



Cultural and Religious Reversals in Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino*

Mark W. Roche and Vittorio Höfle

University of Notre Dame

Abstract

Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* is one of the most fascinating religious films of recent decades. Its portrayal of confession is highly ambiguous and multi-layered, as it both mocks confession and recognizes the enduring importance of its moral core. Equally complex is the film's imitation and reversal of the Christ story. The religious dimension is interwoven with a complex portrayal and evaluation of multicultural America that does not shy away from unveiling elements of moral ugliness in American history and the American spirit, even as it provides a redemptive image of American potential. The film reflects on the shallowness of a modern culture devoid of tradition and higher meaning without succumbing to an idealization of pre-modern culture. The film is also Eastwood's deepest and most effective criticism of the relentless logic of violence and so reverses a common conception of Eastwood's world-view.

Keywords

Gran Torino, Clint Eastwood, film and religion, confession, violence, self-sacrifice, Christ, American identity, multiculturalism, redemption

Clint Eastwood's standing as an actor and a director has received increasing attention in recent years, not only in popular books, but also in scholarly works. A sign of Eastwood's reputation is that both *Unforgiven* (1992), a revisionist Western, and *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), a film about a struggling female boxer and her moving relationship with her trainer, received Oscars for Best Director and Best Film as well as nominations for Best Actor. Although it received no Oscar nominations, Eastwood's film *Gran Torino* (2008) belongs in a discussion of Eastwood's greatest works. It was reviewed on the whole very favorably. Manohla Dargis of the *New York Times* wrote: "Clint Eastwood has slipped another film into theaters and shown everyone how it's done... the film moves

from comedy into drama and then tragedy and then into something completely unexpected.” Kenneth Turan of the *Los Angeles Times* commented: “It’s almost as if Clint Eastwood all at once finds himself in a different movie than either he, or us, really expected. But if the last few years have proved anything, it’s that anywhere Eastwood is, movie audiences are wise to follow.” Joe Morgenstern of the *Wall Street Journal* noted Eastwood’s “performance of a lifetime” and called the film “a meditation, as affecting as it is entertaining, on the limits of violence and the power of unchained empathy.” Marc Eliot summed up the film’s reception by noting that *Gran Torino* “received out-and-out rave reviews, among the best of his career” (330). Not surprisingly, *Gran Torino* is Eastwood’s highest grossing film to date.¹

More importantly, as we will show below, *Gran Torino* effectively interweaves a variety of substantive themes. In some ways, it can be said to transcend even his two most famous films. Whereas *Unforgiven* exhibits the absurdity of the Western ethos, *Gran Torino* takes the critique of violence to yet another level. *Million Dollar Baby* continues Eastwood’s fascination with the American spirit and intensifies his interest in religious and moral questions. But the intercultural dimension of *Gran Torino*, reinforced by screenwriter Nick Schenk, makes it Eastwood’s richest film about America, and the film’s sophisticated wrestling with confession makes it one of the more subtle religious films of the last several decades. Although religion has become a subject of increasing interest across disciplines, including the arts, the religious dimensions of Eastwood’s films, including *Gran Torino*, have barely been noticed.

¹) As of March 31, 2011, the domestic and foreign total gross for *Gran Torino* is just under \$270 million. Comparative box office figures are available at <<http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=grantorino.htm>>. One of the rare criticisms of *Gran Torino* stems from a recent essay by Tania Modleski, who offers two main arguments. First, works in which a woman mourns and then sacrifices herself tend to be mocked as melodramatic, whereas works in which a man does so, often in seeking to protect a woman, are heralded as great. While there may well be such biases in the context of reception (Sophocles’s *Antigone* would be an obvious exception), this reception context should have little say in our evaluation of the work as such. Second, those who praise the film often conflate Walt, the character Eastwood plays, and Eastwood the actor and director; in this way Walt’s self-sacrifice becomes a form of self-aggrandizement on the part of Eastwood. This, too, seems to rest on a category mistake, in this case a conflation of production and artwork aesthetics; either the self-sacrifice is internally justified or it is not.

A quick plot summary will remind readers of the essential points. The film opens with the funeral of Walt's wife, Dorothy. Walt Kowalski (Clint Eastwood), a retired autoworker, a bigot, and a staunch upholder of traditional American values, lives alone in a neighborhood that is now more Hmong than Polish-American. He is fiercely independent and wants nothing to do with his well-fed and spoiled suburban children or his new Hmong neighbors. The local priest, Father Janovich (Christopher Carley), had promised Dorothy that he would watch over Walt and get him to go to confession, but Walt rebuffs his advances. Almost by chance, Walt breaks up a gang's threats to the boy next door, Thao (Bee Vang), and also saves Sue (Ahney Ver), his sister, from some African-American thugs. Over time Walt develops a positive relationship with both of them, becoming in particular a mentor to Thao. But Thao continues to be threatened by the gang. Walt beats up the gang leader, but the gang retaliates with a drive-by shooting and a gang rape of Sue. Thao wants Walt to lead him in a counter-attack. Walt, in contrast, counsels calm. Walt prepares for a final altercation and, after having become more respectful of the priest, formally confesses to him. But Walt saves his most important confession for Thao, admitting that he shot an unarmed boy in Korea. Walt prevents Thao from leaving the house and encounters the gang by himself. Walt seemingly threatens to shoot and is gunned down. His self-sacrifice (he was unarmed) allows the police to arrest the gang, thus making possible a new life for Thao and Sue.

This essay is divided into three sections, each of which focuses on a particular aspect of the film's spiritual-religious dimension. In the first section, we consider the film's explication of two families and worlds, including the developing relationship between Walt and the Hmong family and the film's complex image of America. The second section analyzes the film's portrayal of religion, in particular of confession, including the film's mockery of confession as well as its recognition of the enduring importance of its moral core. In the third and final section, we address the film's integration and reversal of themes essential to Eastwood's oeuvre, particularly violence. While all three themes—intercultural America, religion, and violence—are organically interwoven, and so will appear in each section even as the focus shifts throughout the essay, the third section will try to bring the parts together in the most concerted way. Their organic interweaving in the film is one element that makes *Gran Torino* such an important work in Eastwood's canon and in its own right.

I Contrasting Cultures

If there is a dimension in which the United States do continues to remain a model for the world, it is that in no other country so many cultures live, more or less peacefully, together. Human cultures can differ extraordinarily from each other; at the same time they share some common traits, such as rituals in the face of birth and death. These represent universal needs, and an intelligent interculturalism builds on commonalities of this kind. The film opens by showing the similarities and differences between the cultures of Walt's Catholic-American family and the Vang Lor's Hmong family. Walt's family and guests return from the funeral of his wife; the Vang Lor family is celebrating a birth. The contrast symbolically represents the death of one kind of family and the birth of another, in terms of not only the local neighborhood but also the American population in general.

The suggestion is not just demographic. Walt's family is empty and materialistic. They have little sense of initiative: instead of actually getting chairs from downstairs for guests at the wake, one son simply offers to help, and the other later pauses, while driving away in his van, to express regret, wishing that he could have helped Walt jump-start a car. Talking during the church service, they have lost any sense of spirituality. No one in the family except Walt seems to mourn Dorothy. The granddaughter wears inappropriate clothing to the funeral and complains that the wake is a dead zone for her cell phone. They prefer to listen to the radio than to talk with one another, and they have no capacity to engage Walt in conversation. They are completely unable to read Walt, giving him gifts that befit a less independent or vigorous person. When Walt feels the desire to talk, to break his reticence and reveal his vulnerability (it is clear that after coughing up blood, he should enter the hospital for serious medical tests), his son is engaged in writing bills and asks Walt no questions. At the final funeral the brothers reveal no sense of remorse. The grandchildren, we discover, have no idea where Korea is. Walt, too, asks where Hmong is (as if it were a country) and thinks that the Hmong are jungle people; but at least he knows where Korea is. In fact, he fought in the Korean War and underwent life-transforming experiences there.

