

Zero Dark Thirty (2012) and Girard: The Fortification and Veneration of American Civil Religion in Film

Breann Fallon

Tonight, we are once again reminded that America can do whatever we set our mind to. That is the story of our history, whether it's the pursuit of prosperity for our people, or the struggle for equality for all our citizens; our commitment to stand up for our values abroad, and our sacrifices to make the world a safer place. Let us remember that we can do these things not just because of wealth or power, but because of who we are: one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.¹

Osama bin Laden is dead, and the World Trade Center site is teeming with new life. Osama bin Laden is dead and lower Manhattan is pulsing with new activity. Osama bin Laden is dead, and New York City's spirit has never been stronger.²

Introduction

Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) tells the tale of America launching a "crusade against the evil scourge of terrorism", tracking and killing their greatest threat – Osama Bin Laden (hereafter, UBL as in *Zero Dark Thirty*).³ Bigelow's film follows Maya (Jessica Chastain) a young CIA operative, fresh from college, as she tortures the name of UBL's courier (Ibrahim Saeed) out of captured Al-Qaeda agents. Using this link to locate UBL in a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, the occupants of the compound are subsequently attacked and murdered by US Navy Seals. It is imperative to note that this film tells the story of Osama Bin Laden's death

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¹ President Barack Obama on the Death of Osama Bin Laden, 2 May 2011.

² New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, May 2011.

³ Richard Kearney, 'Thinking After Terror: An Interreligious Challenge' in *Religion and Violence in a Secular World: Toward a New Political Theology*, ed. Clayton Crockett (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2006), p. 207.

from an entirely White-Western, and particularly American, viewpoint. Bigelow does not allow any other opinions besides that of the pro-American, anti-terrorist to enter her film. Hence, when this article suggests that what is being portrayed in this film is the opinion of pro-American/pro-West, this is not doing so in an essentialist manner. The film is fully aware of its viewpoint and has been written and directed to be from this stance. In the words of Glenn Greenwald, “this film is overarching, suffocating jingoism. This film has only one perspective of the world”.⁴

Most commentaries written on Bigelow’s film discuss whether or not the film is pro-torture and pro-violence.⁵ While this focus on the for-or-against violence stance is an important spotlight to consider in relation to the film, this violence can also be analysed in a different manner more suited to the study of religion.⁶ The violence in the film is wholly directed at human figures, in fact, in most scenes the audience is focused toward the death or suffering of one particular character and the positive outcome of that death for America; it actually appears as if the violence in the film is sacrificial in nature. This has shaped the methodology I will use in this article.

To fully analyse the sacrifice in the film, I shall apply the lens of René Girard, drawing particularly on his work in *Violence and the Sacred*.⁷ In order to do this, I will outline and critique the primary methodology in Girard’s theory on sacrifice, supporting his work with that of Robert N. Bellah, Paul Christopher Johnson, Bruce Lincoln, Carolyn Marvin and

⁴ For more on this see Glenn Greenwald, ‘Zero Dark Thirty: CIA, hagiography, pernicious propaganda’, *The Guardian*, 15 December 2012, at www.guardian.com. Accessed 10/04/2013.

⁵ See Jared del Rosso, ‘Torture in Zero Dark Thirty’, *Humanity and Society*, vol. 37, no. 4 (2013), pp. 348-350; Simon Cooper, ‘Enlightened Barbarism’, *Arena*, vol. 122 (2013), pp. 54-55; Tim Kroenert, ‘Evil is Relative in the Hunt for Bin Laden’, *Eureka Street*, vol. 23, no. 2 (2013), pp. 28-29.

⁶ The terms ‘religious’ and ‘religion’ are to be taken here as meaning ‘a tradition of group worship... that makes some kind of demands on its adherents’ for the reason that most scholars who have written on American Civil Religion use the term in this basic sense. See Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), p. 17.

⁷ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 1988).

David W. Ingle,⁸ before finally applying this newly worked methodology to each sacrificial death in *Zero Dark Thirty*.⁹ In doing so, what shall become evident via the application of this methodology is that the film utilises the rhetoric, visual language and experience of sacrifice to adulate aspects of, as well as to fortify and enliven the American Civil Religion for the American people.¹⁰ With each death, a different religious facet of American Civil Religion is given a firm foundation and venerated.¹¹ These religious facets combine in the death of UBL in order that the film presents a collective sacred narrative for the American Nation. What is crucial *vis-à-vis* this presentation of a collective sacred narrative in this film allows Americans to *see* the greatest sacrifice of their time, to vicariously *experience* the retribution that was so vehemently desired after 9/11. Hence, via an examination of the sacrifice at work in *Zero Dark Thirty* it shall be contended that this is not simply a film.¹² Rather, the sacrifice within it goes far beyond the screen. *Zero Dark Thirty* is a retelling of an historical event in such a way as to make it a sacral narrative that provides the audience with direct access to a high moment within American Civil Religion.¹³

⁸ Robert N. Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', *Daedalus*, vol. 117, no. 3 (1988); Paul Christopher Johnson, 'Savage Civil Religion', *International Journal of the History of Religions*, vol. 52, no. 3 (2005).

