

RELIGIOUS DOGMA IN SEBASTIÁN LELIO'S *THE WONDER* (2022)

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Abstract

Religious issues that are no longer relevant to modern living are represented in *The Wonder* (2022) film by Sebastián Lelio. This research aims to unravel the Religious Dogma in the film by focusing on examining the religious situation of Irish society in the nineteenth century. Tracing the religious life of the Irish community in the nineteenth century, where the majority adhered to Roman Catholicism, this research uses the sociology of literature method. In more detail, this research applies Max Weber's theory of the sociology of religion approach. *The Wonder* film entirely is the research data, but specifically, the writer takes the socio-religious context, screenshots from several scenes, and film dialogues as the secondary data. So it can be said that data collection in this research used documentation and literature study techniques. Analysis of the sociology of religion in *The Wonder* (2022) film by Sebastián Lelio is still rare to find, so this research is essential so that it can add to criticism resources of the sociology of literature. Aside from that, the results of this research are that the modernization and logicalization of religion can occur along with times of development and the relevance of public interest.

Keywords: Church Catholics, Religious Dogma, Irish' society, Religion, Sociology, *The Wonder*.

INTRODUCTION

The role of religion is currently judged as outmoded and unnecessary in society. Science and philosophy critique human faiths, many consider religion irrelevant and glorify the traditional values that are steeped in superstition and mythology. As Nurasa et al. (2022, p. 182) stated that philosophy of science is also called the Criticism of Science because historically its birth was caused by rationalization and autonomization in criticizing dogmas and superstitions.

One of the dogmas of the Catholics in Ireland dominated politics in the nineteenth century. This problem became the social theme of religion in *The Wonder* (2022), a film about Irish bishops in 1859 who strongly condemned the presence of the ruler as a traitor to the Holy See. According to Larkin (1987, p. 4), the Catholic Europe, was shocked to see



unscrupulous politicians violating the principles of justice and international law. The pope retains control over what he owns, as well as holding the title of Europe's oldest and holiest. Several years before that, Ireland had just suffered a famine in 1840s which had a significant impact on the stability of society's faith. Gray (2021, p. 170) assumed that Ireland's Great Famine was described as 'one of the extinctions' by one of the government's Senior Poor Law administrators, and it cannot be helped that this calamity was deeply etched in Irish society's remembrance.

Religious Dogma arises because of differences in individuals' perceptions and defiances. Along with individuals' differences in perceptions, behaviors that see themselves as 'very liberal' and 'very conservative' as extremes can confound ideological substance (Zmigrod, 2022, p. 11). In line with Taylor (2014), he argued that religion is not about self-enlightenment or experiencing transcendence, but about adhering to a rigid set of beliefs and following rules set by religious authorities. It is about defending beliefs against those who challenge them, advocating 'truth' over another 'truth', and dispersing beliefs to others.

The Wonder, a film directed by Sebastian Lelio released in 2022, and also based on Emma Donoghue's novel with the same title, *The Wonder*. Besides *The Wonder*, Sebastian Lelio also directed several successful films, especially *Disobedience* (2017) carries the same theme as *The Wonder*, which is about opposition to religious orthodoxy. Slightly different from *The Wonder*, *Disobedience* engages with the themes of the freedom to disobey and queer expression in unlikely places while resisting harmful tropes often attributed to queerness and devout religious communities (Martin, 2019, p. 61).

Set in 1862, *The Wonder* is a psychological period drama that follows an English nurse's immaculate investigation in the Irish countryside. Involving Lib Wright (Florence Pugh) as a nurse, sent to investigate a chosen girl, Anna O'Donnell (Kíla Lord Cassidy) who can survive for months without eating. Although based on a fictional novel, this film is actually rooted to the historical story, The Great Famine in Ireland in the nineteenth century. Ireland saw a rise in cases and deaths of young girls and women, known as 'fasting girls' who claimed to be able to go without eating for months by only subsisting on a God-like substance called manna (Jackson, 2022).

Moreover, besides clearly showing the miracles that the Church Catholics believes in, this film shows other Religious Dogma teachings. Among those Religious Dogma

teachings, there were authority pressure, dogmatic doctrine, single-minded point of view, child abuse, and patriarchal authorities.