The Vang Lors are presented in analogous but different ways. In both families we see rituals, with the Christians at the church, the Hmong at home. While Walt's family speaks of retirement homes, the Vang Lor grandmother lives with her family and is part of the multigenerational

household. Walt has no common conversation with his granddaughter in the garage; in contrast, he later enjoys a meaningful conversation there with Thao. The grandchildren play with the medal in the opening sequences, whereas Thao and Walt have a much richer exchange with the medal later in the film: Walt adorns Thao with it, and an emotional Thao wears it proudly to the scene of Walt's death. The Hmong honor Walt and give him gifts that mean something to him: respect and food. They also request his help in areas where they recognize his knowledge and where he enjoys working. The Hmong shaman reads Walt perfectly, and both Sue and Thao express great concern about Walt's health. Fundamentally the Hmong neighbors become Walt's true family in the course of the movie; he is adopted by them, as he himself adopts Thao as his spiritual son. At the beginning, the reciprocal experience of diversity and hostility characterizes the relation between the two neighboring houses. Not the biological bond, however, but common values constitute a family; and it is the paradoxical greatness of the US, as depicted by Eastwood, that such common values may in the end be more readily found among people of very different cultural backgrounds.

As different as the Vang Lor family is, their hidden identity with Walt comes to the fore in their mirroring him. Misanthropic and prejudiced, like Walt, the grandmother, curses him; they speak about and against each other, though later she will nod to him, this being the most intelligible language they share. After the Hmong family experiences a drive-by shooting, Walt expresses his concern for the grandmother and, later still, there is some movement toward their speaking to each other. The early scene in which Walt spits toward her house and she spits much more fully in response is highly amusing. With Walt and like Walt, Sue is able to offer insults and to banter playfully. Like Thao, Walt is isolated, often silent, and not respected; the two develop a reciprocal emotional relationship. Walt's capacity for violence is also mirrored by the Hmong gang. Like Walt, the Hmong are independent; they live apart, not initially engaging their neighbors; like Walt, they are wary of involving the police. Just as Walt's family is broken, so are there broken aspects of the Hmong culture, most evident in the gang's brutality. In its depiction of the Hmong community, Eastwood's film completely avoids the temptation of idealizing the other culture—which is often simply an instrumentalization of the other for one's own purposes.

Central moments in the development of Walt's relationship with the Hmong family are his mentoring of Thao, through which Thao's opens

up new avenues for Walt. Pressured by the gang, Thao attempts to steal Walt's *Gran Torino*, but Walt discovers Thao and chases him away. Importantly, Walt later rescues Thao from the gang, a seemingly minor action that is magnified and reenacted more fully at the end of the film. Change comes slowly, however, since when the family thanks Walt, he repeats the brutal words he expresses to the gang: "Get off my lawn." Walt's sense of justice at this stage makes no distinction between perpetrators and victims. Defending his personal terrain takes precedence over relations with, and obligations toward, others; indeed, Walt's indiscriminate attitude toward others is in many ways a model of what C. B. MacPherson describes as "possessive individualism" (3): Walt defines himself by what he owns, and he elevates private property above all other values. The initial breaks arise when Walt discovers that Thao has some old-fashioned virtues, such as helping a woman with her groceries when three other boys had simply mocked her, and when Walt develops a relationship with Sue, who is a remarkable figure and a bridge between Walt and the Hmong.

Sue is worth some closer attention. She is the most intelligent person in the film, and she reads Walt a bit like the shaman does. She is unruffled by his early insults. Sue is superb at playing the language game, as is Walt or the barber, who together with Walt helps to teach Thao to speak like an American, and Sue needs no tutorial. She is quick-witted—she reciprocates Walt's slurs—and can toss insults not only at Walt, but at the Hmong gang and the African-American tough guys. Also, literally, she is the translator for her mother. Sue is the philosopher-sociologist of the film, noting that while the Hmong women go to college, the Hmong men go to jail. This is partially borne out when Walt later discovers that the new doctor at his clinic is an Asian woman. Sue has told Walt that Thao "doesn't know which direction to go in." She recognizes that the fatherless Thao needs a positive male role model and seeks out Walt, later thanking him for "kind of looking after him . . . He doesn't have any real role models in his life."² To work for Walt is to learn from and imitate him.

Sue moves easily within the two worlds of the film, her own Hmong world and the world of Walt and traditional America. She is able to initiate Walt into the Hmong family in such a way that he learns to appreciate and understand the family. She gets Walt to come to a party at her home because she appreciates and likes him, but also because she, who

²) Sociologists have recognized that the lack of positive male role models is the greatest predictor of young persons joining gangs. See Taylor, et al. and Wang.

feels responsible for her brother and is the only one in the family who can help him integrate into the new American world, wants to foster a relationship between Walt and Thao, ensuring that Walt eventually goes to the basement, where Thao is waiting. Walt's feeling more at ease with Sue and her culture is manifest when he, who at the beginning of the film had demanded that the priest address him as Mr. Kowalski, says to Youa, a young Hmong woman at the party who later befriends Thao, "I'm Walt." After some initial trust has been established, Sue and her mother can take the next step. They tell Walt that Thao must work off his crime. It is not enough to speak his apology; Thao must also atone for his misstep. This is one of the central ideas of the film; and it is fascinating that the Hmong make this point first, even if Walt will live it out, or, more precisely, die for it. Sue is also able to reflect on Hmong ways. She describes her father as overly strict and traditional, recognizing that he had limitations. When Walt responds, that he, too, is "old school," Sue responds, "Ya, but you're an American." This apodictic sentence is a key to the whole film: even though Walt is perceived as authoritarian by his children and grandchildren, Sue knows that his authoritarianism is of a different nature than that of her late father; she knows that as a woman she can flourish and unfold more easily with a man like Walt as a father figure. There are differences between the cultures: what is allowed in one culture may be taboo in another, and a sophisticated interculturalism respects such differences while also penetrating to the essential dimensions, the common rituals and moral values. Sue, who manages this differentiation process superbly, not only introduces these differences to Walt, she twice calls him "good," which he rejects, much as he did not want to be called "a hero." It is somehow easier for him to deal with being called "funny," even if this description seems strikingly at odds with most of what we know of Walt.

Thao is not virile enough for his own or Walt's culture. He is smart and likes to read, but he is withdrawn and does what his sister orders him to do, including "womanly" chores, such as washing the dishes and working in the garden. For doing so, he is scorned both by his cousin and by Walt. But Walt takes Thao under his wing, teaches him how "guys" act and talk, so that Thao becomes tougher and more American, and learns how to fit in. Walt teaches him skills in construction and helps him get a job. He also helps him develop a relationship with Youa and inspires him with moving lines about his wife, which are all the more palatable and moving for being surrounded by his otherwise sarcastic comments. In the end Walt also gives Thao his car. He thus helps Thao obtain the three things—as

discussed in the barbershop scene—he had previously been without: a job, a girl, and a car. Walt also encourages Thao to go to school and so gives him confidence in himself.

Walt's strategies are interesting. When Thao arrives, Walt tells him to count birds. This indicates Walt's negative view of a penance that is imposed from outside and does not come from an inner urge to compensate for damage done. But it is also an indirect exhortation to Thao to figure out for himself what he is supposed to do. Thao must to some extent find his own way. This is something Walt's sons never learned, as evidenced by their passivity at the wake. Eventually, Thao's penance for Walt becomes an act of community building. Walt directs him to fix the houses in the neighborhood. There is an appropriate asymmetry between Walt the teacher and Thao the student, which is evident in the garden scene, where we see low angle shots of Walt, underscoring his importance as mentor, and high angle shots of Thao, emphasizing his role as learner. But the relationship becomes increasingly symmetrical over time, as when Thao advises Walt to quit smoking. A wonderful turning point is the scene on the stairs. During the wake, Walt carried chairs up the stairs by himself, but here Thao assists Walt in carrying the freezer up the stairs, insisting, against Walt's initial objections, that Thao take the heavier end. For the first time, Thao even speaks like Walt: "You listen, old man." Walt is silently impressed with this advance, and with Thao on top, the hierarchal relationship moves toward symmetry. Symmetry is also present in the scene where Walt confesses to Thao, who has by then become something of a trusted equal. Thao's earlier confession and atonement set a model for, and inspire, Walt, who learns through Thao a deeper concept of confession and atonement.