⁹ It is important to note that there are several versions of the film available to the public, some presenting additional scenes. This article will footnote which version of the film is being used as some examples used do not appear in all versions of *Zero Dark Thirty*.

¹⁰ Scott Cowdell, 'Rene Girard, Modernity and Apocalypse' in Scott Cowdell, Chris Fleming and Joel Hodge eds., *Violence, Desire and the Sacred: Girard's Mimetic Theory Across the Disciplines* (New York, London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 5.

¹¹ Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', pp. 97, 115.

¹² Cooper, 'Enlightened Barbarism', p. 54.

¹³ Before continuing on, it is important to note that while this article is one of the first to apply Girard's methodology to *Zero Dark Thirty* specifically, it is not the first to acknowledge the links between Girard's concepts and American Civil Religion or the American relationship with Terrorism. Gorski and Türkmen-Dervisoglu apply Girard to American Civil Religion and the War on Terror in their article 'Religion, Nationalism and Violence: An Integrated Approach' as have Marvin and Ingle in their piece 'Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion'. Of particular importance in the latter article in Marvin and Ingle's note that Girard himself has not applied his theory of sacrifice to "contemporary nation state violence". See Philip S. Gorski and Gulay Türkmen-Dervisoglu, 'Religion, Nationalism and Violence: An Integrated Approach', *The Annual Review of Sociology* (2013), pp. 193-210; and Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, 'Blood Sacrifice

René Girard's Application of the 'Scapegoat Mechanism' to Sacrifice

The Theory

Girard states that “when men no longer live in harmony with one another, the sun still shines and the rain falls, to be sure, but the fields are less well tendered, the harvests less abundant”.¹⁴ Hence, society seeks to deflect upon a victim (a “sacrificeable victim”) the violence that would otherwise be vented against its own members in this epoch of disharmony.¹⁵ The *rhetoric*, the *visual language* and the *experience* of this sacrificial death reinforces to those in the community what is considered paramount to them. This is due to the drama and responsibility of the event. All those involved cannot remove themselves from the dramatic and emotional force of the violence exerted and are thus drawn to what the death is venerating and fortifying.

Girard goes on to describe this victim as “a substitute for all the members of the community, offered up to a higher order by the members themselves”; in other words, a scapegoat.¹⁶ Crucial for the application of this theory to *Zero Dark Thirty* is the next qualification of sacrifice that Girard outlines; “what we are dealing with, therefore, are *marginal* individuals, incapable of establishing or sharing the social bonds that link the rest of the inhabitants (criminals, the disabled etc.)”.¹⁷ Importantly, Girard notes that one does not have to be ‘outcast’ to be ‘marginal’, for it is a common occurrence in numerous cultures for the king to be sacrificed – “is he not at the very heart of the community?”.¹⁸ This is correct, “but it is precisely his position at the centre that serves to isolate him from his fellow men, to render him casteless [*sic*]” for he cannot create regular bonds with

and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 64, no. 4 (1996), pp. 767-780.

¹⁴ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 9.

¹⁵ Girard expands on this concept in his work *Things Hidden Since the Founding of the World* by adding the notion of ‘mimetic desire’. See, René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Founding of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann (London: Athlone, 1987); René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 4.

¹⁶ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 8.

¹⁷ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 13, emphasis added.

¹⁸ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 13.

the community.¹⁹ To summarise Girardian sacrifice, “its purpose is to cut violence short” for a community that is seen as more important than any other entity.²⁰

What Girard postulates here is that via sacrifice “this slain victim provid[es] the foundation for languages and cultures”.²¹ The *rhetoric*, the *visual* and the *experience* of sacrificial death reinforces to those in the community what is considered paramount to their community. In other words, “what is foundational in any community is what its members can agree is worth killing for, or what they can be compelled to sacrifice themselves for”.²² What shall become evident when applying Girard to *Zero Dark Thirty* is that the audience’s interaction with the sacrifices at hand allows for the fortification of American Civil Religion.

Critiquing the Theory

The predicament that surfaces with this Girardian theory is that it is exceedingly conceptual. Simon Taylor is overtly critical of Girard’s theory, stating that “there is no trouble-free road into Girard”,²³ while Buchoul renders Girard as “superficial”.²⁴ The ambiguity of this theory is due to two particular factors. Firstly, Girard employs broad terms frequently, that are amorphous in themselves. Terms such as ‘culture’, ‘individual’, ‘language’, ‘religion’ and ‘community’ do not possess singular definitions, if they hold definitions at all. Samuel Buchoul finds Girard’s frequent use of indefinable terms indicative of a lack of depth to his theory.²⁵ The frequent use of these terms renders Girard’s work as overly abstract, for depending on which definition of each term one chooses to adhere to, there are many interpretations that appear.