Several previous studies were found as the basis for this research as the first was provoked by an article by Uwah (2015) entitled "Between traditional Christian theology and moral parables of African popular films: Communicating gospel values contextually". In this research, Uwah used several films as objects such as *Cry Freedom* (1987), *Act of Faith* (2008) and *Onyebuchim* (2010) in analyzing African cinematic representations that resonate with audiences contextually in a combination of fellowship and communication that questions critical faith statements and dogmatic doctrines.

The second was ignited from "Trends and Patterns of Muslims ' Depictions in Western Films. An Analysis of Literature Review" by Eijaz (2018). The focus of this research is to evaluate the resulting research in the twenty-first century on the trends and patterns of depiction of Muslims in fictional films and how it affects and is influenced by other domains as well. Moreover, the outline of this research is how films represent framing, stereotyping, and othering of the clash of Muslim civilizations.

The third, an article that conducted by Budiyaniti et al. (2020) entitled "Social communication relation of Madurese people in Max Weber rationality perspective". This research discusses the obedience activities of the Madurese community which have been hierarchically through daily communication activities. Examined through Max Weber's perspective, the results of this research show a structured hegemony from local authorities that influences the persistence of people's obedience through social communication.

The last ignition over the earlier research is "The "Irish" Female Servant in Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly* and Elaine Bergstrom's *Blood to Blood*" written by Downey's (2020). This article examines the character of the Irish female servants in neo-Victorian texts by American authors functioning as a complex signifier of the past and savagery, but also of progressive assimilation and modernization. Objected Valerie Martin's *Mary Reilly* and Elaine Bergstrom's *Blood to Blood*, the results of this research shows that religion and gender influence social behavior towards the Irish female servants.

From the four previous studies above, the dissimilarity with this research besides being supported by Max Weber's sociology of religion theory is this research also reviews the history of the Church Catholics in Ireland, specifically about its Religious Dogma

phenomenon. Thus, this research aims to reveal the Religious Dogma in Sebastián Lelio's *The Wonder* (2022) by focusing on examining the religious situation of Irish society in the nineteenth century.

Conferring about religious phenomenon within the scope of society, this research needs to be reviewed through the lens of sociology of literature study. Literature according to Swingewood is an attempt to recreate human relations with kinship, society, politics, religion, and others. He also argues that literature is an alternative aesthetic aspect to adapt and make changes in a society (Laurenson & Swingewood, 1974). Descriptive qualitative methods are also used to support this research analysis. According to Sugiyono (2013) that descriptive qualitative research is a research method based on the philosophy of postpositivism which is usually used to research in natural objective conditions where the researcher acts as a key instrument.

Bringing up that religion can initiate changes in society, this research also applies Max Weber's theory about the Sociology of Religion. Weber stated that religion is belief in something supernatural which eventually appears and influences the lives of existing community groups (Abdullah in Putra, 2020, p. 40). He also argued that religion is not merely an expression of humanity, but a force and action in itself that brings about change and development in society. Furthermore, he defined religion as an ethic of individualism and even believed religion to be a means of submission to authority that gave rise to Western capitalism (Rautalahti, 2018, p. 6).

Moreover, *The Wonder* film entirely is the research data, but specifically, the writer takes the socio-religious context, screenshots from several scenes, and film dialogues as the secondary data. So it can be said that data collection in this research used documentation and literature study techniques.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Based on history, in August 1845, Ireland suffered a crisis in agricultural production, chiefly a failure in potato cultivation. Kinealy (in Çelik, 2015, p. 15) then stated that this tribulation caused the Great Famine in not only Ireland but Europe in about five years, resulting in the loss of more than one million lives and the emigration of about two million people mostly to the United States. This calamity particularly benefited the Irish Church Catholics's existence in 1845. Contemporary critics acquiesced that the Church Catholics

played a central role in society and that the Clergy also wielded significant power over the political and social life they aided (Kinealy, 2002, p. 150).

Intolerance and single-minded point of view

The observance of the Irish Church Catholics in the nineteenth century was faithful but left backward, and staunchly opposed to secularism, as Jenkins (2003, p. 28) said that Catholicism was evidently the religion of the ignorant and fanatical. This is because the hierarchy of the Church Catholics envisaged disciplined religious constructions containing spaces in which priests could form an orderly and obedient congregation (Cara Delay, 2010, p. 15).



Figure 1. Housewife's response about The Nurse should be with The Nun
Source: *The Wonder* (2022), min. 04:10

One form of single-minded pov in *The Wonder* is that the Irish society in 1862 did not fully trust modern nurses in medical matters, they still relied on nuns who had the same duties. As in the data above, Lib Wright's presence is wary of the committee because she is an English nurse, which is a country whose populations are Protestant. The church's catholic authorities are concerned about this problem because they believed that nursing should be managed in pair with religious deeds (Breathnach, 2014, p. 172).

