homosexuality, forgiving abortion, and appointing women to Vatican administrative roles. Throughout his life, he embodied a response to a fundamental question:

How can faith remain a moral light for the world in an age of profound secularization?

Between these two moments, we catch a glimpse of the core issue confronting contemporary Christianity—how religion can reestablish itself within the structures and emotions of modern society. How can faith and humanity find a resonant frequency amid disenchantment and re-enchantment?

John Dewey (1934), in *Art as Experience*, points out that art is not a transcendent aesthetic ornament but an *educative form of social experience*. It enables people to re-encounter the world through feeling, action, and empathy, thereby achieving a *continuity of experience*. Applying this insight to the relationship between religion and popular culture reveals a profound isomorphism between the spirit of religious reform and artistic expression: religion is no longer merely a sum of doctrines and rituals but a *form of experience*, a mode through which social communities continuously learn, feel, and renew their moral sensibilities.

In this sense, contemporary film and television have become the *aesthetic extension* of religious experience—using imagery and narrative to re-embed abstract faith ethics within tangible social experience. Whether through satire of ecclesiastical authority, exposure of historical oppression, or poetic depictions of human desire, audiovisual media perform a *public theological educational function*, bringing faith back into the realm of human experience.

According to Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory, religion is an autopoietic subsystem within the complexity of society, operating through the binary code of *transcendence/immanence*. However, as modern society differentiates and media technologies evolve, this closed system increasingly interacts with the external world through *communication structures* (Kommunikationsstrukturen). In other words, religious meaning is no longer generated solely by theological texts but is reproduced across diverse communication systems including politics, culture, and media.

As a medium of social communication, film and television thus become a *heterogeneous mirror* for religious self-understanding. When religious discourse is satirized, rewritten, or lyricized on screen, the faith system is effectively engaging in self-observation through cultural dialogue. The comedic satire in *Father Ted*, the ethical inquiry in *Philomena*, the secular warmth of *Chocolat*, and the existential confession of *Fleabag* represent diverse forms of this cultural self-observation by religion. It is precisely through such *cross-system communication* that religion gains new semantic openness and faith's meaning is redefined in the echoes of society.

Charles Taylor (2007), in *A Secular Age*, argues that modernity is not the end of religion but a *reimagining of faith*. He notes that in modern society, the *possibility of faith* is repositioned as a choice; humans live in a *plural moral space* where each belief must seek legitimacy within a secular world. In other words, faith is no longer a predestined identity but an active ethical practice—a moral endeavor of co-existence.

Film and television serve as spaces for this *reimagining*: they allow audiences to *experience faith* empathetically rather than be *indoctrinated into faith*. This is the cultural echo of contemporary religious progressivism—faith is no longer an exclusive claim to truth but an understanding of humanity; no longer a refuge rejecting the world but the courage to embrace it.

Therefore, when Bishop Budde confronts power in the real world and calls for mercy, when Pope Francis enacts reforms within the institution, and simultaneously, on screens large and small, works like *Father Ted*, *Philomena*, *Chocolat*, and *Fleabag* write diverse artistic narratives about the human dimensions of faith—all these together constitute the *modern echoes of faith*: The regeneration of religion within social experience; The self-awareness of art within an ethical world; A dialogue between popular culture and theology about freedom, compassion, and hope.

2. Theoretical Framework: Film and Television and the Possibility of "Cultural Theology"

2.1 From Doctrine to Culture: The Resocialization of Faith

In the modern context where religion gradually loses its social hegemony, faith is no longer merely the internally coherent logic of doctrinal systems but becomes a *social language* distributed across culture, emotions, and everyday experience. If the traditional task of theology is to explain the relationship between God and humanity, contemporary cultural theology seeks to answer another question:

When the voice of God falls silent, how do humans reinterpret faith through cultural forms?

As John Dewey famously asserted, art is an extension and educative form of social experience. As one of the most public and affective artistic modalities, film and television—with their narrative structures, visual language, and audience engagement—constitute the most extensive *classroom of faith* in modern society. No longer dependent on religious institutions, they use stories, images, and emotional media to enable viewers to re-encounter core religious ethical questions in non-religious contexts: good and evil, salvation, mercy, love, and freedom.

In this sense, film and television not only *represent* faith but also *educate* faith—they undertake the task of reshaping social morality and collective conscience. This education is not didactic but achieved through a *reorganization of experience*, that is, what

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Dewey called the *continuity of experience*: through watching, feeling, and reflecting, audiences internalize religious ethics as part of their personal experience.

2.2 Communication Structures and Reproduction: The Social Circulation of Religion

Niklas Luhmann's social systems theory offers another observational perspective. Luhmann posits that modern society consists of multiple self-referential functional systems (such as politics, economy, law, religion, media), each operating according to specific *communication codes*. The operational logic of the religious system lies in the distinction of *transcendence/ immanence*, that is, explaining human experience by referring to transcendent meaning structures.

However, in a highly mediatized society, the religious system can no longer function solely within a closed sanctuary. It must maintain connection with other systems such as culture and media through *communication structures* (Kommunikationsstrukturen). Film and television exemplify this cross-system communication: they belong to both cultural and media systems while continuously incorporating religious symbols, ethical questions, and theological imagination.

For example, when *Father Ted* satirizes clerical hypocrisy and absurdity in comedic form, when *Philomena* uses narrative power to expose religious institutional violence, and when *Chocolat* and *Fleabag* deconstruct the boundaries between sanctity and sin through human complexity, religion does not disappear. Rather, it achieves *self-reproduction* through dialogue with cultural systems.

This reproduction is not *missionary* in the traditional sense but a *semantic restructuring*: religion rediscovers its boundaries and possibilities through cultural media. Film and television thus play the role of a *social mirror of faith*—reflecting religious crises in reality while stimulating religious self-reflection. This mirroring effect constitutes the social condition for the existence of cultural theology.

2.3 Disenchantment: Theology of Laughter and Doubt

The *disenchantment* brought by modernity (Max Weber's *Entzauberung*) has long been regarded as a marker of religious decline; however, within the horizon of cultural theology, disenchantment does not signify the end of faith but rather an opportunity for its renewal.

In works like *Father Ted*, laughter becomes the sharpest theological language. Through satirizing religious authority and exaggerating the secularized image of clergy, the theological *absoluteness* is reduced to the *relativity* of human nature. This disenchantment does not destroy faith but constitutes a *self-mockery of faith*—a stance of faith that dares to confront its own absurdity. As Mikhail Bakhtin famously argued, the carnivalesque laughter possesses liberating power; it breaks the monopoly of power and returns the sacred to the plane of everyday life.

Therefore, the disenchanting function of film and television represents the first pathway of cultural theology: it liberates religion from its mysterious authority and brings it into an open social context, transforming it into an ethical resource that can be discussed, critiqued, and empathized with.

2.4 Re-enchantment: Spiritual Rebirth in the Secular

However, disenchantment is not the endpoint. As Charles Taylor pointed out in *A Secular Age*, modern society is not *godless* but a *pluralistic universe of faiths*: people search anew for spiritual meaning within secular experience. This *re-enchantment* constitutes a new imagination of faith.