Secondly, this theory of sacrifice must be applied to a *bone fide* model in order to truly see it at work. Yet, one cannot simply lay Girard onto an example, because Girard’s methodology can only be applied once

¹⁹ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 13.

²⁰ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 23.

²¹ Cowdell, ‘Rene Girard, Modernity and Apocalypse’, p. 5.

²² Marvin and Ingle, ‘Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion’, p. 769.

²³ Simon Taylor, ‘The Girard Reader’, *The Month*, vol. 31, no. 3 (March 1998), p. 114.

²⁴ Samuel Buchoul, ‘The Nonsell of Girard’, *Journal of Violence, Mimesis and Culture*, vol. 20 (2013), accessed online at

<http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy2.library.usyd.edu.au/journals/contagion/v020/20.buchoul.html>.

²⁵ Buchoul, ‘The Nonsell of Girard’.

many aspects have been identified; who is the *community* being dealt with, what are they *protecting* themselves from, who are the *victims*? It is only once these boxes are filled that a clear comprehension of what is being fortified or venerated by the sacrifice at hand can be gleaned. Furthermore, Buchoul recognises (just as in this article) that the Girardian theory of sacrifice has difficulty standing alone and thus must be supported with other theories which provide more solid groundwork (Buchoul uses the theory of ‘Nonsel’ to support Girard in his 2013 article).²⁶

Interestingly, Charles Davis highlights that Girard claims to look at religion via a scientific lens, which, provides some insight into Girard’s plain and practical manner of describing his ideas.²⁷ While Taylor and Buchoul find Girard’s pseudo-scientific simplicity overly vague and somewhat problematic, this does not have to prevent the use of Girard altogether. In fact, for the purposes of this article, the legwork which Taylor and Buchoul find to be laborious is worth the revelations that will appear as a result. Perhaps it is revelations such as those that occur in this article at the hands of Girard’s theory that account for his popularity amongst many scholars. Applying Girard may be arduous. However, when supported with other works and appropriate groundwork, his theory will prove successful in revealing numerous religious elements of *Zero Dark Thirty*.

Fortunately, Bigelow generously provides the answers to these quandaries in the opening scene of her film, making for an easier application of Girardian theory. She commences with entire darkness, through which the 911 calls of September 11 victims eventually punctuate; themselves sacrificial figures murdered by self-sacrificing figures.²⁸ Thus emerges a concatenation of sacrifices. This suffering forces one to think on the violence being forced upon the men and women crying in the darkness. Immediately, “America is the ‘Good Guy’, the innocent target of terrorist violence”.²⁹ From the outset, there is no denying that the community we are dealing with is America, and perhaps even the West at large, the community that was physically and rhetorically hurt by the falling of the Twin Towers.

²⁶ Buchoul, ‘The Nonsel’ of Girard’.

²⁷ Charles Davis, ‘Sacrifice and Violence: New Perspectives in the Theory of Religion from Rene Girard’, *New Blackfriars*, vol. 70, no. 829 (July 1989), p. 312.

²⁸ Hans G. Kippenberg and Tilman Seidensticker, eds, *The 9/11 Handbook: Annotated Translation and Interpretation of the Attackers’ Spiritual Manual* (London: Equinox, 2006).

²⁹ Greenwald, ‘Zero Dark Thirty: CIA, hagiography, pernicious propaganda’.

Following this opening darkness, the first light of the film comes up on a Muslim Al-Qaeda detainee, Ammar. This character is placed in direct contrast to those screaming in through the blackness. It is impossible for the audience to separate him from the cries of the victims that echoed through the opening of the film. In the words of Greenwald, “for Bigelow, Muslims and Arabs are dastardly villains...hateful and violent... killing without motive, without scruples”.³⁰ It is precisely these characters, whose violence, aggression and ideals that brought down the twin towers, from whom the western community within the film is attempting to protect itself. It is important to note that Jack G. Shaheen documented in his 1987 work that the Arab, while always present as an “Other”, is becoming the ultimate “villain” in Western blockbuster films, being blamed for violence against “innocent people”.³¹ Shaheen foresaw that the “reel Arab” was to become the ultimate “Other” in American cinema, with racial and religious differences defining the vicious actions of these characters.³²

Bigelow reveals further information in her initial scene of *Zero Dark Thirty*. Not only is the community being protected and the violence they are being protected from displayed, but the audience is also given a glimpse of the sacrificial victims that are to come in the film. In the foremost torture scene, an Al-Qaeda detainee (Ammar) is bawled at by an American CIA agent, Dan (Jason Clarke), as he is slung from the ceiling of a dark, drab, detainee cell:

