

Religious Fanaticism and Science Reflected in Sebastian Lelio's *The Wonder* (2022)

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Abstract

*This research is conducted to analyze the form of religious fanaticism of Irish society in 1862 depicted in Sebastian Lelio's *The Wonder* (2022) and the conflict that occurred between science and religion in the film *The Wonder* (2022) using the Roland Barthes model semiotic theory. There are two problem statements that the researcher uses in this study, the first is how is religious fanaticism represented in Irish society in 1862 in Sebastian Lelio's *The Wonder* (2022)? Second, how is conflict between science and religion represented in Sebastian Lelio's *The Wonder* (2022)? The researcher uses a qualitative method in answering the problem formulation. The theories and approaches used in this study are the semiotic theory of the Roland Barthes model, fanaticism, Christian Fanaticism, and the conflict between science and religion. This research includes data collection procedures and data analysis procedures. This study's results show signs of religious fanaticism caused by church authority and fundamentalism, and conflict between science and religion because of the difference of opinion between rational thought and traditional thought based on religious rituals.*

Keywords: *semiotics, signs, fanaticism, conflict.*

Introduction

Religion is a sacred belief system that regulates practical activities, influencing human morals through fear of God, gratitude, love, and repentance through worship, all interconnected and influencing moral character. Another definition states that religion is the worship of supreme power (Menziés, 2015: 17). With this definition, activities in religion are one of the roots that create religious fanaticism.

Religious fanaticism, influenced by extreme beliefs and doctrines, has significantly impacted society, leading to extreme actions and beliefs that are difficult to disprove through logical arguments, according to psychologist Stanley Milgram as stated in Zachary R. Goldsmith. (Goldsmith, 2022: 2).

Post-Enlightenment was crucial for developing religion and science, transforming European culture, and placing church and science fanatics on equal

footing, which led to their separation into hostile camps. The relationship between science and religion was conflicted, with the potential for both conflict and harmony if they complemented each other (Brooke, 1998:33). Christian ideology and doctrine, which rejected science to prevent changing views of God, caused these conflicts and led to anti-church agnostic groups. Historically, Christianity held human sciences in contempt and feared scientific inquiry, resulting in the decline of philosophy and science.

Literary Review

Semiotics Approach

Semiotics, also known as semiology, is the science of signs that dates back to ancient Greek, introduced by figures such as Plato and Aristotle, and has continued to develop until modern times. Semiology, introduced by Ferdinand de Saussure, and semiotics by Charles Sander Pierce, are subdisciplines studying signs, with semiotics being more popular. Saussure emphasized the importance of semiology in seriously understanding language, considering language as a system of signs (Culler, 1996: 76). In Barthes' work, semiotics addresses social and cultural phenomena with the assumption that signs have meaning. Etymologically, semiotics comes from the Greek word "*semeion*" meaning "sign", and terminologically, the study of signs. Signs here are not just the 'signs' used in everyday conversation but about anything that can 'represent' an object or something else. Signs are not just about sounds or voices but can be images, gestures, writing, and objects. The use of signs in the beginning, for example, the appearance of clouds indicates that rain is coming, and the sound of the school bell suggests that teaching and learning activities are stopped for a break or end of learning.

Roland Barthes's Semiotics

Roland Barthes (1915-1980), was a French structuralist born on November 12, 1915. He is also a leading figure in American criticism and a professor at the *Collège de France* occupying the highest position in the France academic system.

He is famous for his semiotic theory that emphasizes the importance of 'humanity' understanding 'things' (Culler, 2001: 53). Barthes revealed that objects can be interpreted not only to provide information but to organize a structured system of significations. Significance is not limited to language alone but also other forms outside language. One of them is social life according to Barthes which is a signification itself, so social life is a sign system. The objects of semiotic research can be taken from films, programs on television and radio, advertisements or advertising posters, and other forms. Barthes believed that information is not only provided but also organized into a structured system. His semiotic research can be found in various media.