In *Chocolat*, the sweetness of chocolate, sensory pleasure, and festive abstinence form a counterpoint, symbolizing the *human return* of religion; in *Fleabag*, the priest's desires and love become a new theological allegory—he is no longer a perfect saint but a vulnerable, longing, and struggling *person of feeling*. This narrative does not profane religion but reshapes spirituality: faith is no longer an escape from transcendence but a discovery of divine fragments within the secular.

Re-enchantment, therefore, forms the second pathway of cultural theology: it allows audiences to re-experience spirituality in the secular world, transforming religion's appeal into a shared human emotional experience.

2.5 Moral Imagination: From Empathy to Civic Education

Ultimately, the core purpose of cultural theology is not merely to interpret religion but to cultivate a new *moral imagination*—the capacity of humans, through art and narrative, to understand others, reflect on themselves, and reconstruct communal ethics.

Dewey contends that the essence of education is the reorganization of experience; Taylor asserts that the core of faith lies in ethical choice; and Luhmann reminds us that the meaning of religion must be renewed through social communication. These three converge on one point: film and television, as cultural forms, are the carriers of *faith education* in modern society.

Philomena allows audiences to experience the power of forgiveness; *Chocolat* helps people comprehend the warmth of goodness; *Fleabag* teaches confrontation with the fragility of love and hope; while *Father Ted* instructs skepticism through laughter. Together, they shape a *sensory civic education*—not through admonition, but through affect.

In this education, the audience is not a passive recipient but an active participant: they complete the generation of self-ethics in the act of viewing. This is the ultimate mission of cultural theology—to make faith a social ethical resource through the exchange of images and emotions, rather than an exclusive truth system.

2.6 Summary: The Threefold Pathways of Cultural Theology

Theoretical Pathway	Corresponding Media Function	Theological Significance
Disenchantment	Satire and deconstruction of religious authority (*Father Ted*)	Self-reflection and re-humanization of faith
Re-enchantment	Discovery of the divine within the secular (*Chocolat*, *Fleabag*)	Spiritual rebirth within secularism
Moral Imagination	Education through empathy and narrative (*Philomena*)	Transition from religious ethics to civic ethics

Through these three pathways, film and theology form a new intertextual relationship in contemporary society: faith gains vitality through culture, and culture gains depth through faith.

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3. Literature Review: Exploration of Religious Themes and Cultural Theology in Film and Television

3.1 *Father Ted*: Religious Authority and Institutional Deconstruction in Satirical Comedy

As a landmark work in Irish and British television comedy, *Father Ted* has received considerable scholarly attention for its satire and critique of Catholic Church authority. Scholars generally agree that the series employs absurd humor to humanize and domesticize the sacred image of the Church, breaking traditional religious stereotypes of clerical sanctity (O'Leary, 2006; Murphy, 2014). Lynne Joyrich (2007) emphasizes that the identity of "priests as performers" in the show reveals the tension between church rituals and social reality, demonstrating the complexity of religion as a social communication system, aligning with Niklas Luhmann's theory on the interaction between religious and social systems (Luhmann, 1977). Furthermore, the series' desacralization of church authority reflects modern society's skepticism toward and reconfiguration of traditional religious authority (Hill, 2012).

3.2 *Philomena*: Religious Confession and Ethical Reflection on Historical Trauma

The film *Philomena* centers on the Catholic Church's historical oppression of unmarried mothers and their children and is widely regarded as a classic text exploring faith ethics and personal redemption (Smith, 2013). Researchers note that the protagonist Philomena's personalized struggle against ecclesiastical institutions embodies the complex contradictions within religious faith—both dependence on the sacred and critique of religious systems (Brown, 2015). Helen Thompson (2016) particularly highlights that the film's themes of confession and forgiveness resonate with John Dewey's philosophy of "experience and education," which holds that faith should serve the ethical growth of individuals and society (Dewey, 1934). Additionally, *Philomena* is viewed as a modern interpretation of the tradition of "faith's self-critique" within religious modernity (Taylor, 2007).

3.3 *Chocolat*: Religious Metaphors and Human Liberation in Secular Delight

Chocolat constructs a narrative space that challenges asceticism, exploring the tension between religion and secularism, abstinence and pleasure (Williams, 2008). Scholars argue that the protagonist Vianne embodies a latent symbol of "sacred feminism," reflecting a cultural critique of male centrism and rigid moral codes in traditional religion (Miller, 2010). The openness and warmth of Vianne's chocolate shop symbolize a reconciliation and fusion between religious asceticism and human sensual delight, resonating with John Dewey's concept of "art as an educative form of social experience" (Dewey, 1934). Furthermore, the film's portrayal of the humanization of religion is interpreted as a cultural reimagination of modern religious authority (Taylor, 2007).

3.4 *Fleabag* Season Two: Faith Reconstruction and Ethical Tension in Confession of Desire

Fleabag's second season has attracted widespread attention in religious and cultural studies for its profound exploration of complex humanity and religious faith. The series, through the protagonist's relationship with a priest, unveils the multifaceted dimensions of confession and redemption in contemporary faith (Jones, 2019). Scholars contend that the show disrupts the traditional religious narrative of "sin and punishment," emphasizing faith's rebirth as a "practice of life" (Kavanagh, 2020). This aligns closely with Charles Taylor's notion of the reimagining of religious modernity in *A Secular Age*, indicating that contemporary faith is more often an ethical self-reflection and cultural practice (Taylor, 2007). Additionally, the religious language and metaphors employed in *Fleabag* reflect the dual tension of "faith's aphasia and cultural re-narration" characteristic of post-religious theology (Caputo, 2011).

Comprehensive Review

Existing scholarship demonstrates that these audiovisual texts not only critique and deconstruct religious authority through narrative strategies and visual language but also provide rich imaginative resources for "post-religious theology" at the cultural level. Collectively, they construct a complex cultural field prompting audiences to reconsider the relationships among faith, authority, ethics, and humanity. Integrating John Dewey's concept of "educative experience," Niklas Luhmann's theory of "communication structures in social systems," and Charles Taylor's interpretation of modern religiosity, these works are regarded as significant practices in the dialogue between religion and modern culture, exemplifying the pivotal role of film and television culture in the regeneration of religious discourse and ethical renewal.

4. *Father Ted* — Satire and Disenchantment: A Cultural Deconstruction of Religious Authority

4.1 From "Holy Island" to "Desolate Isle": The Spatial Allegory of Religious Authoritarianism

Within the tradition of British and Irish television comedy, few works have achieved both widespread audience acceptance and profound cultural critique as *Father Ted* (1995–1998) has. This situational comedy, set on the fictional "Craggy Island" off the west coast of Ireland, cloaks itself in absurdity and humor, yet conducts a sustained and incisive cultural deconstruction of the Catholic Church, the clerical institution, and its authoritarian structures.

Craggy Island itself functions as an allegorical space—it symbolizes both a "religious exile island" banished from the social center and the spiritual barrenness resulting from the Catholic institution's self-imposed closure. The three "exiled" priests—Ted Crilly, Dougal McGuire, and Jack Hackett—live together in this place forgotten by time, their lives filled with farce, misunderstanding, and worldly desires.