Therefore, observed through the historiography of women's mobility in the Church Catholics, there is a great need for the nun profession in nursing and teaching. However, O'Brien (2016, p. 398) supposes this profession inappropriately has received little recognition and accuses the Church Catholics of not affording social equality. Even up to the twentieth century the problem of professional modernization was still held up by the church authorities. As Jenkins (2003, p. 59) stated that Nuns demanded more rights, more freedom in choosing what kind of work they would be put to, and, most importantly, unquestioned obedience.

Child abuse

Child abuse occurs in a breadth of family and residence settings, both religious and secular (Pilgrim, 2012, p. 409). Furthermore, adults instill in children attitudes and stereotypes that reflect not only the relationships system in society and the group's status they belong to but also religious beliefs that can form prejudices (Ayrapetova, 2022, p. 107). According to Clemmons et al. (2007, p. 173), point out that the prevalence of sexual abuse, physical abuse, psychological maltreatment, neglect, and witnessing of family violence in a community as types of child abuse.



Figure 2. Meeting between The Committee and The Nurse
Source: *The Wonder* (2022), min. 06:22

In *The Wonder*, Anna O'Donnell is sacrificed herself to atone for her dead brother by fasting for months. This is a type of child abuse both physically and psychologically. Religious demands for fasting on young children make their minds restrained from other normal children's activities. As the data above shows how the local authorities ordered Lib Wright to supervise Anna by forbidding her to feed her because it was believed that Anna was accomplishing a sacred duty. According to Güvercin and Munir (2017, p. 329), fasting to death has been practiced for a long time by Roman Catholic and Orthodox Judaism. Even though The Religious Affairs Administration disapproves of these religious duty, there is still no intervention whatsoever to them.

Religious Dogma

Irish people are known for their strong adherence to Roman Catholicism. As Moran (in Roddy, 2013, p. 603) has argued that God has made the Irish, use the popular term, 'martyrdom', where millions of displaced children are found in new parishes and dioceses. They were formed as a faithful epicenter of the Church Catholics wherever they settled in the world. Moreover, Stern (2003, p. 175) argued that the Church Catholics had

opposed almost every moment of democratic and political liberalization in mid-nineteenth-century Europe on religious grounds.

Anna : "The souls in Purgatory have to be burned for a while, to clean them. But the souls in Hell have to be burned forever."

Lib : "Surely your brother's in Heaven, Anna?"

Anna : "We can't know that, Mrs. Lib."

Source: *The Wonder* (2022), min. 34:28 – 24:48

As the dialogues above, Anna O'Donnell sacrificed herself to fast for several months because she believed in the church's Catholic dogma of self-purification. Moss (2022) contended that the reason was ravaging, Anna was grieving her dead brother who gave her 'double love' (as a sister and a wife) through fasting and self-sacrifice, and she was wishing he could go to heaven by her purgatory instead of hell. Anna feels guilty that her brother got sick and died after they did the 'double love'.



Figure 3. Anna O'Donnell reconsidering her faith

Source: *The Wonder* (2022), min. 50:36

Gradually, Anna realized for tormenting herself with excessive fasting and giving herself to Religious Dogma. Sebastián Lelio's *The Wonder* metaphorically illustrates Anna's situation as a bird trapped and freed from its cage. Lib Wright offers Anna new life by leaving the village and her dogmatic beliefs then changing her name to Nan Cheshire.

CONCLUSION

From the discussions above, we can conclude that Religious Dogma in Sebastián Lelio's *The Wonder* (2022) is represented in several ways. *First*, The Great Famine in the nineteenth century had a major impact on the logical decline of the Church Catholics devotees so that they became intolerant and had a single-minded point of view. *Second*, the Local Committees do not have wise authority in handling Anna O'Donnell's case for

sacrificing herself by fasting to death whereas this was an act of child abuse. *Third*, the absurdity of religious dogmas closes the adherents' sanities, causing a small teenager like Anna to sacrifice her life.

Considering the results of this research, apart from Religious Dogmas, several similarities were found in the religious rituals of the church Catholic and Islam. So this inspired researchers to make a further plan to compare religious rituals between church Catholics and Islam in some literary works.

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