Roland Barthes' main ideas on semiotics are about meaning and myth. Meaning according to Barthes is divided into two stages 'two orders of signification', the first stage is the relationship between signifier and signified in the real form, where the first meaning is called Denotative meaning and the second meaning is called Connotative meaning. Connotative meaning can be further developed into a myth (Fiske, 1990: 85).

Meaning in Barthes Model

1. Denotative Meaning

Denotation is the first stage of signification that explains the relationship between the signifier and signified in a sign and between the sign and the object it represents (Fiske, 1990: 140). Denotative meaning is the original, clear, explicit meaning that is understood by many people. For example, the word "bathing" has a denotative meaning of cleansing the body by pouring water all over the body. This is a meaning that almost everyone knows and falls under the first level of signification. Denotative meaning is cognitive meaning (Sobur, 2015: 27). According to the Collins Dictionary, the term "cognitive" refers to the mental processes involved in learning, comprehending, and knowing things. So cognitive meaning is related to knowledge, the sender of the message, and the recipient of the message and can be proven by the human senses.

2. Connotative Meaning

Then, connotative meaning is a meaning that enters the second stage of meaning, which is implicitly or indirectly expressed, sometimes this meaning is not realized

and this meaning can only be known after analysis. Connotative meaning describes the relationship between the sign and the emotions found in the second level of Roland Barthes's signification chart (Fiske, 1990: 142). Barthes's thought about the relationship between signs and meanings does not only stop at the first level or denotative meaning as in Saussure, but Barthes has the thought and opinion that the meaning of a sign can be expanded by examining signs related to the culture and habits of society. For example, the word 'gold' has connotations of glory, success, and wealth.

Connotative meanings are built on the culture formed by society and these meanings can differ depending on the social context in which the culture exists. In addition, connotative meanings can also be analyzed through images and texts. In this framework, connotation is a sign that derives from the signifier of a denotative sign so that denotation leads to a series of connotations (Chandler, 2007: 140).

3. Myth

In Roland Barthes's semiotic studies, there is a strong emphasis on the discussion of myths. The myths referred to by Barthes here are not mythology, superstition, or mysticism that exist in society, but myths are specific meanings inserted into the structure of communication (Chandler, 2007: 143). Myth is placed in the interpretation of the second level, which is an extension of connotative meanings. Myths are things that are agreed upon and accepted as something worthy of being conveyed to or developed within society and myths are part of culture (Fiske, 2011: 124).

Myths are language, or in other words, myths are messages or communication systems. For example, a rose signifies the desire for love and romance; this myth has been agreed upon by certain societies that the symbol or emblem of love, desire, and romance is the red rose. However, a rose can become a symbol of mourning, as in the case of the black rose. This shows that color symbols can also have broad meanings.

Fanaticism

Fanaticism, derived from the Latin term *fanaticus* meaning enthusiastic and earnest, comes from the Roman term *fanum*, referring to a sacred place (Toscano, 2017: 12). From the meaning above, it can be concluded that fanatical behavior is earnest and serious dedication of an individual to something, whether in the realm of politics, religion, or culture. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, Fanaticism is an extreme belief that can lead to unreasonable or violent behavior, often associated with intolerance, discrimination, and extremism. It has persisted from ancient times to the modern era, with fanatics believing their beliefs are the absolute truth.

Fanaticism refers to excessive and overwhelming dedication to a particular object, person, or desire without regard for laws or rules. This behavior arises from cultural friction and differences in beliefs, leading to disagreements and fanaticism. According to H. J. Perkinson, as cited by Zachary R. Goldsmith, the key attribute of fanaticism is the "flight" from "fallibility" (Goldsmith, 2022:2). The refusal to acknowledge errors causes fanatic behavior.

Religious Fanaticism

The concept of religious fanaticism is fanaticism that is often negatively connoted and associated with acts of intolerance, extremism, deviation from faith, human rights violations, cruelty, etc. Religious fanaticism considers what it believes to be true and has nothing in common with other beliefs. However, in the realm of religion, this attitude is often associated with negativity to insult other people's beliefs, hurt, degrade, and intolerance of differences. Finally, there is conflict between religions by throwing equally strong arguments, denigrating each other, fighting for the most correct, and thirsting for validation from other groups or societies with examples such as the crusades (Browne, 1835:5).