This "exiled clerical ensemble" epitomizes the crisis of religious modernization: clerical identity loses its aura of mystery in a secular context, and the faith system is compelled to coexist with mundane trivialities and absurd realities. The island's isolation and comical daily life create the dramatic stage upon which religious power undergoes "disenchantment."

4.2 Character Construction: The "Play within a Play" of Clericality

The character construction in *Father Ted* itself subverts the sacred structures of religious tradition. The three protagonists each represent a satirical variant of clerical imagination: Father Ted Crilly, outwardly loyal but secretly ambitious and unscrupulous in his pursuit of promotion, embodies the "disguise of faith"; Father Dougal McGuire, naïve and almost atheistic, personifies theological ignorance and skeptical faith; Father Jack Hackett, a

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drunken, coarse figure who merely shouts "Drink! Feck! Girls!", symbolizes the degradation of faith and the overflow of desire.

Image 1. The main characters in *Father Ted*
Website Source: https://www.channel4.com/programmes/father-ted

They are not so much "performing" their clerical duties as they are "acting out" the priesthood. As scholars have observed, "The clerics' acting and interacting … is no longer defined by conformity or non-conformity with the principles of their vocation but has adopted the nature of playing."

In this sense, *Father Ted* constructs a "performative clericality" structure: the ecclesiastical identity becomes a cultural template continually parodied, questioned, and deconstructed, exposing the fissures between institution and symbol.

4.3 Carnivalesque Theology: Laughter as a Ritual of Disenchantment

Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World*, proposed that laughter possesses a liberating power—it can subvert hierarchies, dismantle authority, and restore the flow of suppressed vitality. *Father Ted* represents a modern incarnation of this "carnivalesque theology".

Through absurdity and comedic techniques, the series dissolves religious authority amid laughter. The priests' hypocrisy, greed, desire, and incompetence allow the "sacred" and the "secular" to interpenetrate on the comedic stage.

For instance, in Season 3, Episode 6, *"Kicking Bishop Brennan Up the Arse,"* Bishop Leonard Brennan—an emblem of traditional church authority—is robed in red and seated in a mansion, epitomizing "clerical authority." Yet he is ultimately kicked in the backside by Ted, and the scene freezes in an absurd pose, signaling the collapse of authority through laughter.

Image 2. Scene Screenshot of "Ted Crilly kicking Bishop Brennan up the arse", from *Father Ted* Season 3, Episode 6
Website Source: https://www.dailyedge.ie/trainee-priest-bishop-brennan-1468492-may2014/

This visual reversal is a symbolic moment of religious disenchantment: the bishop's sacred façade is completely torn away, and the former "voice of God" is reduced to a laughingstock. Through such farcical scenes, the series allows the audience, for the first time on a cultural level, to "permit themselves to laugh at religion" and to reconsider the relationship between faith and power in the process.

Such satire and absurdity have in fact, provided a cultural context for the progressive religious figures of today, such as Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde or Pope Francis: as *Father Ted* habituates audiences to question authority and view clergy with a humanizing lens, it cultivates the cultural soil for real-world religious reform and ethical renewal.

4.4 *Speed 3*: A Metaphor of Ethical Explosion

In Season 3, Episode 3, *"Speed 3,"* the plot appears ridiculous: milkman Pat Mustard is fired after a sexual scandal with parishioners and retaliates by planting a bomb under his milk float. Ted and Dougal become entangled in the crisis to defuse it.

> In the dialogue between Ted and Pat Mustard, the satire directly targets the Catholic Church's conservative stance on contraception:
>
> Father Ted: "There are some very hairy babies on Craggy Island, and I think you are the hairy baby maker."
>
> Pat Mustard: "…you wouldn't be advising the use of artificial contraception now, Father, would ya?"
>
> Father Ted: "Yes, I… well… if you're going to be… of course you will… JUST FECK OFF!"

This absurd exchange reveals the profound tension between religious doctrine and real life. The juxtaposition of the church bells with the bomb's countdown merges religious solemnity with industrial society's anxieties. The milk float becomes a symbol of "ethical explosion": once faith refuses to confront real issues—sex, desire, responsibility—its moral framework risks being detonated.

Image 3. Scene Screenshot of "Dougal McGuire driving the milk float", from *Father Ted* Season 3, Episode 3
Website Source: https://www.dailyedge.ie/speed-3-father-ted-2049550-Feb2017/

The priests are compelled to intervene in the secular mechanical world; they are no longer purely "pastoral" figures but ordinary people managing chaos, sexual morality, and public safety. As Pope Francis teaches in reality—that religion must "step out of the sanctuary and into the crowd"—this episode forces clergy to confront life's complexities, showing that the true test of faith lies not at the altar but in the world.

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4.5 "Cigarettes, Alcohol and Rollerblading": When Divinity Falls into Humanity

Season 2, Episode 8, *"Cigarettes, Alcohol and Rollerblading,"* once again explores the tension between "asceticism and desire" through absurd comedy. The three priests attempt to give up smoking, drinking, and rollerblading during Lent—but each fails spectacularly.

At night, Dougal skates alone on empty streets wearing rollerblades; Ted secretly smokes a cigarette; Jack hides alcohol by the seaside.

Image 4. Scene Screenshot of "Dougal McGuire about to skate on streets", from *Father Ted* Season 2, Episode 8
Website Source: https://www.tvmaze.com/episodes/219656/father-ted-2x08-cigarettes-and-alcohol-and-rollerblading

All of these have formed a comedic deconstruction of religious ritual: the ascetic ideals of faith comically shatter before everyday temptations. Dougal mistakes the Lord's Prayer for a pop song, symbolizing the failure of theological knowledge and religious education.

However, when ascetic rituals collapse and priests become mere mortals, the human dimension of religion is revealed—clergy seek grace amid desire and weakness. This "failed ritual" becomes an opportunity for faith to return to authentic life.

4.6 From Cultural Hegemony to Cultural Resistance: The Politics of Laughter

Antonio Gramsci's theory of "cultural hegemony" reveals how religion maintains social order through ideology. For a long time, Catholicism in Ireland epitomized this "faith hegemony": regulating gender, dominating education, and defining the "moral citizen."

Yet, *Father Ted* achieves a mild resistance to this hegemony through humor and absurdity. It strips religious authority of its seriousness, transforming power into ridicule, enabling believers to reclaim the right to interpret faith through shared laughter.

As Ted's rebellious kick at Bishop Brennan demonstrates—this act is not merely personal anger but a symbolic revolt of cultural subjects against the old order. Laughter becomes a "democratic theological language": it restores dialogue between faith and society through comedic means.