Dan: You’re a money man, a paperboy, you’re a disgrace to humanity, you and your uncle murdered 3000 innocent people.³³

This detainee is tortured vigorously (for around 35 minutes of the film’s total screen time) before Maya says to Dan “is he ever getting out?”, to which Dan replies “no.”³⁴ Here, with Ammar’s foreseen death, the audience is given a glimpse of the type of outcast victims that will be sacrificed to protect America in the film – the dangerous Arab “Other”. Moreover, as

³⁰ Greenwald, ‘Zero Dark Thirty: CIA, hagiography, pernicious propaganda’.

³¹ Jack G. Shaheen, ‘The Hollywood Arab: 1984-1986’, *The Journal Popular Film and Television*, vol. 14, no. 4 (Winter 1987), p. 148.

³² Shaheen, ‘Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People’, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 588 (July 2003), p. 172.

³³ *Zero Dark Thirty*, DVD, directed by Kathryn Bigelow, 2012, Los Angeles (CA, Columbia Pictures).

³⁴ *Zero Dark Thirty*, DVD, directed by Kathryn Bigelow, 2012, Los Angeles (CA, Columbia Pictures).

Dan tortures, giving himself morally and physically to the cause of protecting his beloved Western homeland, Bigelow hints of the sacrifice of central affiliates in the film; as his humanity wanes, Dan is no longer a part of the community he is trying to protect, becoming a sacrificial scapegoat.

This formulation of the United States as the community to be protected from the Otherness and violence of the Arab has not been formulated in the film itself. Rather, as becomes evident in the further sacrifices depicted in the film's ensuing/following scenes, this model arises out of American Civil Religion. It is in this system of meaning that the community of the United States is adulated and their ideals upheld as being of ultimate importance and worthy of protection.³⁵ To support Girard's theory and also my postulation of the model present in the film, it is important to discuss the formulation of an American Civil Religion, along with existing analyses of it from within the academy.

American Civil Religion: A *Précis*

With the publication of 'Civil Religion in America' (1988), Robert Bellah became one of the first scholars to lay down a solid outline of American Civil Religion.³⁶ Here, Bellah delineates it as a "concern that America be a society as perfectly in accord with the will of God as men can make it, and a light to all nations".³⁷ On a basic level, this early work provides a good synopsis, yet scholars such as David Fontana would argue that Bellah's civil religion is merely "Christian-centred nationalism".³⁸ However, this system of meaning is more than merely Christ-inspired nationalism, for:

Behind the civil religion [of America] at every point lie biblical archetypes: Exodus, chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, Sacrificial Death and Rebirth. But it is also genuinely American and genuinely new. It has its own prophets and its own martyrs, its own sacred events and sacred places, its solemn rituals and symbols.³⁹

While beneath American Civil Religion there lies a Christian foundation, there are also new civil elements that differentiate this system of meaning from that of just "Christian-centred nationalism". For example, Bellah

³⁵ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, Perennial Classic Edition (New York: Harper, 2001).

³⁶ Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America'.

³⁷ Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', p. 115.

³⁸ David Fontana, 'Obama and the American Civil Religion from the Political Left', *The George Washington International Law Review*, vol. 41, no. 4 (2010), p. 910.

³⁹ Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', p. 115.

points out that the president is of a “higher criterion”, almost a God on earth.⁴⁰ So, while the president may answer to God, he is the next pseudo-divine figure-head in the hierarchy. Moreover, while the Bible will always be a part of American culture, there is a duty to uphold the Constitution as a sacred text of the American way of life.⁴¹ In addition, Marvin and Ingle note that the “contemporary American Flag has a visual symbolic power for its people that is comparable to the medieval crucifix”.⁴² Hence, American Civil Religion is a melting pot of Christian tradition and new national elements that revere the “generalised American way of life”.⁴³

Since Bellah’s specific formulation in the 1960s, American Civil Religion has morphed as a result of America’s involvement in the War on Terror. Paul Christopher Johnson refers to this as the “refurbished” version of American Civil Religion.⁴⁴ Johnson’s “refurbished” system of meaning is not simply defined by a melting pot of Christian values and the general American way of life, but is rather identified by America representing the lead country of Western civilisation in active opposition to the Arab world of the East. Bruce Lincoln refers to this change as a movement from a religion of resistance to a religion of revolution, due to a desire to create rapid and significant change and to dictate normative values.⁴⁵ With the fall of the Twin Towers in 2001, former President Bush can be seen to have altered American Civil Religion to be more than just a veneration of America as the ‘light to all nations’, for he imparts an active role upon this veneration.