Christian Fanaticism in the 19th Century

Christian fundamentalism, originating in America, is a Protestant movement that rejects liberal and modernizing tendencies in theology. Fundamentalists emphasize traditional Christian teachings, such as the second appearance of Jesus Christ, the Bible's accuracy, Jesus' mission, and the church's role in society. This

led to religious fanaticism in the 19th century, which conflicted with rational thinking (Kasehage: 2021: 252). Fundamentalists have a harsh attitude towards non-Christian religions, reject modernization and secularism, and prioritize the church's role in community life. They also emphasize the church's role in forming religious authority, leading to obedience and prioritization of religious affairs in the 19th century.

Some of the characteristics of Christian religious fanaticism according to Smith and Raymond (2020) are:

1. Obsession with objects, people, or certain Bible teachings.
2. Commitment to achieve a goal without paying attention and caring about the impact on oneself and others.
3. Dynamic or changing (sometimes dangerous) activism to achieve goals with great effort.
4. Violent cruelty against individuals who can be exploited or ignored because they are perceived as mere objects.
5. Lack of humor or desire to listen to others.
6. One avenue of conversation where fanatical obsession is paramount, there may be a fanatic who is silent because he secretly has 'political' goals.

A powerful way to gain respect or alienate others with fear and hate. This tends to create polarized actions among others.

Science

Science, derived from the Latin word '*scientia*', is the study of phenomena, objects, and events through reading, examining, and developing written language to uncover the truth. According to Wahana, science can be seen in everyday life where it examines material objects or studies subjects such as nature, physics, and living things with their various aspects (Wahana, 2016: 54). Science and knowledge are interconnected. Science is knowledge, while knowledge is information known and acquired by humans.

The Conflict Between Science and Religion

Science and religion are two entities that are interrelated and inseparable. The two are intertwined but have a complex and often incompatible relationship that

creates uncomfortable conflicts. According to Ian G. Barbour, the relationship between science and religion is very complex, consisting of conflict, independence, dialog, and integration (Barbour, 2013: 10).

The most well-known relationship between science and religion is conflict. Science and religion reinforce each other's opinions, are independent, and have different areas and goals, but they need each other. Conflicts occur due to differences in views, beliefs about things, and differences in analysis in studying symptoms and phenomena in the world. They are passionate and distrustful of each other. Religious individuals and scientists face conflict due to their opposing views on reality and scientific discoveries. Despite their interdependence, they are powerful enemies and have an uncertain future.

Research Method

The research method which is used in this research is qualitative research. Based on Creswell in his book *Research Design* (2009), qualitative methods are frequently used in the fields of social science, humanities, and education to address research questions that need an in-depth understanding of human nature, social dynamics, and macrostructure.

The object of this research is a film titled *The Wonder* (2022) directed by Sebastian Lelio that was released on Netflix in 2022. The film published sentences of subtitles and also focused on the picture in the film. The types of data that are used are main data which is collected from the dialogue's film, and supporting data which is collected from some sources, like books, e-books, the internet web, and journals that can support the research.

The method of collecting data in this research is by doing observation. The procedures are watching the movie and reading the subtitles, identifying the data from the scripts and subtitles, classifying data, and selecting the data.

After the data are collected, the next step is analyzing data by following: Displaying the data, explaining data, and interpreting data.

Finding and Discussion

The research analyzes the issue in this chapter. The issue is about religious fanaticism in Irish Society and the conflict between science and religion that is found in the Irish society in the movie entitled *The Wonder* (2022).