The American flag is prominently displayed on Walt's front porch and the flag also graces his coffin. But the image of the American flag is not restricted to Walt. The flag appears in the film almost as a leitmotif. We see it again and again in the context of Walt looking at the Hmong, though it also surfaces in the context of the Hmong looking at Walt, or in the case of the gang, their eyeing his *Gran Torino*. The future of America lies in how these people forge bonds among one another, how a new synthetic culture develops from the interactions between the various ethnic groups with their different, but not incompatible, perhaps even complementary, values. In one of the scenes where the flag is prominent, Sue rebuffs Walt's fear that the Hmong eat dogs and calls him "moron," implicitly suggesting that true Americans do not harbor such prejudices against immigrants. But the flag is also present in the context of the conversations between Walt and

the priest, on the porch and in the bar. The national narrative is interlaced with a religious narrative. The priest's line, "We're not in Korea," is meaningful in a primary way that we will see below, but it has the secondary and ironic meaning, given the presence of Asians in the film, that East Asia has come to the United States.

The film is sometimes elegiac, in invoking the past, as in the two funerals that frame it. It is often satiric, in showing the inadequacies of the present. But it is not paralyzed by memories of a more harmonious past of middle class bliss in a less multi-ethnic America or bitter in its criticism of the shortcomings of the present. In the last image Thao drives the Gran Torino he has inherited from his mentor, hopefully toward a bright future no longer jeopardized by the stupid violence of traditional American machos and heedless Asian brutes. The film suggests that what is valuable in America can continue only if the cultures of the European immigrants are enriched by pre-modern cultures, which are guided above all by tradition. Immigration can rejuvenate America, widening its vision, but only if the old citizens interact with those other cultures and learn to understand and appreciate them and if the immigrants are willing to accept basic American principles, such as the rule of law and the dignity of labor. Eastwood remains committed to these principles, but he recognizes that a society based on them alone will be shallow and lack meaning, as evidenced by Walt's children and grandchildren. Both in their empathy for Walt while he lives and in their honoring him at the funeral in their beautiful traditional dress, the Vang Lors are more moved by Walt than is his own family.

There is among the Hmong a level of sharing with, and a seriousness about, obligations to others, which contrasts with the petty selfishness of Walt's family. When Thao thanks Walt in the hardware store, telling him how much he appreciates his help, Walt offers a generous but ritualistic and gratuitous, "Forget it." Thao, however, responds, "No." He will not forget it, but thanks Walt again, and they shake hands. If we try to translate the complex moral message of the film into the language of political philosophy, we can connect the film with political debates in this country about which Eastwood cares. We can thereby suggest that Eastwood is proposing a powerful synthesis of liberalism and communitarianism. He knows that traditional societies are often oppressive; their value systems include gratuitous violence, exploitation, and anti-intellectualism. The promise of America stands against these pre-modern habits in which many members of these cultures take enormous pride. But a society based only on law,

work, and exchange is a soulless society, in which people easily become banal and even mean-spirited. Concrete care for one's neighbor must be added, even if she appears entirely foreign. Insofar as religion maintains an awareness of a dimension that transcends law, Walt and Eastwood the director acknowledge its irreplaceable importance.

II Mockery and Embrace of Religion

In an early scene, the priest seeks Walt's confession. Walt, who despises him for, among other things, being a virgin, responds with a performative contradiction: "I confess not wanting to confess to a boy that's just out of the seminary." Performative contradictions tend to cancel themselves, and so it will be in the course of the film that Walt moves toward a confession. But in fact there are two confessions that Walt makes, one to the priest and one to Thao, and the splitting of the expected confession into two different acts is on Walt's part both a mockery and a recognition of the value of confession.

The consciousness of guilt requires the recognition that I am individually responsible for my actions and that my misdeeds were committed against other persons who have dignity. As such, the progression toward confession can be a formation process that emerges in tandem with, and is partly triggered by, respect for, and integration into, another community. Racism and bigotry seem to suggest that our actions are determined by our backgrounds and that persons of other groups do not have value or at least the same value that I do. That cannot lead to a sense of guilt. Walt shields himself from the truth about himself and projects onto all Asians a hatred that justifies his actions during the Korean War. If the victim of a crime does not have fully human value, then the act seems less wrong. Walt's animosity is compensation for his own feelings of guilt. As Tacitus writes in the *Agricola* (42.3), it is characteristic of the human mind to hate the person one has harmed, and this hatred can easily be extended to collectives. When the chickens are decapitated in the ceremony next door, Walt says to himself, "Damn barbarians." It is paradoxical at best that Walt should himself, given his actions, use such a term, but it is reminiscent of Lieutenant Colonel Bill Kilgore's speaking of the "savages" in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), while it is he who is bombing innocent civilians.

In recognizing that his Asian neighbors have dignity, Walt grows. Walt begins the film a very unhappy man: not just unhappy that his wife has died, but unhappy with himself, not at all at peace, common elements in

the analyses of the priest and the shaman. The parallelism between these two figures sheds light on various features. First, it points to the fact that religions, in various forms, belong to the essence of human culture. Second, it recognizes that there is a plurality of legitimate forms of religion. Even if it is astonishing that a man raised a Protestant should show such a subtle understanding of the nature of confession as Eastwood does in this work, Catholicism is not at all portrayed as the only carrier of truth; in fact, while the priest has comic traits and matures only slowly through the course of the film, the shaman immediately strikes Walt as well as the viewer as a man of great sagacity, wisdom, and goodness. Still, it is his own tradition with which Walt must reconcile: even if being X-rayed by the shaman accelerates his moral growth, it is the Catholic priest to whom he confesses, thus complying with his wife's wish. The confession, however, evades the deed that most haunts Walt's conscience.

The relationship with the priest develops over time. The priest gains Walt's grudging admiration via his persistence and his occasional acumen, telling Walt, for example, that Walt knows more about death than about life and that he himself knows about forgiveness. The priest also says things that Walt grasps only over time, for example, that it would be good for Walt "to unload some of that burden" from his past or that one needs to work with the police. When the priest shows sympathy for the Vang Lors, expresses his frustrations, and drinks a beer together with Walt, Walt honors him with a confession. Interestingly, Walt chastises the priest for not having experience but is himself full of biases; although Walt is older and more experienced, he needs the kind of experiences that will allow him to shelve some of his prejudices. As the film makes clear, not all experiences open us up to truth.

Gran Torino provides the viewer with three models of confession. The first is dominated by ritual. The priest's first homily, at Dorothy's funeral, is full of clichés, but clichés become clichés because they contain at least kernels of truth. Both families have rituals for birth and death; both cultures recognize the value of marking rites of passage and honoring those rites with special rituals and clothing. These rituals help persons work through crises and serve to bind a community. Both cultures have persons who are specialists in guilt and penance, atonement and forgiveness. Nevertheless, ritual is partly mocked in the film. As the grandson enters his pew at the funeral, he offers the sign of the cross with "spectacles, testicles, wallet, and watch." The granddaughter offers the sign of the cross with her left hand. The priest wants Walt to confess without really asking if Walt has the inner

desire to do so. Confession is meaningless when it is externally driven. Similarly, the birthday event for Walt is a kind of empty ritual. The family brings meaningless presents, and Walt kicks them out of the house.

When Walt finally goes to confess, to the utter amazement of the priest, who rightly deduces that Walt is planning to do something exceptional, Walt mentions three sins: in 1968 he kissed another woman; at one point he made \$900 in profit, which he did not declare (he calls this tax evasion “stealing,” thus linking himself to the guilt that Thao had incurred); and he was never close to his two sons. Of the three sins named, each is triggered by self-interest or individualism: the first violates the wife, the second the larger community or the state, and the third the children. The film recognizes as sins not only active misdeeds but also neglect. One of Walt’s other sins of omission early in the film is his failure to adapt to new circumstances and to engage and recognize his neighbors. Still, the priest listens impatiently, waiting for the great sin that is burdening Walt. But Walt does not mention it, obviously because he does not believe that a formal absolution would help him to eradicate his guilt. He must do more than fulfill the mechanical injunctions of the church. It is clear that he confesses far more for his wife’s sake than because he himself believes in the sacrament of reconciliation. When the priest forgives Walt and assigns him ten Hail Marys and five Our Fathers, we never see Walt recite them. But in his final moment, he dies with one of the Hail Marys on his lips, thus only partially fulfilling the priest’s requirement, but with the consciousness that he has done far more than could have been asked of him even if he had confessed his most heinous deed.