4.7 Disenchantment and Redemption: The Re-humanization of Faith

The satire in *Father Ted* is not blasphemy against religion, but a confession directed at religious institutions. It reveals the fissure between the "essence of faith" and the "form of religion"—faith as humanity's pursuit of the good, while religion is often institutionalized into a network of power. In this sense, the disenchantment in *Father Ted* serves redemption. It liberates faith from the bondage of power, returning it to humanity, reason, and emotion. Laughter becomes a theological act, a ritual through which faith is restored to the human realm. This cultural spirit continues in reality: Bishop Budde confronts the president in her sermons and prays for the LGBTQ community; Pope Francis advocates for civil protections of same-sex unions in the documentary *Francesco*; he washes prisoners' feet and blesses the marginalized—these real-world actions exemplify a "new ethics" emerging after the rupture of religious authoritarianism. Just as *Father Ted* dismantles power through laughter, they rebuild compassion through action.

4.8 Summary: The Theology of Laughter and Cultural Regeneration

In summary, the cultural significance of *Father Ted* can be understood on three levels:

Dimension	Cultural Function	Theological Meaning
Space and Symbol	Using the "deserted island" as a metaphor for religious isolation and modern dilemmas	Revealing the historical closure of faith systems
Narrative and Laughter	Achieving disenchantment through satire and absurdity	Returning faith to humanity and fostering reflection
Society and Reality	Providing a cultural context for religious progressivism	Opening possibilities for ethical renewal through humor

In Bakhtin's terms, laughter is a "language of a second life"; within contemporary faith contexts, the laughter of *Father Ted* becomes the "voice of religious regeneration." It lets the divine fall into the human, teaches faith to self-mock, and restores religion to the reality of ethics and compassion.

5. *Philomena* — Repentance and Justice: Self-Critique of Faith and Human Redemption

5.1 From Institutional Sin to Soul Redemption: The Mirror of Religious Self-Reflection

If *Father Ted* tears open the façade of religious authority through laughter, allowing faith to regain a sense of reality amid disenchantment, then *Philomena* (2013) completes a different level of redemption through tears—it converges religious self-critique, individual repentance, and the pursuit of justice into the core proposition of modern faith ethics.

The film is based on a true story: a young Irish woman, Philomena Lee, was confined by nuns at the Roscrea convent in the 1950s due to her out-of-wedlock pregnancy, forced into hard labor, and compelled to give up her newborn son for adoption by an American couple. Half a century later, she embarks on a journey to find her son with journalist Martin Sixsmith. This journey, spanning time and faith, ultimately reveals not only the brutal hidden history of the Church but also how faith, when confronting institutional evil, rebuilds its moral legitimacy in the name of "forgiveness."

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Image 5. The film poster of *Philomena*
Website Source: https://www.heyuguys.com/philomena-poster/

Philosophically, *Philomena* serves as a "conscience narrative" of modern religion: it does not negate faith but demands that faith face its own shadow—a form of internal *metanoia* (repentance). As Charles Taylor (2007) notes in *A Secular Age*, religious modernity is not the end of faith but a reconsideration of faith's place within secular society—a "faith after disenchantment."

Philomena exemplifies this "post-disenchantment" religious context: faith no longer claims authority through power and mystery but bases its legitimacy anew on repentance and humanity.

5.2 Foucault's "Discourse of Confession" and the Ethical Turn of Religious Power

Michel Foucault (1978) in *The History of Sexuality* argues that modern Western power mechanisms do not operate solely through repression but produce subjects through the "discourse of confession." Confession in religion was originally a ritual of soul salvation, but in its institutionalization, it often becomes a tool for disciplining the individual's body and conscience.

The opening convent scene in the film symbolizes this mechanism: young Philomena is forced to labor in a cold laundry room, with the nuns treating her suffering as a necessary price of "atonement".

Here, confession is alienated into a tool of control—the female body is disciplined, sexuality stigmatized, and maternal love denied. This is the classic paradigm of power's perpetuation "through the confession of sin" described by Foucault.

However, the latter part of the film achieves a reversal of this discourse of confession. When the elderly Philomena confronts the nun who harmed her, she utters the deeply moving line: "I forgive you."

This act of forgiveness is not merely a personal virtue but a subversion of religious power logic: confession is no longer submission but becomes an "active practice of atonement."

By the power of forgiveness, she redefines the meaning of redemption—not as grace bestowed by the Church, but as a transcendence inherent in humanity itself. This "sovereign self-confession" marks the ethical shift of faith's power toward individual ethics and symbolizes the ethical renewal of religion in modern society.

5.3 The Space of Confession: From Convent to Motel

The film's spatial narrative shift corresponds directly to the transformation of the form of faith.

The convent's high walls, the cold-toned corridors, and the tightly shut iron gates symbolize the closure of religious institutions and the repression of ascetic ethics. When the camera shifts to Philomena and Sixsmith traveling through the Irish countryside, airplane windows, and American highways, the space becomes open, fluid, and secularized—faith is no longer imprisoned within a sanctuary but begins to reconstruct meaning throughout the journey of life.

This spatial displacement itself serves as a theological allegory: the place of redemption migrates from "within the Church" to "within human experience."

This coincides with John Dewey's (1934) argument in *Art as Experience*—the essence of both art and religion lies in transforming experience into an educational form; true spirituality does not transcend life but rather makes life itself an "art of experience."

Philomena's narrative is precisely this visual practice of "experiential theology": it returns faith to the fabric of life, making the quest to find her son an educational form of "faith as experience."

5.4 Narrative Ethics: The Dialectic of Forgiveness and Justice

The film's core tension lies in the opposition between "forgiveness" and "justice."

The journalist Sixsmith, as a faithless rationalist, insists on "uncovering truth and punishing wrongdoing," whereas Philomena chooses "understanding and forgiveness." This divergence reflects two modes of redemption in religious and secular ethics:

Ethical Mode	Subject Logic	Path of Redemption	Representative Figure
Secular Rational Justice	Restore order through exposure and punishment	Justice as truth	Sixsmith
Religious Human Forgiveness	Resolve harm through understanding and compassion	Justice as love	Philomena

The film does not simply favor one side but, through their tension, reveals a "moral polyphony."

When Sixsmith angrily tells the nun, "You should be ashamed of yourself!" but Philomena calmly says, "It's not for me to judge," this dialogue symbolizes a key dilemma of religious modernization: after institutional sins are exposed, in what form can faith maintain its moral legitimacy?

Philomena's forgiveness is not blind submission but a spiritual act of "resisting the institution through humanity." Her "non-punitive justice" restores religion to the realms of emotion, compassion, and ethics.

This resonates with Hannah Arendt's assertion in *The Human Condition*: "Forgiveness is the only human action that can restart history." The power of *Philomena* lies precisely here: it makes forgiveness a reckoning with the past rather than an evasion.

5.5 The Theology of Vision and Emotion: Redemption in Tears

Director Stephen Frears employs a calm and restrained realist approach in his visual language. The camera does not dramatize conflict but constructs the emotional structure of faith through subtle expressions and still frames.

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In the concluding scene, Philomena quietly stands before the convent cemetery and discovers her son's gravestone—at that moment, the camera gently pulls back as sunlight pierces through the gray clouds. The light ceases to symbolize "divine revelation" and becomes a metaphor for "human understanding".

Image 6. Scene Screenshot of "Philomena standing in front of her son's gravestone mourning", from *Philomena*
Website Source: https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/philomena-2013

This cinematic aesthetic corresponds precisely to what Charles Taylor terms "the immanent frame" in *A Secular Age*: the sacred no longer comes from beyond but manifests within the interplay of light and shadow in earthly experience.