America is now to “rid the world of the evil-doers (Arab Terrorists)... this is a crusade, a war on terrorism”.⁴⁶ This was built upon in the American invasion of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). Girard as well as Marvin and Ingle note that seeing one’s kin use violence against an ‘Other’ in order to protect the community is vital in unifying a group, and

⁴⁰ Bellah, ‘Civil Religion in America’, p. 100.

⁴¹ Bellah, ‘Civil Religion in America’, p. 100.

⁴² Marvin and Ingle, ‘Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion’, p. 770.

⁴³ Bellah, ‘Civil Religion in America’, p. 97.

⁴⁴ Paul Christopher Johnson, ‘Savage Civil Religion’, *International Journal of the History of Religions*, vol. 52, no. 3 (2005), p. 289.

⁴⁵ Bruce Lincoln, *Holy Terrors: Thinking About Religion After September 11* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 86.

⁴⁶ Former President George W. Bush in Johnson, ‘Savage Civil Religion’, p. 291.

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also in the fortification of its sacral narratives.⁴⁷ Hence, this new active role of American Civil Religion brings the nation together against a common enemy, asking citizens to sacrifice themselves for their homeland by sacrificing Arab terrorists. This both fortifies the love for the nation that was already present and reinforces the sacred symbols, texts, martyrs, places and events that Bellah highlights in his work from the 1960s. Via the work of Bellah and Johnson, this article is given solid support for the community model outlined above in the film; America as the community, protecting themselves from the Arab world with both outcast and central victims.

Applying Girard to *Zero Dark Thirty*

The First Victims: Jessica and Khamidi

In a conversation between Maya and another CIA operative Jessica (Jennifer Ehle), the audience discovers that she is meeting with a Jordanian mole, Abu Al Khamidi, offering to penetrate the inner circle of UBL in exchange for US\$25 million. At this point we have a dual sacrifice take place, for Khamidi is in fact a suicide bomber who detonates his charge next to Jessica at their meeting in Camp Chapman, Afghanistan. Khamidi has been offered up as a sacrifice by the Al-Qaeda community, but most importantly for this argument, Jessica becomes the ultimate scapegoat, taking the blow of the violence in order to protect her community.

This sacrifice lays many foundations. Firstly, on a base level, with the sacrifice of this central affiliate, Bigelow lays the foundation for the martyrs of the American Civil Religion, for Jessica could have lived on in that society once the “fields were again well tendered and the harvests abundant”, to use Girard’s phrase.⁴⁸ It is in Jessica’s sacrifice that the audience are presented with the idea that “all agents of the US government – especially in its intelligence and military agencies – are enshrined as heroic, noble, self-sacrificing crusaders devoted to stopping the Terrorists” in the name of America.⁴⁹ In fact, Greenwald describes the portrayal of these characters as wholly “saintly” and Cooper suggests that Bigelow gives them

⁴⁷ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 8; Marvin and Ingle, ‘Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion’, p. 773.

⁴⁸ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 9

⁴⁹ Greenwald, ‘Zero Dark Thirty: CIA, hagiography, pernicious propaganda’.

“divinely inspired power”.⁵⁰ Hence, in this sacrifice, we have the veneration of sacred figures to the American Civil Religion – those who Bigelow deems worthy of worship.⁵¹

Secondly, taking this sacrifice further beyond its martyr base reveals a notion to which I have previously alluded. Bellah outlines the sacrifice of central affiliates as central to the formation of American Civil Religion, and indeed, Marvin and Ingle also note that the killing of central affiliates is paramount.⁵² This is because (as Girard highlights) this particular sacrifice creates a rhetoric of importance around the community that is being protected while simultaneously alienating the figure that killed the central affiliate.⁵³ Here, the sacrifice of the central member is fostering a notion of revenge, a binary battle of good and evil. Bigelow begins to cultivate revenge in her film by suggesting that the innocent victims of 9/11 must be avenged in the opening scene. The fact that the audience sees the death of Jessica not only adds another name to the list of victims taken by ‘the Arabs’ but also draws upon Girard in that *seeing* and *experiencing* sacrifice is central to is greater affect.⁵⁴ It almost appears that America must lose even more of their own in order to further found the ultimate sacrifice of UBL that is to come. Bigelow wants the audience to be fully invested in these characters, she wants the viewer to *desire* their death in order to increase the emotions of this event. As UBL’s hands become increasingly soiled with American blood, he is rendered more antagonistic and the price

⁵⁰ Greenwald, ‘Zero Dark Thirty: CIA, hagiography, pernicious propaganda’; Taylor, ‘The Girard Reader’, p. 54.