A second model of confession places less weight on formal ritual and more on a subjective outpouring of personal feelings. This is a typical modern American idea; one pretends to have an easy familiarity with the other and unburdens oneself almost indiscriminately, sputtering one’s innermost thoughts, without much recognition of context or community or decorum. The granddaughter’s asking Walt for his car after he is dead (“So, what are you going to do with it when, like, you die?”), the son’s asking Walt about football tickets, after rebuffing the suspicion that he was calling for a favor, and the priest’s overly intimate familiarity with “Walt” are all part of this ethos of familiarity. This is far removed from Walt’s distancing himself from others, his isolation, his refusal to seek or accept help, a trait that he has inherited from the lonely cowboy of the Western. The distance to the priest is necessary to keep at bay the false narcissism and cheap absolution of confession.

The moment of truth in this model is that confession should not be simply an external exercise or objective ritual; it needs to come from within, and it must be addressed to a person with whom there is a meaningful bond. Mouthing words is not enough; there must be an inner transformation. In one crucial scene Walt says to the priest, “The thing that haunts a man the most is what he isn’t ordered to do.” Walt is reacting to the priest’s remark that in war people kill because they are ordered to do so; and if the priest were more experienced with the nature of war, i.e., death and killing (a field where he recognizes Walt’s superiority), he would quickly grasp that Walt is alluding to the fact that the killing that torments him was not ordered by anybody. During his formal confession, Walt may believe that he has already mentioned his most serious crime, even if the priest did not understand what he was talking about. However, the remark somehow evokes the further idea that Walt cannot be ordered to confess this act. To be meaningful, confession must be voluntary, much as guilt must be freely recognized. What haunts Walt is both his shooting without command and his knowing that a confession, given simply on command, has no meaning, and yet he cannot will himself to go on his own.

The third model of confession integrates the initial two, acknowledging the value of ritual and recognizing that confession must be spoken from within. This third model combines the collective or ritualistic and the individual or voluntary. In elevating intersubjectivity over objectivity and subjectivity, the third model places considerable emphasis on symmetry and depth of understanding: one best confesses to a person one respects, to someone who is capable of understanding the sin and forgiving the sinner. Thao’s empathy and equality are manifest in his genuine interest in Walt and in their gradual movement toward symmetry. In addition, Thao wants to kill, and so he understands the mentality that triggered Walt’s sin. Thao’s hatred makes him paradoxically qualified for empathy; he has deeper experience. Also Thao is for Walt a partial substitute for the boy he killed, “some scared little gook, just like you.” This is a reversal of the earlier projection: instead of denying something in himself and seeing it in others (barbarism, for example), he now sees what had been hidden not only in himself and his victim but also in another person he initially rejected: human dignity. The importance of this second confession is punctuated by Walt’s using the word “soul” in his comments to Thao, a word we have heard otherwise only in a Hmong context.

Confession receives its fulfillment not simply in speaking, unburdening one’s inner sense of guilt and remorse to another in an intersubjective con-

text, but also in penance. This is its ultimate intersubjective meaning. One not only regrets one's actions; one also seeks recompense by working away one's sins. Confession is the act of recognizing one's subjective weaknesses and errors by revealing them to another person, and it is in this way both a cognitive act of recognition and a transformative act of reentering the intersubjective and communal arena. Sin is removed not simply by prayer and confession but also by good works. Walt's role is to "fix things," as he says to Youa. This phrase has literal meaning, but Walt also fixes things in terms of making amends. We see reparation via good works in Thao's work for Walt and the community and in Walt's final self-sacrifice. Despite his distance from the church, Walt accepts this model of forgiveness; his penance is his death, which atones for his guilt. Walt atones, unlike Christ, not for the sins of others, but for his own sins, but like Christ, he acts self-sacrificially in order to free others.

Similarities between the priest and Thao are abundant. First, they are each seen reading a book, Thao when he is walking beside the gangs that threaten him, and the priest walking in the safety of the Church. Each pursues an intellectual path. Second, the priest hears Walt's confession behind the lattice of the traditional confessional. The scene of Thao reading is partly filmed through the lattice of a wire fence, and Walt's confession to Thao is filmed through the lattice of the door to the basement. Third, both confession scenes are shown in the dark. The only other truly dark scene, and the final one, is of Thao at the reading of the will. This underscores his proximity to Walt, and the subsequent light, his having been freed by Walt.

Finally, the priest and Thao are both surrogate sons to Walt. That Thao is Walt's surrogate son is obvious, but the priest is also a son. Walt calls the priest "Sonny" early on, and the ironic epitaph carries a deeper meaning. Also, when the priest expresses empathy, anger, and frustration in Walt's home, and Walt invites him to call him by his first name, their relationship, which is in some ways also a mentoring relationship, develops further and culminates in the priest's public confession at the funeral: "I knew really nothing about life or death until I got to know Walt. And boy, did I learn." The priest's acknowledgment of having learned from Walt restores a level of symmetry to their relationship; where earlier the priest had been arrogant, here he recognizes Walt's superiority. And it is paradoxically this recognition that allows him to give now a much better funeral sermon than at the beginning. In addition, just as Walt gives his Gran Torino to Thao, he gives his house to the church, represented by the priest. Walt comes to recognize the importance of the church and comes to appreciate the priest

more and more. He wills his house to the church, “because Dorothy would have liked it.” The act pays homage to his wife, but also to the priest, and that Walt hides his recognition of the church behind his love for his wife is both moving and subtle.

Much as the confession and the legacy of the house is an embrace of the church and a distancing from it, so is Walt’s self-sacrifice. Walt is a Christ figure. The film opens with him, at his wife’s funeral, standing erect beside the coffin. This opening represents the vertical axis of the cross, which speaks of the individual’s private relationship to God. At his own funeral he lies horizontal; the horizontal axis represents community, and it can be present only later in the film, as his death is the result of his sacrifice for the community. Combined, the two images equal a cross. In one of the more moving scenes in the film, when Thao is building community and a young Hmong girl comes to ask Walt if Thao can also remove the wasps in the neighborhood, we see in the background the subtle representation of a cross. At his death Walt’s arms are outstretched like Christ’s, and blood is on his hands. In addition and more conventionally, Walt’s coffin is placed before a crucifix.

As his death approaches, Walt begins the Hail Mary, which asks Mary to “pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.” It is a partial and continuing embrace of religion, a recognition of his status as a sinner, and an acknowledgment of his imminent death. We have already seen that in this belated fulfillment of only a small part of the priestly injunctions, there is a mockery of ecclesiastic rules; but since the mockery is part of the most intense imitation of Christ, it is at the same time an apotheosis of Christianity. Still, there is a peculiar inversion of the basic Christian story. In one of the greatest works of American literature, Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd, Sailor*, a formal repetition of the Christian story is enacted, insofar as Captain Vere, a father figure, sacrifices the innocent Billy Budd, a pagan equivalent of Christ’s purity, in order to maintain social order. But in *Gran Torino*, it is not the father who sacrifices the son—it is the father who sacrifices himself in order to save the son from the violence of the gang. True enough, Walt has earlier killed a young man, who could have been his son; and it may well be that his lack of relation with his own sons was a psychological consequence of this deed. But this sacrifice of the son is not celebrated; it is the quintessential sin that has to be atoned. Since the Enlightenment, the idea that God may sacrifice his own Son in atonement of other people’s sins has been regarded by some interpreters as morally absurd, if not repulsive, for the killing of an innocent person hardly seems

right, and vicarious satisfaction seems in contradiction with individual responsibility. Eastwood seems to share this Enlightenment view, but he manages to preserve the Christian idea of redeeming self-sacrifice by challenging and inverting the basic Christian story.