Faith thus no longer depends on transcendence but becomes a "gentle worldly ethic"—a redemption realized through understanding, compassion, and memory.

5.6 The Repositioning of Cultural Theology: From Power to Compassion

From the perspective of cultural theology, *Philomena* is a film about the "resocialization" of religion.

Niklas Luhmann argues that the core of religious systems lies in their "communication structure" (Kommunikationsstruktur)—how they manage the semantic difference between transcendence and immanence. In modern society, the function of this structure no longer lies in upholding doctrine but in providing a channel for emotional and ethical communication.

In the film, the communicative structure of faith shifts from the Church to the individual, from clergy to laity:

Philomena's forgiveness, Sixsmith's sympathy, and the audience's empathy together constitute a new "religious communication field". This marks a key feature of contemporary cultural theology: religion no longer serves as a social control system but as a medium of ethical empathy.

Hence, the "confession" and "forgiveness" in *Philomena* are not merely narratives of individual redemption but symbols of cultural-theological transformation—faith moves from power to compassion, from institution to humanity.

5.7 Summary: The Gentle Politics of Faith

Philomena and *Father Ted* are formally distinct—the former completes religious introspection through tragedy and emotion, the latter accomplishes religious disenchantment through comedy and satire—yet the two form an intertextual cultural structure:

Dimension	***Father Ted***	***Philomena***
Emotional Grammar	Satire, carnival, laughter	Confession, compassion, tears
Religious Focus	Disenchantment and authority deconstruction	Introspection and human redemption
Cultural Function	Opening a public space for religious critique	Establishing a gentle form of religious ethics
Theological Shift	From clerical power to secular dialogue	From institutional confession to personal forgiveness

Both point to a dual pathway of religious modernity: disenchantment and re-enchantment are not opposites but two ends of the same faith renewal process.

Through *Father Ted*, faith learns self-mockery; through *Philomena*, faith learns introspection. Laughter and tears intertwine to form the cultural genealogy of religious modernity, revealing a new religious landscape—the power of faith lies not in authoritative command but in the warmth of human understanding.

6. Chocolat: Secular Sweetness and Religious Humanity — From "Divine Asceticism" to "Human Delight"

6.1 "Sweetness" and "Sanctity": The Sensory Boundaries of Religious Ethics

If *Father Ted* reveals the absurdity of religious authority, and *Philomena* presents religious confession and human redemption, then *Chocolat* (2000) further explores the tension between religious ethics and sensory ethics—when faith attempts to restrain the body and desire, how does humanity achieve self-redemption through the form of "sweetness"?

The film is adapted from Joanne Harris's novel of the same name, set in 1959 in the French village of Lansquenet-sous-Tannes—a religious community tightly wrapped in Catholic tradition, where "fasting," "confession," and "temperance" form the everyday ethical norm.

On the day when the spring breeze blew in, single mother Vianne Rocher and her daughter Anouk arrive in town, opening a chocolate shop. The aroma of chocolate pierces the ascetic atmosphere of the church and awakens the long-suppressed senses of the townsfolk. Thus, a cultural conflict about "sweetness and sin" begins to unfold.

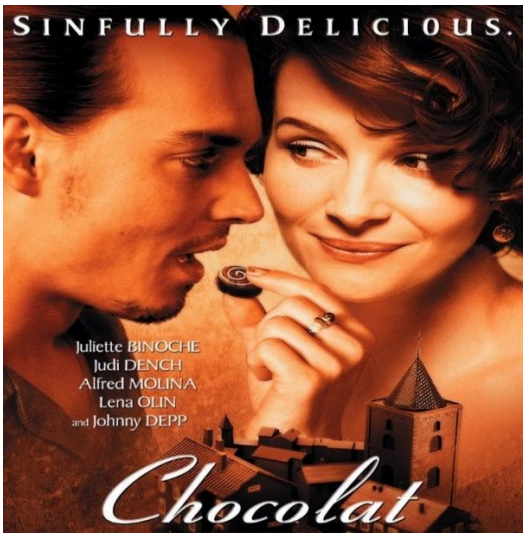

Image 7. The film poster of *Chocolat*
Website Source:
http://www.impawards.com/2000/chocolat_xlg.html

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Formally, the film's structure is an inversion of religious allegory: if traditional religion regards "temperance" as the path to redemption, then *Chocolat* uses "sensory experience" as the medium to forgiveness and love. As John Dewey states in *Art as Experience*, "aesthetic experience is the highest form of education because it allows one to rediscover the sensual dimension of life."

Vianne's chocolate shop is precisely an "aesthetic cathedral"—she replaces ritual with taste, redemption with sweetness, and abstinence with sharing, allowing life to regain its palpable warmth.

6.2 The Collapse of Authority: From Sunday Sermons to Dessert Temptations

The religious representative in the film is the mayor, Comte de Reynaud—a devout, strict, and self-sacrificing Catholic. He symbolizes the residual moral authority of the Church in modern society: restraining the populace through fasting, defining good and evil through temperance, and maintaining order through guilt.

At the film's beginning, Reynaud states, "This is a time for abstinence, not for indulgence." The camera then shifts to the corner chocolate shop, where golden cocoa powder, cream, and chili chocolate are displayed on the windowsill.

Image 8. Scene Screenshot of "Vianne Rocher in her chocolate shop -- Chocolaterie Maya", from *Chocolat*
Website **Source:** https://www.popsugar.com/entertainment/movies-about-food-25997647

Two ethical systems—asceticism and delight—form a striking contrast in the imagery.

Chocolate becomes a material symbol of cultural conflict:

It is not only a medium for sensory pleasure but also a declaration of humanity's right to the joy of life.

As Niklas Luhmann observes, communication boundaries between social systems are maintained through "difference"—the religious system self-defines through the "sacred/secular" difference, and Vianne's chocolate is precisely the "noise signal" of this difference, tearing open the closed structure of the system and forcing religion to confront the "Otherness of life."

The mayor's collapse and transformation process is a metaphor for the communicative structure of the religious system: when on the eve of Easter he inadvertently enters the chocolate shop, dips his finger into the melting chocolate, and tastes it, the camera freezes—that moment, his ascetic ethics are shattered by sweetness.

This is a "sensory conversion": the body rediscovers the experience of good beyond religious power.

6.3 The Politics of Sweetness: Sensuality as Ethics

Chocolat is not merely a confrontation between "freedom and repression"; it more profoundly reveals the political relationship between religion and the body.

In traditional theological systems, the body is often regarded as the bondage of the soul, and the senses are marked as the source of temptation and fall.

However, Vianne's presence subverts this structure: she is not an anti-religious atheist but rather a *secular priestess*—she listens, heals, and forgives, yet without prayer, scripture, or the confessional, but through chocolate, storytelling, and companionship.

In this respect, *Chocolat* echoes *Father Ted*: both deconstruct clerical authority through the ordinariness of daily life.

Yet unlike the satire of *Father Ted*, *Chocolat* achieves its deconstruction through gentleness and pleasure. It does not oppose the sacred with laughter but dissolves fear through sweetness.