1. Representation of Religious Fanaticism in Irish Society in 1862 in *The Wonder* (2022).

Church Authority

In the object of research, some types of religious fanaticism are shown by Irish people as the characters in the movie, one of the types is church authority. The dominant power of the church in the life of the community causes the church to control and interfere in the life of the community by making rules that must be according to the doctrine of the church and based on the Bible. This causes people to submit under the auspices of the church and become fanatical about anything that smells of religion. This can be shown by the picture:



The Wonder, 2022, 00:06:03

In the picture table above, there is a denotation sign in the form of Nurse Lib and sister Michael being brought into a meeting with the church committee and village representatives. The meeting was held in a room that was slightly dim and closed. In this meeting, the church committee sat at the table dressed neatly in the style of officials, while Nurse Lib and sister Michael stood in front of the room like small children who were punished. The atmosphere of the meeting was tense, while nurse Lib and sister Michael stood at a distance.

The connotation of the table above is the hierarchical structure of church authority. The way the church committee sits facing the front of the room and Sister Michael stands at the front of the room away from Nurse Lib Wright shows the hierarchical structure in the church with Sister Michael as one of the authorities with the highest power. This indicates a form of religious fanaticism, that is religious authorities who look down on other authorities, such as in the table above, nurse Lib Wright as a representative of science. Or in the sense of considering other fields inferior which is called Justification.

Religious fanaticism has a tendency to denigrate other authorities including the field of science with skepticism or rejection because science is considered a threat that is not in accordance with religious doctrine, resulting in a society that is less critical and less open to rational and scientific thinking.

Believe in Miracles

In the object of research, one of representation of religious fanaticism are shown by Irish people as the characters in the movie is believe in Miracles. Irish people believe that what happened to Anna O'Donnell who has not eaten for months is proof of a miracle from God and on the other hand they lack faith in scientific explanations because they do not conform to the teachings of their religion. This can be shown by the dialog:

Ksiadz : “Anna O'Donnell doesn't eat”.
Lib Wright : “If a patient in the hospital refuses to eat, we use force”.
Dr. McBrearty: “The child should not be forced”.
Flynn : “He should not be pestered or disturbed”.
Dr. McBrearty: “Even if he asks for food, he should not be forbidden”.
Flynn : “**The girl has lived miraculously without food since her 11th birthday**”.
(*The Wonder*, 2022, 00:06:14).

In the dialog above, the denotative sign shows that Nurse Lib and the church committee are holding a meeting. In the meeting, the church committee explained the condition of O'Donnell's little girl who was considered a miracle. The church committee believed that it was a miracle from God but Nurse Lib didn't know anything about miracles. One of the church committee named Flynn said that during the observation the child should not be disturbed or forced. Meanwhile, nurse Lib said that if the patient does not want to eat then it can be forced.

Connotative in the dialog above is that the church community still believes in the existence of miracles experienced by someone. The community considers O'Donnell's child to be holy and special because after receiving a miracle from God as claimed by the church prove by “*The girl has lived miraculously without food since her 11th birthday*”. This creates skepticism of Nurse Lib Wright as a representative of science. It can be said that the traditions of the people in the

movie strongly believe in miracles and are difficult to realize and difficult to prove.

The scene above illustrates the myth of religious fanaticism when a group defends religious beliefs by being intolerant of the views of other authorities including scientific opinions. The church and the fanatics believe in miracles as proof of God's presence and reject other opinions because according to the fanatics what is said in the Bible is the truth and no one can oppose it.

2. The Conflict Between Science and Religion in *The Wonder* (2022)

The conflict between science and religion in the object of research is shown in general by the act of character in the movie. Religion holds its principles as well as science. They have different thoughts and are reluctant to accept each other's opinions. One of the findings of conflict in the object of this research is:

DATA 1

Lib Wright	: “Do you know why I’m here?”
Anna O’Donnell	: “To make sure I don’t eat.”
Lib Wright	: “I’m here to watch. Not prevent you from eating. Do you know the dangers of a prolonged fast, Anna? ”
Anna O’Donnell	: “ I don’t need to eat. I live on <i>manna</i>. Heaven. ”
Lib Wright	: “And how does that feel?”
Anna O’Donnell	: “Full.”

(*The Wonder*, 2022, 00:1:42)

In the dialog above, the signifier is Nurse Lib Wright coming into Anna's room and explaining her purpose for coming to Anna's house. Anna guesses that Nurse Lib will make sure Anna does not eat like the others. Nurse Lib shakes her head, she is not preventing Anna from eating, her job is to observe how Anna can fast long-term without getting sick. She was worried about Anna's health due to prolonged fasting as it was dangerous for her body. According to Anna, she lived from *Manna* from Heaven which made her full without eating.