Twice the connection to Christ is pre-figured in ambiguous ways. During the priest's initial homily, Walt says "Jesus," obviously discontent with the priest's platitudes. Walt is longing for a greater representative of God. It is a curse, but with a deeper meaning and an element of foreshadowing. After Walt gives his confession, and the priest senses that Walt has held back and is planning to retaliate, Walt says that he is at peace. The priest, apprehensive of violence, responds, "Jesus Christ." In retrospect, the line is unintentionally deep, a hidden allusion to the truth. Until the very end, the priest anticipates that Walt will go to the gang's house to kill them, not to sacrifice himself. The deeper meaning of the curse, then, is that Walt will act as Christ, sacrificing himself. When the priest discovers what Walt has done, his face expresses amazement. He is moved because he did not anticipate Walt's heroic action. Walt more profoundly lives the imitation of Christ than the priest who claims to be Christ's deputy.

Eastwood stopped attending church when he was a young adolescent (Schickel 36); his biographers devote few pages to the topic of religion, and very few analyze Eastwood's films in the light of religious themes. What, then, justifies such a strongly religious reading of the film? First, Eastwood recognizes the social significance of religion. Although Eastwood's personal religious sensibilities and sense of reverence seem more directed to nature than to organized religion (Schickel 36; McGilligan 29), he is not, like many who are removed from the church, personally critical of the religious sensibilities of others; on the contrary, he notes: "I was always respectful of people who were deeply religious because I always felt that if they gave themselves to it, then it had to be important to them" (Palmer). Not surprisingly, then, his films are not without positive integration of religion. One thinks, for example, of the conclusion of Eastwood's Capraesque comedy about a struggling Wild West Show, *Bronco Billy* (1980), when Billy (Clint Eastwood) tells the children in his audience always to say their prayers at night; or Eastwood's portrayal of an inspiring and morally courageous minister (John Malkovich) in *Changeling* (2008), a film about police misconduct and political corruption in depression-era Los Angeles, and the film that immediately precedes *Gran Torino*. In portraying religious figures, positive and negative, Eastwood is trying to capture part of America.

In the years leading up to *Gran Torino*, Eastwood increasingly integrates Christian characters and imagery; the fascination is unmistakable. *Mystic River* (2003) explores Catholic families in Boston and works with Christian iconography. In one of the film's final scenes, the camera lingers on a large cross tattooed on the back of Jimmy Markum (Sean Penn), which contrasts with the character's non-Christian values: in this scene Jimmy informs his wife that he has murdered the wrong man, a former childhood friend, whom Jimmy had falsely suspected of murdering his daughter; Jimmy's wife, Annabeth (Laura Linney), responds without remorse that she admires Jimmy for having the strength to do "what he had to for those he loved." The Catholic hero in *Million Dollar Baby*, Frankie Dunn (Clint Eastwood), prays by his bedside at night and attends Mass almost every day for decades but struggles with his Catholicism, constantly interrogating a Catholic priest (Brian F. O'Byrne) about theological puzzles such as the trinity. *Gran Torino* is itself the most explicit of Eastwood's films in wrestling with Catholic themes, and any interpretation that overlooks these themes offers a truncated reading.

Second, Eastwood recognizes the moral validity of religion. As Eastwood's own philosophy moves beyond mere individualism, he recognizes religion for its role in embedding persons within a meaningful collective, one informed by moral obligations. There is in Eastwood's filmography an increasing interest in the broader themes that the Western tradition has tended to grasp with religious categories: the forging of community, the cost of vengeance, the idea of a moral imperative, the willingness to sacrifice, the desire for atonement and forgiveness, and the possibility of reconciliation.

Finally, despite his recognition of the social and moral significance of religion, Eastwood is himself never conventionally religious, so even as we argue for a religious reading, we recognize that the film offers, not surprisingly, a distinctive take on Christianity and on religion in general. As our discussion of *Gran Torino* and other examples illustrate, Eastwood hardly endorses traditional religion; instead, he rethinks its ideals and practices as well as the frequent tension between the two. He interweaves his own perspectives, asks probing questions, and brings forward unconventional views, so any religious reading of his films needs to account for his divergences, which might be expected in the light of his personal distance from religion. Indeed, his very distance, combined with interest and respect, makes his films especially interesting from a religious perspective and may also have motivated his integration of other religious traditions. One may be even more religious if one uses the moral core of religiosity to reach out

to other religions (Walt, for example, never tries to convert Thao). The link between interculturalism and religion is partly manifest in Walt's return to religion through his recognition of the dignity of the Vang Lor family and eventually his *imitatio Christi* on behalf of a person of another race and culture. It is a universalist gesture, which is reinforced by the film's positive portrayal of Hmong spirituality.

The film itself is primarily Christian, as Walt has lived within a Christian universe, but one aspect of Eastwood's profound religiosity, even as it distances him from a more narrow Christianity, is his interest in other religions. In the passage where the Hmong ask Thao to eliminate wasps, one may recognize an allusion to the Avestan praise bestowed on the elimination of harmful animals.³ Further, the very name Thao may well be an allusion to Taoism, one of the prominent religions of East Asia and one whose highest values—compassion, moderation, humility, and peace—are all evident in Walt's final "Christian" act. In the *Tao Te Ching* we read, for example: "Through selfless action, he attains fulfillment" (9). "The still is the master of unrest" (28). "Weapons are instruments of fear; they are not a wise man's tools" (33). "Tao abides in non-action, / Yet nothing is left undone" (39). "Stillness and tranquillity set things in order in the universe" (47). In Taoism *Tē*, or virtue, is what keeps the universe balanced and ordered; it implies power, but a power through means other than violence. Taoism elevates the overcoming of prejudice and recognizes a destiny or true path. The combined integration of, and distancing from, Christianity makes possible a broader recognition of moments of true insight in other cultural traditions, ones not frequently associated with America or an image of America.

The evocation of alternative spiritual traditions is even captured in the reading of the horoscope, which suggests that there will be a choice between two life paths and that second chances are possible. Here, too, there is simultaneous mockery and embrace. While Walt makes fun of the horoscope, of Hmong animism and ritual, and of the name Thao, calling him "Toad," we see a hidden wisdom in these traditions, an openness to various avenues of spirituality and higher meaning. The embrace of the other culture is not sentimental (it is partly colored by sarcasm), and it is

³) Underscoring the film's outreach to other religious traditions, a traditional religious element in Zoroastrianism involves killing noxious animals (Khrafstras), such as snakes and scorpions, in order to atone for sins. Cf. James Darmesteter's "Introduction" to the *Zend-Avesta*, I.lxxi.

not complete (the film is clear in saying that we should be ourselves—the final song contains the prominent lines, “standing strong, do you belong in your skin?”). Being true to one’s own is also evident in Walt’s critique of the white boy who mimics the language of African-Americans (“Bro’”). Walt recognizes that it is inappropriate and that the African-Americans do not like it. The film suggests that integration in a multicultural world does not mean eliminating who you are or who other people are in their difference.

III Ironies and Reversals

A popular view casts Eastwood as a proponent of violence, first, in his Westerns and, second, in his police dramas. John Tibbetts notes: “Eastwood is best known—and in many cases critically reviled—for the graphic violence of his pictures” (11). The Western is dominated by violence, manifest in the endeavor to gain land and security by force, but also in the common motif of revenge (Lusted 167–73). For John Cawelti the Western involves a conflict of good and evil in a narrative pattern that “works out and resolves the tension between a strong need for aggression and a sense of ambiguity and guilt about violence” (14). Eastwood, of all American directors, it has been argued, “is the one who’s delved the deepest into the question of violence” (Jones 48). The Western does indeed have a modern variant in police dramas, which reenact some of the ambiguities of violence; as Harry Callahan in *Dirty Harry* (1971) suspects a bank robbery across the street, he waits for “the cavalry.” Even more important than the linguistic allusion is the integration of Western motifs: the strong threat to society, the lonely and individualistic hero, the mirroring tendencies of hero and villain, and the temptation in combating violence to move beyond the rule of law.