This "politics of sweetness" can also be viewed as a cinematic articulation of what Charles Taylor calls "immanent transcendence" in *A Secular Age*—that is, the human capacity to rediscover meaning within secular experience (Taylor, 2007).

The sweetness of chocolate is not hedonism but a form of *gentle theology*: It restores goodness and beauty to the senses and allows religion to embrace the body once more.

6.4 Theology of the Senses: Redemption from Repression to Delight

The narrative core of the film lies in the reconciliation between religion and desire, a reconciliation whose theological foundation may be understood as a *theology of sensibility*.

Contemporary theologian Sarah Coakley (2013) points out that genuine spiritual discipline is not the repression of desire but the redirection of desire toward love and creation.

In *Chocolat*, the sweetness of chocolate becomes a metaphor for love—it awakens the body and also revives souls frozen by fear.

For instance, the reconciliation between the elderly woman Armande and her daughter, the awakening of the abused young woman Josephine, and the wanderer Roux's discovery of belonging—all these narratives revolve not around "faith" but around the *rebirth of feeling*. While religion teaches abstinence, Vianne teaches people once again how to *taste*.

As John Dewey (1934/2005) emphasizes, aesthetic experience is a form of "educative experience"—it allows individuals to grow through their sensory engagement with the world.

Thus, the "sweetness" in *Chocolat* is not a symbol of decadence but an *educational enlightenment*: a pathway through which humanity redefines the meaning of "the good."

6.5 Cinematic Language and the Symbolism of "Easter": From Guilt to Rebirth

The film's climax unfolds during Easter—the most significant Christian festival of "rebirth".

On the eve of Easter, Mayor Reynaud falls into Vianne's chocolate shop, is seduced by sweetness, and collapses drunk in the chocolate liquor. The next morning, he sincerely apologizes to Vianne. The

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scene then cuts to the church, where the young priest Père Henri takes to the pulpit and says:

"Do I want to speak of the miracle of our Lord's divine transformation? Not really, no. I don't want to talk about His divinity. I'd rather talk about His humanity. I mean, you know, how he lived his life here on Earth. His kindness. His tolerance. Listen, here's what I think. I think we can't go around measuring our goodness by what we don't do; by what we deny ourselves, what we resist & who we exclude. I think we've got to measure goodness, by what we embrace, what we create & who we include."

This is the theological turning point of the entire film: religion moves from *via negativa* (the way of denial) to *via positiva* (the way of affirmation)—goodness is no longer the outcome of abstinence but an act of creation and inclusion.

Image 9. Scene Screenshot of "Père Henri doing the sermon on the Easter", from *Chocolat*
Website Source: https://www.tmz.com/2018/11/21/father-henri-chocolat-hugh-oconor-now-photos/

Director Lasse Hallström employs a striking visual contrast: the cold tones of the church alternate with the warm hues of the chocolate festival, and the laughter of children replaces the sound of prayer.

Here, Easter no longer symbolizes the transcendent resurrection of Christ but rather humanity's own ethical awakening—a *secular resurrection* (Hallström, 2000).

6.6 Redefining Cultural Theology: Life as Worship

From the perspective of cultural theology, *Chocolat* proposes a bold thesis: the future of religion lies not in the continuation of asceticism, but in the *aestheticization of life*.

Niklas Luhmann's notion of "religious communication structures" is re-coded here (Luhmann, 2013): the communicative center of the Church shifts from *clerical authority* to *lived practice*; the medium of faith transitions from *doctrine* to *sensory experience*.

Vianne's chocolate shop, the communal festivals, and shared meals constitute a new form of *faith ritual*.

This aligns closely with Charles Taylor's idea of the "moral imagination of the secular age" (Taylor, 2007): in a post-religious society, meaning is no longer derived from external authority but generated through coexistence, joy, and creativity. *Chocolat*, through its visual power, embodies this prototype of a "lived religion".

6.7 Summary: From Asceticism to Pleasure — The Sweet Return of Religious Humanity

The cultural significance of *Chocolat* lies not in its opposition to religion but in its reconstruction of the *human dimension of faith* through sweetness. It releases religion from power, punishment, and fear, restoring it as an *ethical imagination of the senses*.

Thematic Dimension	*Philomena*	*Chocolat*
Attitude of Faith	Confession and Forgiveness	Sensuality and Pleasure
Religious Space	Convent and Cemetery	Chocolate Shop and Market
Ethical Theme	Justice and Forgiveness	Love and Creation
Theological Shift	From Institutional Confession to Human Redemption	From Ascetic Ethics to the Ethics of Living

In this sense, *Chocolat* completes the final movement of religious modernization: if *Father Ted* teaches religion to laugh at itself, and *Philomena* teaches it to reflect upon itself, then *Chocolat* teaches it to *live*.

It presents what might be called a *Theology of Sweetness*—a cultural form that reintegrates the sensory, the creative, and the loving into the language of faith.

Within this theology, eating chocolate becomes a prayer; sharing sweetness becomes an act of redemption.

7. *Fleabag* (Season 2): Carnal Desire, Sacred Confession and the Rebirth of Faith

7.1 From "Speechlessness" to "Confession": The Psychological Narrative of Contemporary Faith

In *Fleabag* Season 2 (2019), religion for the first time becomes the central theme of this dark comedy about female failure and desire.

The entire season begins with a dinner scene and the entrance of "the Priest"—a young, handsome, humorous, and worldly man ("Hot Priest"), who becomes the moral mirror in Fleabag's life.

Image 10. Scene Screenshot of "the priest and Fleabag meeting each other for the first time at a dinner", from *Fleabag* Season 2, Episode 1
Website Source: https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/fleabag-season-2-almost-changed-andrew-scott-hot-priest_uk_668651ebe4b0940ade4320d2

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He is both the object of her desire and the occasion for her rediscovery of faith.

The spiritual structure of the second season fundamentally alters the nihilistic narrative of the first. In Season 1, Fleabag combats the absurdity of the world by "breaking the fourth wall": she looks directly into the camera to flirt, to lie, to escape, and to mock all systems of meaning.

But in Season 2, for the first time, she meets someone who can *see her looking at the camera*—the Priest.

That moment marks the theological turning point of the entire series.

When, in the confessional booth, the Priest softly asks, "Where did you just go?", he not only disrupts the show's narrative mechanism but also symbolizes the return of the *religious gaze* into the interior life of the modern subject.

It is no longer a matter of "being watched by God," but of *being seen by another human being*—a theology of humanity, a tangible grace, an embodied spirituality.

This transformation—from *speechlessness* to *being seen*—corresponds precisely to what Charles Taylor (2007) in *A Secular Age* defines as "immanent transcendence": "We are within the world, and the experience of transcendence must be rediscovered within this world."

Fleabag's "rebirth of faith" thus becomes a modern allegory of immanent transcendence.

7.2 Desire and Sanctity: When the Body Becomes the Site of Theology

The most striking aspect of *Fleabag* Season 2 is not merely the plotline of a celibate priest falling in love, but how the series redefines *desire* as an integral part of the experience of faith.