⁵¹ Interestingly, Bigelow takes this further in the credits with the following text; “The filmmakers wish to especially acknowledge the sacrifice of those men, women and families who were most impacted by the events depicted in this film: the Victims and families of the 9/11 attacks; as well as the attacks in the United Kingdom; the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad, Pakistan; in Khobar, Saudi Arabia and at the Camp Chapman Forward Operating base in Afghanistan. We also wish to acknowledge and honor the many extraordinary military and intelligence professionals and first responders who have made the ultimate sacrifice”. Here, Bigelow adds more martyrs of the American Civil Religion to those already in the film, the reality of these additional deaths augmenting the reality of her adoration of those sacrificed in the film. *Zero Dark Thirty*, DVD, directed by Kathryn Bigelow, 2012, Los Angeles (CA, Columbia Pictures).

⁵² Bellah, ‘Civil Religion in America’; Marvin and Ingle, ‘Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion’, p. 767.

⁵³ Marvin and Ingle, ‘Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion’, p. 767.

⁵⁴ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*.

on his head becomes greater, until his death is no longer simply worth money or a front page of the New York Times, but grows to be rhetorically imperative for the emotional state of the American nation.⁵⁵

This is interesting methodologically, because this postulation throws Girard's theory out of order, suggesting that the veneration and fortification that comes from sacrifice does not necessarily have to follow the death itself. The rhetoric of importance from the sacrifice to come may actually be brewing before the death occurs. Mohanty recognises this in his observation that 'Geronimo' became the code name for UBL.⁵⁶ The use of the word 'Geronimo' signals to the greater American mythos. Geronimo was the name of an American-Indian chief sacrificed by white invaders, a moment seen as defining for the characterization and development of the Western American nation. This is an American legend from which the tradition that the word 'Geronimo' indicates great victory or accomplishment stems.⁵⁷ Hence, as suggested above, even before he is killed, the death of UBL is given a mythic and legendary weight so great that his death cannot help but be defining for those who achieve this ultimate sacrifice and the community who benefit from it.

Finally, the antagonisation of UBL via the sacrifice of Jessica not only creates a great weight upon his life and actions, brewing the importance of his sacrifice, it is also vital in creating a vicarious experience of this death for those who do not harbour feelings of ill-will towards him. Central to Girard's theory is the notion of community; sacrifice is by them, for them, and experiencing it unites them. The difficulty with the sacrifice of UBL is that not all Americans were old enough at the time of 9/11 to understand the magnitude of that sacrifice. Hence, building the weight of UBL's death by adding victim after victim to his name heightens their understanding of his 'Otherness' and subsequently their desire for his death. Also, seeing deaths at the hand of UBL is a persuasive way of uniting America against their villain, for all the members of that community feel as

⁵⁵ Interestingly, Bruce Lincoln notes that in October 2001, President Bush broadcast a video of UBL on television and his diction and argument began to foster a greater understanding of his humanness and subsequently a consideration of his point-of-view in some Americans. As a result, any media releases of UBL were carefully packaged as to foster the characterisation of UBL as an adversary and Other. See Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*, pp. 19-20.

⁵⁶ Manoranjan Mohanty, 'America's Geronimo', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 46, no. 21, pp. 12-14.

⁵⁷ T. C. Alpin, 'Geronimo', *American Indian Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 2 (April 2004), p. 259.

if they have been personally wronged. All of this lays the foundation for a vicarious experience of the ultimate sacrifice of UBL for those who may be initially distant from an overt desire to harm this character.⁵⁸ It is fair to argue that without the initial sacrifice of Jessica, prior to that of UBL, that some audience members may not be *as* affected by his death.

The Ultimate Victim: UBL

The penultimate scene of *Zero Dark Thirty* features the death of UBL. This scene begins with Maya and the Navy Seals assigned to the task being informed that the mission to kill their target will be taking place in the next few hours. They prepare, load into helicopters, and all mime the ‘Sign of the Cross’. As they fly off to ritually sacrifice the ultimate outcast, we see a lingering shot of the American flag against a settling middle-eastern sun. After landing at the compound, the men raid the building, shooting or capturing any adult Arab they find standing in their path, leaving only children completely unhurt. The seals progress up the compound, floor by floor, until UBL is finally located and shot multiple times. At this point, the first line from the killer is “Geronimo. For God and country. Geronimo”.⁵⁹ After gathering all the items that could possibly contain terrorist information and ‘bagging’ the body of UBL, the seals abscond the compound, leaving all other bodies to rot. As the helicopter touches back down at base camp with the corpse of UBL, one of the operatives calls the President of the United States who is the first to hear the confirmation that the body brought back is indeed UBL. While rifling through their findings from the compound, the soldiers cheer and appear to be in a state of ultimate euphoria at what they have just achieved for their homeland.