Pauline Kael once called Eastwood “the *reductio ad absurdum* of macho today” (McGilligan 366), and the most notorious comment ever published on Eastwood was Kael’s description of *Dirty Harry* as a “fascist” film (387 and 388). The film does share with fascism and the classic Western a fascination with violence. Whereas the Western wrestles with a justification for violence, in the Eastwood canon we also recognize gratuitous moments of violence, such as the rape that occurs early in the first Western he directed, *High Plains Drifter* (1973). Such scenes represent a shift from the classic Western, in which the hero acts always in self-defense (shooting only after

the other person has moved first) or in defense of an innocent third party. The classic Western differs radically from fascist violence for two reasons. First, fascist violence is inherently unjust, directed toward innocent persons and gratuitous. Second, the Western, both its classic and modern variants, arises within an American culture, and thus its violence is not collective, as in fascism, but individualistic. The contrast between the lonely Western hero and the member of the collective who wants to delegate his concrete responsibility to a figure above him could hardly be more striking. Indeed, Eastwood's characters, rarely with any kind of sidekick, have tended to be even more alone than the usual Western hero (Loy 121).

Beyond this distinction, we see in Eastwood an increasing sense of the perverse logic of violence, even violence in response to the aggression of others, and in this respect *Gran Torino* is remarkable in its integration of central Eastwood themes and its reversal of those themes. *Gran Torino* contains the interesting line on the part of Walt: "I finish things." This has two meanings. It suggests that Walt will take the action to its ultimate conclusion and not back off. It is also a self-reflective reference to this film as a kind of final film, a farewell to the genre of violence, and likely Eastwood's final film appearance (Jamieson). Very important are the respective roles of the hero and the police. In the Western, there are few, if any, police (in the form of the sheriff). Power, both for vengeance and justice, is in the hands of the individual villains and heroes. With the building of the constitutional state based on the rule of law and democratization, we see movement into the age of men, where heroism seems no longer to be necessary: just institutions guarantee stability.⁴

But two problems remain: modernity sees increasing moments of isolated violence that often do not serve rational self-interest, as in gangs and terrorism, and it develops a lethargy, as in Walt's family, that lacks any moral vision. The resurgence of violence in modernity—and the emptiness and lack of spiritual meaning at its core—result in a renewed need for heroes. Honor and heroism are a response to both the isolated violence that could not be eradicated in the age of reason and the lack of recognition that greatness still exists and may still be needed. Not surprisingly, Walt responds to both, being a figure of both power and self-sacrifice. He has abandoned the revenge culture of the West but retained its capacity for

⁴ Roche and Hösle spell out the ways in which John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, and to some extent the Western in general, can be interpreted in the light of Vico's concept of the transition from the age of heroes to the age of men.

heroism. His critique of the gang as “miniature cowboys” is telling. The worst criminals think they are cowboys, but they lack the most important trait, which is not violence, but honor.⁵

Initially, Walt continues to act like an individualistic hero. Walt mocks the first visit of the priest and the priest’s admonition that he should have called the police (“I prayed that they would show up, but nobody answered”). Walt still lives within a mentality where the heroic individual solves problems; this nicely matches his ideology of isolation and independence: “In Korea, when a swarm of screaming gooks came across our line, we didn’t call the police. We reacted.” The priest tells Walt that this is not Korea; therefore, he needs to act differently, to call upon the police. Military life has aspects of the frontier mentality, including the need for courage, the willingness to sacrifice, and the temptation to use violence beyond a reasonable measure. Walt still lives that model. The priest cautions him, and Walt recalls his past, almost confessing, and the act of almost confessing betrays a growing need to confess, but Walt still dismisses the priest (“Hallafuckinglulia”) and goes his own way, beating up and threatening one of the Hmong gang members.

But the gang retaliates. There is no end to the escalation of violence. Walt himself realizes that the shooting attack on the house and the rape of Sue are partly the result of his having entered into a counter-productive cycle of violence, which is more characteristic of the pre-modern era. Walt is completely moved by Sue’s arrival, partly because of her suffering, partly because he knows that he helped to cause her rape. He returns home to break the glass in his cabinets. He still responds with violence, but the recognition grows on him that his violence only exacerbated the problem. He acts violently as a release, but he limits his violence toward persons by directing it against objects. In a fascinating reversal, where earlier, after Thao was beaten up on the way home from work, and Thao counseled Walt not to do anything, and Walt responded by roughing up the gang leader, here Thao insists on revenge and action (“Thinking time is over”), and Walt counsels patience. Walt searches for a plan that will protect Thao from bloodying his hands or being killed, end the cycle of violence, and reintegrate the police. He recognizes that the priest was right; Walt’s actions in the end do lead to the intervention of the police. His movement toward community is symbolized by the number of faces who watch the

⁵ On the concept of honor in the Western, see, for example, the classic essay by Warshaw, esp. 110–11.

final encounter and who, unlike in the Western or in the previous silence on the part of the Hmong, bear witness, just as Walt became, in a different sense of the word, a witness to Christ.

In modernity one needs the police to protect society and ensure stability, but the police must leave the scene of the possible crime; they cannot be everywhere at once. The police are indispensable, but it is superficial to think that their presence in society renders heroic behavior superfluous. One cannot rely solely on them; one still needs the heroic action of individuals. Two worlds that collided in the late Western come together in the film's self-sacrifice: the singular act of the heroic individual and the police as the force of security in the modern world. One of several ways in which this film mirrors John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), is that it shows a time of transition, when both cultures are still present: in the case of *Gran Torino* the old America that is still bigoted and exclusive and the new America that is multicultural and diverse; an old America that still needs heroes and a new America that is seeking through institutional strategies to ensure peace and order. As in *Liberty Valance*, the figure who moves most easily between worlds is a woman. Thao and Walt struggle far more than Sue, much as Tom Doniphon (John Wayne), destined to become a figure of the past, and Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart), who represents the promise of the future, were unable to straddle the two worlds in *Liberty Valance*. Only Hallie (Vera Miles) could live in both worlds, even if her capacity and insight increase her tragedy. When Thao comes to discover what happened, it is very important that he speaks with a Hmong policeman—in Hmong. We had heard that language spoken earlier, but at the margin of American society and statehood; now we see it integrated into the public police force. This suggests that there are indeed paths for Hmong males in which a rational, legally and morally legitimate use of violence replaces and breaks the violence of gangs. Also, an African-American policeman is shown. The police play an important role not only in protecting modern society; they are one of the leading institutions for integrating the various cultures of America, and Eastwood's films have consistently ensured that this dimension is visible to viewers.

The film is remarkable in its portrayal of Walt's dismissive attitude, racism, and language. On the level of social commentary, Walt's moral ugliness makes evident the extent of the challenges facing America, offering a realistic sense of where we are as a nation. The language underscores how unappealing Walt is in his prejudice. Despite the idealism of the ending, Eastwood does not offer an unrealistic or overly patriotic America. Also

impressive is that the multiculturalism is not naive. Sue is able to criticize the oppressive aspects of Hmong culture, and we see gangs among the Hmong, Mexican, and African-American communities. Multiculturalism is fraught with problems, potentially self-destructive in its conflicts between and among cultures, if no common ground is recognized.

On the religious level, Walt's behavior underscores the claim that the most morally ugly figures can be redeemed. This is also the meaning behind the tension between Walt's bigotry and his sacrifice. Even the most wretched individual, ugly in word and ugly in deed, is capable of reaching redemption. It is an important and innovative Christian argument that the lowliest man is capable of tragedy (Auerbach). Eastwood's image of America draws on two seemingly contradictory but interrelated moments, both of which have religious analogues: an emphasis on the distinctive individual, who is often weighted down by the past, by human weakness and sin; and an embrace of the collective, which is also an evocation of optimism, idealism, and the possibility of redemption for all. These two dominant motifs are intertwined in one of Eastwood's most explicit films about America, *Bronco Billy*. Eastwood plays Bronco Billy, an ex-convict, raised in the urban East, who pursues his eccentric dream of life as a cowboy entertainer and does so with indefatigable spirit as part of a larger community that he has formed out of outcasts; the final scene is filmed in a large tent stitched together entirely of American flags, made by the residents of an insane asylum, for whom Billy and his traveling circus have done pro bono performances. In *Gran Torino*, Eastwood similarly interweaves these elements—which could be associated, in turn, with Protestant individualism and an emphasis on human depravity and Catholic views of the collective and of possible universal redemption—but he does so with an edge. As in *Million Dollar Baby*, where Frankie Dunn provokes the priest with questions, Walt is not folded into the church in all its rituals or absurdities, but instead aligns himself with the basic moral core present in various religious traditions.