In traditional religious narratives, desire and sanctity are established as opposites—one belonging to bodily temptation, the other to the purification of the soul.

Yet in the relationship between Fleabag and the Priest, the body becomes the site where grace occurs.

They eat soup, drink wine, and laugh together in the church; they discuss the Bible, loneliness, and love. The kiss that takes place in the confessional booth is the religious climax of the entire series—not an act of sin, but one of revelation.

The Priest says, "I don't know what this feeling is."

Fleabag responds, "It's God, isn't it?"

The camera lingers on the moment when their breaths intertwine.

Image 11. Scene Screenshot of "the priest and Fleabag kissing in the confessional booth of the church", from *Fleabag* Season 2, Episode 4

Website Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/Fleabag/comments/1ibe4tg/the_priests_attraction_to_fleabag/

This line draws the theological dimension down from transcendence into bodily experience.

As John Dewey (1934/2005) writes in *Art as Experience*,

"The religious quality of experience lies not in the statement of creed, but in the unity of experience itself."

At that moment, bodily experience *is* religious experience.

Through desire, they experience *unity*—a temporary, secular, yet profoundly sacred oneness.

7.3 The Reinvention of Confession: From "Sin" to "Truth"

In the Catholic tradition, *confession* is a ritual path toward redemption—believers must articulate their sins through words in exchange for forgiveness.

In *Fleabag*, however, the function of confession is subverted: it is no longer a ritual of absolution but an opportunity for sincerity.

In the confessional scene of Episode 4, Season 2, Fleabag begins to speak: "I want someone to tell me what to wear every morning. I want someone to tell me what to eat. What to like, what to hate, what to rage about, what to listen to, what band to like, what to buy tickets for, what to joke about, what not to joke about. I want someone to tell me what to believe in, who to vote for, who to love and how to tell them. I just think I want someone to tell me how to live my life, Father, because so far I think I've been getting it wrong, and I know that's why people want people like you in their lives, because you just tell them how to do it. You just tell them what to do and what they'll get out at the end of it, and even though I don't believe your bullshit, and I know that scientifically nothing I do makes any difference in the end anyway, I'm still scared. Why am I still scared?"

Image 12. Scene Screenshot of "Fleabag doing the confession", from *Fleabag* Season 2, Episode 4

Website Source: https://www.vice.com/en/article/that-fleabag-confessional-scene-was-about-much-more-than-the-show-itself/

This is not the confession of guilt—it is the admission of being lost. Just like drama critic Lauren O'Neill commented, "Fleabag's monologue in this episode detailed a type of frustration that is quite difficult to name, because it is so pervasive, and such a fundamental part of contemporary life for lots of young people. It's hard to get to know who you are when the world around you is changing so rapidly, mutilating into something darker all the time. What the speech offered was words to put to these feelings which

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sometimes gnaw at me. Am I a good person? Am I living my life right? How can I be better in a world that feels like it is becoming more diseased by the day?" (O'Neill, 2019)

Fleabag (or any other confusing one) does not recount specific "sins"; rather, she searches for a sense of order in her life.

The priest's response is not absolution, but listening. The camera slowly moves in as he smiles and says, "That's what people do, they get it wrong."

This moment marks the religious revolution of *Fleabag*: confession ceases to be hierarchical (*God forgiving man*) and becomes empathetic (*human understanding human*).

As Niklas Luhmann (2000) notes, the communicative structure of religion depends upon the binary distinction between *transcendence* and *immanence*; when this distinction blurs, religion transforms into a form of emotional communication.

The Priest in *Fleabag* embodies precisely this *religion of communication*: he participates in faith through listening and vulnerability, not through preaching or punishment.

7.4 The Broken Saint: Vulnerability and Refusal in Faith

The Priest ultimately leaves Fleabag and returns to his religious vows.

At their farewell, he says, "It'll pass."

She replies, "I love you."

He responds once more, "I love you too."

Then he turns and walks toward the altar.

This is not a fulfilled romantic ending—but it is a true spiritual rebirth.

The act of refusal is not a failure but a theological completion: the Priest's love attains eternity through renunciation, while Fleabag finds honesty through loss.

She no longer looks into the camera, no longer seeks the gaze of the audience—in the final scene, she shakes her head gently, smiles, and walks away.

That is her farewell to the "eye of God" and her renewed embrace of "real life."

She has finally transformed from *a subject being watched* into *a subject living for herself*.

This journey—from desire to faith, from brokenness to rebirth—embodies the contemporary expression of faith in a secular age: faith is not a perfect order but the courage to endure chaos (Taylor, 2007).

7.5 Cinematic Theology: The "Absence of God" in Modernity

Director Harry Bradbeer and writer Phoebe Waller-Bridge visualize the concept of *divine absence* through the language of the camera.

Fleabag's direct gaze into the lens functions as a modern form of *prayer*—she does not confide in God but instead seeks a response from the viewer, that is, from modern society itself.

When the Priest notices that she "looks somewhere else," the theology of this world is reactivated: the audience becomes the *disturbed God*.

Here, religion is not merely a thematic backdrop but a constitutive part of cinematic form.

As Charles Taylor (2007) observes, the hallmark of modern faith is *fragilized belief*—human beings continue to yearn for transcendence, yet can grasp it only in fragments, mediated through broken forms.

The visual grammar of *Fleabag* precisely embodies this *fragmented narrative of belief*.

7.6 A Theology of Desire and Female Spirituality

One of the most significant contributions of *Fleabag* Season 2 lies in its articulation of a distinctly feminine religious language.

Fleabag's desire is not a sin but a theological act—through love, longing, and failure, she learns grace anew.

Unlike traditional male-centered theology, her spirituality does not arise from obedience but from exposure.

Her confession is not submission but expression.

Her body is not a site of shame but a portal to understanding God.

In this regard, *Fleabag* resonates with *Chocolat*:

Both works render the *female body* a medium of religious experience.

Yet *Fleabag* takes this further—it allows redemption to occur not through the reconciliation of sweetness but through the sincerity of desire.

This is a *theology of eros*, in which desire no longer opposes faith but becomes its language (Coakley, 2013).

7.7 Conclusion: The Rebirth of Faith—From the Gaze of God to the Gaze of the Self

Fleabag (Season 2) completes one of the most profound redefinitions of *religious experience* in contemporary visual culture: it is not faith in doctrine but faith in relationship; not a theology of obedience but a theology of existence.

If *Father Ted* brings religion "down to earth" through satire, *Philomena* makes religion "human again" through confession, *Chocolat* enables religion to "embrace life" through sweetness, then *Fleabag* returns religion to the *individual* through desire and brokenness.

This marks a *religious resurrection in the post-faith age*: God may have departed, yet grace remains—in our gazes, our kisses, our refusals, and our confessions.

As the Priest says in the last episode, "It takes strength to know what's right. And love isn't something that weak people do. Being a romantic takes a hell of a lot of hope. I think what they mean is, when you find somebody that you love, it feels like hope."

Image 13. Scene Screenshot of "wedding speech by the priest", from Fleabag Season 2, Episode 6

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Website Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yZbV-bZdmFY&t=12s

So, it is with faith. Faith is the willingness to love amid chaos.