Signified in the dialog above is a debate about religious traditions that are irrational and harmful to health. In this scene, it appears that Anna has a spiritual belief in the expiation of sins through long-term fasting. Anna's belief in Manna from Heaven as God's intervention and the form of fasting as self-sacrifice and surrender to God. Meanwhile, Nurse Lib Wright is concerned with Anna's

condition where such a young child is already practicing a tradition that endangers herself. Conotatively, Nurse Lib emphasizes the importance of nutrition from food rather than religious activities that do not provide benefits, but instead harm and harm themselves. Proven by the sentences “*Do you know the dangers of a prolonged fast, Anna?*” and Anna O’Donnell’s response “*I don’t need to eat. I live on manna. From Heaven*”.

DATA 2

Father Thaddeus	: “Mrs. Wright, Rosaleen tells me you won’t allow her to be her own child.”
Lib Wright	: “I’m sorry. But for an objective report, no one can touch her.”
Rosaleen O’Donnell	: “You’ll never understand.”
Father Thaddeus	: “My only concern, as the family’s parish priest, is for them to find peace.”
Lib Wright	: “So why would you allow this nonsense?”
Father Thaddeus	: “It’s not your job to question us, Nurse. You are here only to watch.”
Lib Wright	: “Then let me.”

(The Wonder, 2022, 00:42:30)

The scene above shows a dialogue signifier whose denotation is that Nurse Lib comes to the O’Donnell family’s house after a walk with Anna. In the living room of the O’Donnell family house were Father Thaddeus and Rosaleen sitting and talking. Father Thaddeus looked at Nurse Lib and asked if Rosaleen had complained if Nurse Lib forbade Rosaleen from meeting Anna during the observation. Nurse Lib explained that it was intended so that observation ran smoothly by objective observation and analyzed the disorder. According to Father Thaddeus, the action was inappropriate and for him, it was a form of concern to find peace for the O’Donnell family and it was violated. There was tension between the two. According to Nurse Lib, this is nonsense, while according to Father and Rosaleen, this is not the domain to ask questions like this, because it is not part of observation.

Signified in the table above discusses the conflict of tension between scientific opinions and religious opinions. Science performs actions based on the learned science and makes more sense. On the side of Nurse Lib, represents rational thinking or provides an understanding based on evidence. Meanwhile, religion prioritizes spiritual values, togetherness, and peace. In the sentence “*I’m*

sorry. But for an objective report, no one can touch her", we can see it as a form of scientific thinking that does something that must be objective and empirical. By mentioning that the actions of Father Thaddeus and Rosaleen are nonsense, it proves that science does not believe in irrational things and is difficult to prove. Meanwhile, the sentence "My only concern, as the family's parish priest, is for them to find peace", shows that scientific thinking is wrong and not by religious teachings. Both statements are representations of the conflict between the two sides, namely science vs religion.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the analysis in the previous chapter, the researcher concluded that religious fanaticism is reflected in *The Wonder* (2022). The researcher concluded with two focuses on the discussion. That is a representation of religious fanaticism and the conflict that occurs between science and religion in the film. The researcher focused on the relationship between signifiers and signified and how they can produce meaning. Representations of religious fanaticism in Irish society in 1862 in data analysis included church authority and belief in miracles. In the findings, it is shown that eleven signs contain signifiers, signified, denotative, and connotative that produce the myth of religious fanaticism. The conclusion in this problem is that religious fanaticism occurred due to strong belief and low human resources in 1862 which caused people to tend to believe in miraculous things that are difficult to prove scientifically.

The conflict between science and religion in Irish society in 1862 is a prominent issue in *The Wonder* (2022). The Semiotics of the Roland Barthes model is used to analyze this relationship, revealing that religion prioritizes spirituality and biblical teachings, while science prioritizes objectivity and rationality.

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