On the aesthetic level, Walt's ugliness guards against kitsch. The vulgarity of the language prevents any movement in the film toward sentimentality, which is easily associated with heroic self-sacrifice. Whenever the hero moves unwaveringly toward martyrdom and sees only the joy of the afterlife, as in Corneille's *Polyeuctus*, self-sacrifice loses its tragic dimension, becoming undramatic and sentimental. Walt, in contrast, must first work his way to self-sacrifice; he has taken false paths, and he must think deeply before arriving at this insight. His final prayer in advance of his

death underscores his aloneness and vulnerability. Self-sacrifice can also be misguided when its purpose is the formal desire to sacrifice oneself in order to make reparations for an earlier misdeed but without any thought of the consequences of one's deed, as in the prideful self-obsession of Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim. Walt, on the other hand, does not sacrifice himself in order to prove to himself that he is able to do so; he does so because it is the only way to redeem Thao from being a victim of the Hmong gang's violence and, perhaps worse, becoming like them in the understandable, but futile and morally disfiguring act of fighting them with their own means.

Often Walt's ugliness, especially his language, has a comic effect. It is certainly not so that we laugh *with* him when he tells his friends a racist joke; we laugh *at* the stupidity of his humor. His language is alienating and distances us from the character and the plot and encourages reflection. The vulgarity of his joke helps us penetrate to the core of biases. Walt himself experiences the alienation of a false name, unintentionally, at the clinic, when his name is pronounced "Koski." The comedy is softened by the gravity of the situation, but such combinations are a trademark of the film. Comedy surfaces as well in the repetition of the priest's appearances: at first, we have the feeling that he is a ridiculous, if not masochistic figure; but in the long run, we recognize something noble behind his stubbornness, which is, after all, motivated not only by the church's teachings, but also by his promise to Dorothy. Walt seems to feel it, and this contributes to the emerging bond between the two men. Comedy also comes to the fore in cultural divides, for example, between the Hmong and Walt, as he wrestles with their repetitive gifts (coming out of the door once toting his gun while they bring flowers and food) or participates in the Vang Lor's party or in the scenes, first in the barber shop and then on the construction site, as Thao learns to navigate Western and manly culture.

In advance of his self-sacrifice Walt gives Thao the Silver Star, his medal of valor. The medal is a sign of heroism and is awarded to soldiers for their heroism. We have a sense that Walt was in many ways heroic in battle, having risked his life and having killed more than a dozen North Koreans, but we know that the medal symbolizes for him also his transgression; it was given to him for the very battle in which he killed an innocent Korean. The medal has yet a third meaning: the medal of valor goes to Thao for *not* using violence that evening. In this sense it combines and reverses Walt's heroism and guilt—one must be ready to fight, but one must also be able to hold back for higher moral goals. In honoring Thao in this way, Walt

offers him a contrasting model of virility, of the complete man, to what the gang represents and what he himself seemed to embody previously. The significance of the medal, also a trigger for Walt's own death (his valor of not fighting means certain death), is accentuated when the scene with the police cuts to Thao and Sue leaving their home for the funeral via a lingering and blurring image of the medal. The greatest valor consists in giving up the intention to use individual violence, but it is compatible with continuing the heritage of the man who has sacrificed himself.

Early in the film Walt's spitting blood indicates that he is sick and potentially dying. The physical sickness can be seen as symbolic of his spiritual attitude toward life. Yet as Walt progresses in corporal sickness, his spirit comes back to him. Spitting out blood is also symbolic of spitting out his connection to blood relations, to family and race as the defining features of his identity.⁶ He slowly recognizes that he has "more in common with these goddamned gooks" than his "own spoiled-rotten family." Walt recognizes his guilt and does not want Thao to enter into the same cycle ("I have blood on my hands"). On two occasions Walt has blood on his knuckles, first from having beaten up the gang leader, second, from having put his fist through his cabinets. The blood we see next is on his palms, the blood of a Christ figure, who is not fighting, but sacrificing himself. Hands are symbolic of Christ on the cross but also of God the father (one need only think of Michelangelo's creation fresco in the *Sistine Chapel*). Walt shouts at the gang, you raped "your own blood, for Christ's sake." He means by "blood" here "kin," but it prepares us for the shedding of his own blood for Christ's sake. He is the reversal of the gang and a deputy of Christ. Walt does not go to church and so does not take communion (that is, he does not receive blood), even after his confession; instead, he spits up blood involuntarily and sheds blood voluntarily. He follows Christ, whose death has not saved these people. Much as the police cannot do all, so does God not do all. The moral order requires our action. We must act in a world that is still inadequate, not wait for God to act. There is something here of the modern idea, perhaps most fully represented by the Jewish thinker Hans Jonas, that God depends on us and on our actions.

Walt's lighter, which he obtained while in the service, has the emblem of the First Cavalry and so is associated with his fighting in Korea; in the final

⁶ The connection between blood and relations is also central in *Million Dollar Baby*, as in the prominent reference to "Mo Cuishle," which Frankie Dunn, the surrogate father, translates as "My darling, my blood." (The actual Gaelic term is Mo Chuisle.)

altercation with the gang Walt reaches not for the gun, but for this symbol of fighting, the lighter. He is thus unarmed and is shot as an unarmed man. The movement of his hand toward the lighter is a deepening of his previous gesture of using his hands to simulate shooting. Like the medal, the lighter is associated with his heroism and his evil actions. Walt's line at this point, "Me, I've got light," refers, literally, to his movement for the lighter, but it has additional meanings. "I've got light" means I have knowledge, I have understood that violence cannot be the answer, that it only begets more violence, and my unexpected act shall remove you gang members from society and from this cycle of violence. It is also symbolic of religious insight; Walt now understands that self-sacrifice can be a kind of atonement. The collective lights of the police cars carry forward a final meaning, as Walt's act is a passing of the baton to the police, a recognition of the role they play, much as he recognizes the place of the church.

The integration of America's weaknesses into Eastwood's image of America is important. In a sense this was already evident in some of his earlier films, such as *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976), which portrayed the government's violation of its own promises; at the beginning of the film the Red Legs of the Union Army massacre Confederates who have surrendered with a promise of amnesty, and later the film prominently thematizes the government's betrayal of Native Americans. *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006) can also be seen in this context: it not only matches *Gran Torino* in its outreach to Asians, offering the Japanese perspective on the battle of Iwo Jima, being filmed essentially entirely in Japanese, and showing the Japanese in their dignity and with tremendous sympathy; it mirrors *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), which gives the American version of the same battle, thus showing that historical justice can be achieved only if history is seen with the eyes of both the victor and the loser. *Letters from Iwo Jima* includes scenes in which two soldiers betray the honor of the Japanese code of fighting to the end by surrendering to the Americans and in which two Americans betray American honor by shooting these POWs in cold blood. It is an aspect of American history that is not part of the general consciousness of many Americans, although it is a gruesome historical fact: many Japanese POWs were simply shot after having surrendered (Dower). In our era, which has reawakened some of the Vietnam-era rhetoric of "Love it or leave it!" and in which it is widely considered unpatriotic to question America's greatness, Eastwood reminds us of our failings, bigotry, hatred, internal divisiveness, and war crimes. America does not always fight only noble wars and unflinchingly protect human rights. Whereas Germany, for

example, was forced, as a result of its defeat in World War II, to integrate the most shameful facts of its past into its history books, many Americans do not know the extent to which Japanese and Korean soldiers were killed after having surrendered. To Eastwood's credit, he remembers this fact in two films, *Gran Torino* showing how the memory of it, repressed as it is, can still haunt the perpetrator more than half a century later.