Once more we see a shot of the black body bag and finally a lingering shot of the American Flag as the sun now rises on the reborn, UBL-free world. The veneration of America in this particular sacrifice is robust, in fact, overly extravagant. Here, Bigelow not only lets us know that America and the West at large is the community to be protected by this sacrifice, that the CIA and army are the martyrs of this religion, offering themselves up for their community; she also highlights the other elements

⁵⁸ Mario Gollwitzer et al., ‘Vicarious Revenge and the Death of Osama Bin Laden’, *Personal and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 40, no. 5 (May 2014), pp. 604-616.

⁵⁹ *Zero Dark Thirty*, DVD, directed by Kathryn Bigelow, 2012, Los Angeles (CA, Columbia Pictures).

of American Civil Religion outlined by Bellah, Johnson and Lincoln. Firstly, the rhetoric created via the action of alerting the President first imparts upon him an authority and importance that is clearly greater than any other figure in this community. This catapults him up the hierarchy and suggests to the audience that he is a figurehead for the American Civil Religion. Some scholars refer to the President as “semi-divine”, a “Totem figure” or “pseudo-Godhead”.⁶⁰ Interestingly, as the audience never glimpses the president nor hears his voice (except via television), Bigelow successfully presents him as a Gnostic-like deity, far from the human world yet still to be placated with sacrifices that benefit him and his community.⁶¹

No matter what particular term one uses to describe him, it is clear here that the president is the head of the earthy hierarchy of American Civil Religion. Moreover, this scene displays an overt visual focus on the American flag. Marvin and Ingle note that some American citizens openly speak of the flag as “sacred” and also employ phrases such as “this is why we die, for the flag”.⁶² This convergence on the flag in numerous shots holds fast to the sentiment expressed here by American Citizens. Bigelow does not shy away from the importance of the American flag as a sacred symbol of the community that has successfully been protected in this sacrificial act. Also, as aforementioned, the use of the word ‘Geronimo’ signals to the American past and the greater American mythos. The sacrifice of Geronimo aided the growth, development and character of the American nation. Hence, using the term immediately after the death of UBL indicates that this moment is just as imperative as the now legendary instant when Geronimo was sacrificed. Finally, the “Otherness” of the Arab to the American people is highlighted in this scene, with no remorse for their loss shown by any Western character. The American men in the scene shoot most of their opposition without question – the victims are indeed Shaheen’s “reel Arab”.⁶³ This violence against the Arab furthermore signals

⁶⁰ Marvin and Ingle, ‘Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion’, p. 773.

⁶¹ The intersection between Gnostic ideas and American figureheads is further discussed in D. Weller, ‘Godless Patriots: Towards a New American Civil Religion’, *Polity*, vol. 45, no. 3, pp. 372-392.

⁶² Marvin and Ingle, ‘Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion’, p. 770, 774.

⁶³ Shaheen, ‘The Hollywood Arab: 1984-1986’, p. 172.

to Johnson's "refurbished" American Civil Religion for it depicts active citizens on their crusade against the enemy.⁶⁴

Bigelow manages to fortify and venerate nearly every aspect of American Civil Religion in this sacrifice. From Bellah's symbols, martyrs, and Christian elements to Johnson's activism and Shaheen's "Othered" Arab, there is a fusion of religious notions here that changes the film entirely. This is for the reason that all the elements of the American Civil Religion are fortified and venerated here in one sequential and visual narrative. It is via this sacrifice that the film ceases to be one simply presenting aspects of American Civil Religion, and becomes an artwork that is in fact a depiction of American Civil Religion's sacred collective narrative which goes beyond the screen to affect the American nation and its citizens.

This is evident when one considers the two quotations from President Barack Obama and Mayor Bloomberg referenced at the opening of this article, as both men depict this particular story as defining for the rhetoric of the American nation. In the former, Obama confirms in the phrase "that is our story" that the religious elements in this sacrifice are indeed the characterising features of the American Nation, and should thus be upheld without question and with the utmost respect. As Greenwald recognizes, this is a "sacrifice [that] has obtained sacred status in American lore".⁶⁵ Continuing this, Bloomberg highlights the foundational nature of this narrative – the ability of the death of UBL to act as a moment of rebirth; for individual, for city, for nation. For Bloomberg, this is the point that America can indeed be considered "the light to all nations"⁶⁶ stating that "the fight against terror goes on, but tonight America has sent an unmistakable message: No matter how long it takes, justice will be done".⁶⁷ Here, Bloomberg indicates that America will continue to act in this manner, that their role as the great defender and that their crusade is not over – this is still the narrative that defines them.

⁶⁴ Johnson, 'Savage Civil Religion'.

⁶⁵ Greenwald, 'Zero Dark Thirty: CIA, hagiography, pernicious propaganda'.

⁶⁶ Former President George W. Bush in Johnson, 'Savage Civil Religion', p. 291.

⁶⁷ Former President George W. Bush, 'Osama Bin Laden's death', *BBC US and Canada*, at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-13256956>. Accessed 01/05/2014.