8. From the Silence of Faith to the Re-Speaking of Culture: The "Post-Religious Theology" in Film

8.1 The Modern Context of "Faith's Silence"

Since the Enlightenment, religion has gradually withdrawn from the sphere of public discourse in modern society. Scientific and institutional rationality have replaced the meaning-making functions of faith through what Jürgen Habermas (1987) calls systemic colonization. The confusions of the human soul are no longer interpreted by theology but are absorbed by psychology, sociology, and economics.

However, as Charles Taylor (2007) repeatedly emphasizes in A Secular Age:

"We live in an age of chosen belief, not an age without belief."

In other words, religion has not disappeared—it has become silent. It has lost its unified language of articulation yet remains latent within culture and individual experience, speaking again through fragments, metaphors, and emotions.

When institutional religion falls into silence, cultural narrative—particularly cinema—takes up the theological voice.

The visual, affective, and corporeal nature of film makes it the ideal medium for rearticulating faith experience.

These cinematic texts no longer proclaim the existence of God; rather, they ask: "How do we continue to search for meaning in a world without God?"

8.2 Film as a New Arena for "Cultural Theology"

The four works analyzed in this study—Father Ted, Philomena, Chocolat, and Fleabag—constitute an evolutionary trajectory of post-religious theology.

They represent, respectively, the modern transformation of faith from institution → conscience → sensibility → individuality:

Stage	Cinematic Text	Core of Faith	Cultural Strategy	Theological Shift
I. Institutional Deconstruction	*Father Ted*	Satire of clerical authority	Comic disenchantment	From "Church theology" to "cultural critique"
II. Moral Redemption	*Philomena*	Confession and forgiveness	Realist narrative	From "salvation from sin" to "salvation of humanity"
III. Sensual Ethics	*Chocolat*	Love and the sweetness of life	Sensory allegory	From "ascetic theology" to "theology of sensibility"
IV. Individual Rebirth	*Fleabag* (S2)	Coexistence of desire and faith	Psychological narrative	From "the gaze of God" to "the gaze of the self"

These texts do not compose a *history of the negation of religion* but rather a *history of its cultural translation*.

Within them, religion ceases to be a transcendental system and becomes an *aesthetic form of social experience*.

This precisely echoes John Dewey's (1934) proposition in *Art as Experience*:

"Art is the supreme form of education through experience."

In the contemporary cultural context, cinema becomes the inheritor of this educational form—it re-educates our sensibility through narrative and image, teaching us once again *how to feel meaning*.

8.3 Luhmann's Perspective: The Openness and Recommunication of the Religious System

Niklas Luhmann, in his systems theory, points out that the religious system maintains its self-referential structure through the binary distinction between *transcendence* and *immanence* (Luhmann, 2013).

However, when modernity causes the transcendental pole to collapse, religion, in order to persist, must reconstruct its communicative structure—that is, it must find new resonances within the plural systems of society such as art, media, politics, and psychology.

Cinema serves precisely as this structural space of *recommunication*.

In *Father Ted*, the religious system is inserted into the entertainment system of television, forced to communicate with society through the language of comedy.

In *Philomena*, the religious system collides with the legal and journalistic systems, reestablishing its moral legitimacy through public discourse.

In *Chocolat*, it merges with consumer culture and sensory experience, redefining the notion of "the good".

In *Fleabag*, the religious system becomes fully internalized within psychological and narrative structures—transforming into a form of *self-reflective meaning*.

Thus, in Luhmann's sense, these cinematic works collectively accomplish the *resocialization* of the religious system: the function of religion shifts from *guiding transcendence* to *sustaining empathy*; from *commanding belief* to *understanding existence* (Luhmann, 2000).

8.4 From Institutional Theology to Existential Theology

These four works reveal a clear theological displacement: *Father Ted* dismantles the logic of "religion = institution"; *Philomena* restores the function of "religion = moral conscience"; *Chocolat* expands the boundaries of "religion = sensual ethics"; and *Fleabag* ultimately culminates in "religion = existential experience".

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This transformation directly echoes Paul Tillich's concept of *existential theology*—the idea that God does not reside in external authority but "in the depth of being itself" (Tillich, 1957).

When one confronts loneliness, desire, loss, and love, that very moment constitutes the experience of faith.

In this sense, cinematic art becomes the surrogate of contemporary theology.

It moves faith from the church to the screen, from the altar to the living room, from prayer to dialogue...

Through the act of viewing, the audience undergoes a kind of *aesthetic confession of community*, reconstructing the experience of faith through emotional participation.

8.5 The "Prayer" of Images: From Visual Faith to Cultural Redemption

In a post-religious society, the image assumes the function of *prayer*.

Prayer was once the means of communication between humans and God; now, through images, people relearn how to communicate with themselves, with others, and with the world.

When viewers, amid the absurd laughter of *Father Ted*, question institutional hypocrisy, that is a *prayer of critique*; when they weep with *Philomena* in the experience of forgiveness and justice, that is a *prayer of ethics*; when they savor the sweetness of life in *Chocolat*, that is a *prayer of the senses*; and when they sit in silence with *Fleabag*, confronting loneliness and love, that is a *prayer of existence*.

The object of these prayers is no longer God, but *one another*.

In this sense, cinematic art becomes a *secular theological practice*.

It does not preach, yet it perpetuates faith; it does not evangelize, yet it rebuilds a spiritual community (Taylor, 2007).

8.6 The Form of "Post-Religious Theology": The Re-Speech of Faith

In conclusion, the "post-religious theology" manifested in contemporary cinema may be classified into three distinct forms:

Theology of Disenchantment — exemplified by *Father Ted*, which dismantles religious authority through satire and parody, allowing faith to re-engage with social reality.

Theology of Humanity — represented by *Philomena*, which transforms religious salvation into moral self-reflection, reconstructing a "faith of conscience".

Theology of Sensibility — embodied in *Chocolat* and *Fleabag*, which reclaims faith through the body, desire, emotion, and aesthetic experience, returning it to the sensual sphere of life.

Together, these three theological forms constitute the essence of *post-religious theology*: it is not centered on God but on experience; not mediated by institutions but by culture; not aimed at salvation but at understanding and empathy (Tillich, 1957; Luhmann, 2013).

8.7 Epilogue: The Re-Speech of Faith

As "the voice of God" gradually fades from modern society, cinema becomes the new pulpit.

The figures, dialogues, and scenes on screen replace theological texts, continuing to ask the same ancient questions: Why do we believe? How do we still love?

The laughter of *Father Ted* is the fall of the sacred; the tears of *Philomena* are the prayer of humanity; the sweetness of *Chocolat* is the redemption of the senses; and the silence of *Fleabag* is the rebirth of the soul.

Together, they form the *Cultural Four Gospels* of contemporary faith.

Ultimately, faith has not died—it has merely changed its language, continuing to speak in the light and shadow of the screen.

As Charles Taylor (2007) writes, "In a world without God, we still need something that can make us bow our heads."

And that light, perhaps, emanates from the flickering moments upon the screen.

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