The image of America that Walt embodies is multivalent. Although Walt remains the heir of the lonely cowboy up to the end, he shifts from isolated, bigoted, and violent to community-oriented, integrative, and self-sacrificing. In this shift we see two competing narratives of America, which have their analogues in America's relations with other countries and races. In one model, America goes its own way, expressing disdain toward other cultures and securing its position through military might and violence, which it uses freely, independently of long-term consequences; a more culturally-oriented model works toward recognizing the value of the other and while threatening the use of violence with its peerless power, nonetheless seeks, wherever possible, to refrain from using that power. The wider political resonance of Eastwood's wrestling with violence in this way follows a cinematic tradition in which "gunfighter Westerns," as Richard Slotkin has shown, came to symbolize "the role of power and force in American political and social life" (402). The mortal sin that Walt confesses to Thao concerns the annihilation of an individual boy's life, but on a broader symbolic level, given the portrayal of Walt as a patriot, it is about American violation of other races and countries. In Walt's reversal of the idea of God sacrificing his son is a hidden allusion to the way in which in an unjust war the fathers, preoccupied with false concepts of manliness, sacrifice the innocent sons instead of finding alternative ways to stem the cycle of violence. Eastwood chooses a model in which the threat of violence and the capacity to fight still play a role. Walt's final deception works only because the gang expects him to fight. This model is what makes the self-sacrifice so especially tragic and surprising. At the same time, an understanding of cultural differences and cultural universals represents a higher goal than the perpetuation of violence, which in the long run is self-defeating, even when in the short run it is necessary.

The film's reversals and ironies are extensive. The choice of the *Gran Torino* as the model for an *American* car is delightfully ironic. The *Gran Torino* is already a multi-national symbol, but the status of having a car with international flavor is not the important intercultural dimension;

instead, it is developing a meaningful relationship with neighbors from different cultures, so the term is both ironic and evocative of deeper meaning. Thao breaks into the garage that Walt will later encourage him to enter on his own, to pick out whatever tools he needs. Walt seeks to protect those like him, who, however, turn out to be not those of his race. Although initially rebuffed by Walt, Thao, it turns out, has more in common with Walt than he does with the boys in the Hmong community. Walt is old and stubborn but still learns. The hero who is at odds with himself, a tough guy seeking violence and revenge, becomes a hero at peace with himself, whose heroism involves refraining from violence and becoming a martyr. Though Walt initially seems to fear that the Hmong would eat his dog, he eventually trusts the Vang Lors to be the dog's right caretakers. The camera moves when Walt notes someone around the garage and when Walt is sick in the Vang Lor house. In the first, his possessions are jeopardized; in the latter, his health and perhaps his identity are threatened; in each case there is a loss of orientation, which is later reversed: Walt gives the *Gran Torino* to Thao and offers up blood for the Vang Lor household. Furthermore, there are elements that invite us to see the film a second time. For example, we learn that it is inappropriate in Hmong culture to touch the top of a person's head, as that is where the soul resides, and one should not appropriate or disturb the soul, but we learn this only after we have seen Thao's cousin twice touch the top of Thao's head.

Unforgiven, which has deep continuities with *Gran Torino*, was Eastwood's first attempt at a farewell to the Western: in this film, murder is presented as repulsive and ugly. The aging hero Will Munny (Clint Eastwood) seeks both to avenge an injustice and collect bounty, but Munny himself can initially barely still ride. Along the way we encounter a sheriff, Little Bill Daggett (Gene Hackman), who is unveiled as a sadist in a scene where he emerges standing before an American flag. The film's reputed gunslinger English Bob (Richard Harris) is exposed as a fraud; one of the bounty hunters, Ned Logan (Morgan Freeman), can no longer will himself to kill a person; and the budding sharpshooter, the Schofield Kid (Jaimz Woolvett), turns out to be nearsighted as well as devastated by having killed in cold-blood and is himself afraid of dying. *Gran Torino* has in common with this film, among other elements, the portrayal of an aged hero (Munny) who has a past that weighs heavily on him and a critique of the uglier aspects of violence, including the price of revenge (Munny states: "It's a hell of a thing, killing a man. You take away all he's got and all he's

ever gonna have”). Although *Unforgiven* seems to critique the Western, its ending actually perpetuates the genre. A critique of violence is obviously present, especially in the painful scenes of the first murder, when we are presented with the protracted portrayal of a dying man, the more innocent of the two who are being chased, crying out for mercy and begging for water, and with the remorse of Ned, who had tried to kill him, but in the final scene the audience is encouraged to identify with the successful vengeance of Munny, who kills Daggett in cold-blood for having flogged Ned to death.⁷

Whereas the Western to end all Westerns ends with the hero wielding a gun for revenge and gaining no redemption, in *Gran Torino* the hero carries no gun and is redeemed. *Unforgiven* mocked our expectations of a Western and questioned, to a degree, the myth of violence and revenge, but *Gran Torino* takes the matter further, not simply reflecting on the inadequacies of the revenge ethos and encouraging distance, but replacing it with another model. In both works we see someone in awe of the action (the reporter in *Unforgiven* and Thao in *Gran Torino*): in the one, the reporter is impressed by heroic might, which remains intact in the final scene of vengeance; in the other, Thao is inspired by heroic restraint.

Gran Torino opens with a funeral and almost closes with a funeral, but the symmetry is enriched and broken in two ways. First, the priest has learned during the process, and his homily is now richer and more personal. Second, the actual close is with Thao, the dog, and the *Gran Torino*, an opening that moves beyond religious tradition to encompass nature in its beauty and sublimity. Given the religious context of the film’s conclusion, the recurring line in the film’s theme song, “the gentle breeze blows,” can be read as a reference to both religion (the Holy Spirit) and nature. The intercultural element is in some ways extended further by the powerful allusions to nature and to humanity’s relationship with nature, which draw on Eastwood’s lifelong “affection for animals and small, helpless creatures” (McGilligan 64; cf. Schickel 28 and 230–31). Evident here is the loving relationship with the dog, communion with a non-human; the conversation in the garden, where Thao is almost hidden, blending into the garden; and the shots of water at the film’s conclusion. Although Eastwood became a Republican in 1951, the first year he could vote (Judge) and has often

⁷ Plantinga notes this ambiguity: “*Unforgiven* is unable to extricate itself completely from the violence it critiques and from the expectations of an audience raised on the myth of Western violence” (78).

been associated with libertarian causes and conservative candidates, he was against the 2003 invasion of Iraq (Palmer), and he has been strongly pro-environment (Eliot 235). Both positions are indirectly evident in this film, whose extraordinary intercultural sensibility reaches out even to an understanding of non-human nature: Thao inherits not only the car, but the care for a living being, the dog, who had been Walt's most important companion after the death of his wife and before the bonding with the Hmong neighbors and from whom he takes a characteristically short, but touching leave.

The theme music punctuates the film at central moments. We first hear the music, after its introduction in the opening credits, when Walt polishes his Gran Torino and, with his dog, admires it on his porch in the beautiful afternoon light. We hear the music again when Thao builds community and Walt admires him in the presence of his dog and on his porch. The next occurrence is when Walt is contemplating his likely death, after speaking with his son. There is a moment of humanity at play, a near connection, when the son, after hanging up, wonders what may be wrong; this lifts him slightly out of his emotional shallowness, though in failing to act in the wake of a dawning recognition, he paradoxically increases his guilt. The theme music then recurs, from the moment of Walt's self-sacrifice through Sue's and Thao's departure for the funeral and the shot of the dog and the grandmother on the porch. We hear it again in the final scene with Thao, the car, and the dog. These are all central scenes, involving a strong sense of human emotion and meaning. Beyond the symmetry of the opening and the closing, we see two moments of happiness: Walt's private happiness (with only his car and his dog) and the happiness associated with Thao's building community. We also witness two moments of sadness: Walt's private anticipation of his death, in the wake of his looking at his wedding picture and his conversation with his son, and his self-sacrifice, which is public, both in the number of persons observing the act and in its fostering of community. The opening occurrence of the music blends into the first funeral, and the occurrence of the music at Walt's death blends into the second funeral. The first occurrence after the opening, with Walt, the dog, and the car is echoed, with a difference, in the final occurrence, with Thao, the dog, and the car. It is moving that Clint Eastwood, the voice of Walt, sings the initial stanzas of the final song, with the contrast between his raspy voice and the lines "so tenderly," which are accentuated by Walt's presence in his disembodied voice and by his absence, echoed by the words, "beats a lonely rhythm."

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