Zero Dark Thirty and Girard



Figure 1: Twitter feed of *Zero Dark Thirty* audience response from January 2012.

Not only does Bigelow fortify the narrative of American Civil Religion, but this scene enables the visual and experiential aspect of Girardian sacrifice to occur. The evidence for the affect of the visual and the sheer experience of UBL's death on the audience is profound. Adam Horowitz documented the Twitter feed after the initial release of the film (figure 1).⁶⁸ Particularly interesting of the responses are those of Isabella Pellien, Dalton Rowe and Kevin Dietrich. The former provides an example of Girard's notion that sacrifice lays foundation of community, for this audience member has gleaned that serving Americans are worthy of worship but is also explicitly aware of the Otherness of the Arab. Pellien's qualification that these emotions are 'new' suggests that she did not hold these previous to her experience of this ultimate sacrifice. This is also evident in the comment by Dalton Rowe who states that he wants to "shoot Muslims *now*, because of *Zero Dark Thirty*".⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Adam Horowitz, 'The Reviews are In: *Zero Dark Thirty* Makes Me Hate Muslims', *The War of Ideas in the Middle East*, at <http://mondoweiss.net/2013/01/reviews-thirty-muslims.html>. Accessed 07/05/2014.

⁶⁹ Dalton Rowe in Adam Horowitz, 'The Reviews are In: *Zero Dark Thirty* Makes Me Hate Muslims'.

It appears as though it has been Pellien's and Rowe's vicarious experience of UBL's sacrifice in the film that has given them this newfound sentiment. Also of interest is Dietrich, who 'hashtags' the word 'Patriot' after his statement, "*Zero Dark Thirty* made me want to shoot any Arab in the face".⁷⁰ A patriot is generally recognised as someone who feels strongly for their country, hence, Dietrich's use of the term here appears to intimate that those who feel strongly for their country 'shoot Arabs in the face'. I have included these examples because they perfectly encapsulate the theory outlined above. That is, that the *rhetoric*, the *visual language* and the *experience* of sacrifice instils elements of "language and culture" – here elements of American Civil Religion.⁷¹ In all three of these examples, it is evident that seeing and experiencing the death of UBL at the hands of their own kin has unified these Americans. Moreover, it has alerted to them the sacral elements of American Civil Religion because these are the aspects that are being fortified in the death itself. From these remarks on Twitter, it is clear that the sacrifice in the film goes beyond the screen. The rhetoric, visual and experience of this violence lay foundations of both the theological and the practical elements of American Civil Religion amongst the American people.

Conclusion

Zero Dark Thirty is by no means just a film. Rather, Bigelow has created a propagandistic piece of pro-American art, which holds a place as a sacral narrative for American Civil Religion. To deny the religious elements of this film is to ignore what *Zero Dark Thirty* is holding as ultimate. Undoubtedly, the death of UBL is at the heart of this film. However, this sacrifice, along with the others may be seen as more than just a notch in America's belt. As this article has argued, when one applies a Girardian lens (despite the onerous task of this application) to the film it is clear, just as Girard suggests, that sacrifice presents an opportunity to fortify, underline and experience the sacral aspects of a particular community.⁷² For when an individual is killed by a community, or offers themselves up

⁷⁰ Kevin Dietrich in Horowitz, 'The Reviews are In: Zero Dark Thirty Makes Me Hate Muslims'.

⁷¹ Cowdell, 'Rene Girard, Modernity and Apocalypse', p. 5.

⁷² Cowdell, 'Rene Girard, Modernity and Apocalypse', p. 5.

Zero Dark Thirty *and* Girard

for slaughter, they are highlighting what is ultimate and deemed to be sacred to that very community.

The sacrifices in *Zero Dark Thirty* fit this model of the Girardian paradigm perfectly. In Ammar's death, the nation itself is given sacral status. In Jessica's death, both herself and the American individuals sacrificed with her are given the status of a martyr and, simultaneously, the foundation for the importance of UBL's sacrifice is laid. In UBL's death, the flag is enshrined as a revered symbol, the President is upheld as a semi-divine Godhead, and Christianity is highlighted as central to the American Nation. Above all, a lionised narrative of American Civil Religion is formed through which the American citizen can both experience and worship UBL's historic and sacred sacrifice. In *Zero Dark Thirty* the audience comes into direct contact with the rhetoric, the visual and the experience of the sacrifice of victims directly linked to American Civil Religion. Bringing the audience into contact with this sacrifice aids in the fortification of narrative and the veneration of the American Civil Religion itself. When one looks through a lens of Girardian sacrifice, supported by scholarship on American Civil Religion, it is evident that this film may indeed be read as a piece of holy American scripture, through which citizens of the United States can directly access and experience a sacral narrative of American Civil Religion.