

**Research Article**

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**The fathom for good and evil: Decoding religious meaning system in  
Antonio Campos' *The Devil All The Time* (2020)**

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**Abstract**

Religion and humans are like salt and pepper, they are inseparable. The former becomes an integral part to define the lives of the latter. In some cases, religion is perceived as a tool to construct system of meaning. Utilizing Silberman's paradigm, this article tries to uncover the manifestation of religion as a groundwork of meaning system in human life within *The Devil All the Time* (2020) by Antonio Campos. A qualitative method is adopted, with data sourced from library research encompassing both written materials such as books and academic journals and visual media, specifically the movie itself. The findings reveal that religion incarnates as a meaning system through various elements – self and world belief, contingencies, expectations, goals, actions, and emotions. The concept of religious meaning system is exemplified by several characters who are directly tangent to the religious practices.

**Keywords:** *The Devil All the Time*; Religion; Meaning System

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**1. Introduction**

Religion only works for the weak. That is the essence of Karl Marx's legendary quote in his book entitled *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* "...sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world. It is the opium of the people" (Marx, 1970). However, it is crucial to avoid hasty conclusions based on a superficial reading of Marx's critique. A comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the broader context in studying religion must be applied. First and foremost, religion cannot be defined as a simple tool to give temporary relief. It is undeniable that the term 'religion' is complex and often encompasses a variety of concepts and practices (Nye, 2008). To develop a more culturally unbiased and secular ideology-neutral understanding, one approach posits that religion comprises multiple interconnected elements. These elements include doctrine (a system of beliefs), myth (historical sacred narratives), ethics (moral principles with sacred origins), rituals (the use of sacred objects and ceremonies, including historical sacrifices), experiences (devotional, mystical, and experiential), and social institutions (educational, social gatherings, social services, and pastoral care) (Lemming, 2020). This comprehensive perspective underscores the miscellaneous nature of religion and the various elements that contribute to its complex role within human societies.

The differentiation between religion and belief hinges on the active participation of individuals

in religious practices which places them at the threshold of social action that encompassing the potential for interaction with others in nearly all human endeavors (Christiano et al., 2016). Individuals navigate their lives guided by personal beliefs or theories concerning their own identities, their perceptions of others, the diverse situations they encounter in the world, and their relationships within it. These beliefs or theories constitute unique systems of meaning that enable individuals to interpret the world and their experiences, establish goals, strategize activities, and regulate their conduct (Silberman, 2005). This system comprises a cohesive set of beliefs, values, rituals, and narratives that serve to elucidate profound existential questions, such as the nature of existence, purpose in life, and the human condition (Silberman, 2005).

Antonio Campos' 2020 psychological thriller film, *The Devil All the Time* which adapted from Donald Ray Pollock's novel of the same name offers a compelling examination of religious and moral intricacies. The narrative delves into the complex interactions among faith, ethics, and human behavior, particularly exploring how religion shapes the lives of its characters. The film portrays individuals grappling with their religious beliefs amidst moral ambiguity and violence. Illustrating how these beliefs influence their engagement in morally ambiguous actions. *The Devil All the Time* underscores the diverse ways in which religion can serve as a justification for behaviors ranging from virtuous to profoundly immoral.

A number of researchers have developed excellent discourses that address the phenomena within the movie *The Devil All the Time* (2020). First study entitled *Trauma and Deviation of Theology in Movie Script "The Devil All the Time" by Antonio Campos and Paulo Campos* (2022) written by Irene Titasya. This research delves into the predominant psychological issue of trauma depicted in the film. Specifically, it examines how Arvin's parents' actions have left him with a deep antipathy towards God (Titasya, 2022). Second, there is a thesis from Pasya M. Alhambra with the title *Behaviorism Reflected in "The Devil All the Time" Movie Script by Antonio Campos* (2022). In this research, the writer places emphasis on the psychological challenges encountered by the protagonist, Arvin Russel (Pasya, 2022). Third, *Death Instinct and Classification of Emotion in Movie Script "The Devil All the Time"* (2021) (Putra, 2021). Previous studies primarily focused on the psychological intricacies of *The Devil All the Time* (2020), with limited exploration of its religious dynamics. This research aims to fill this gap by examining how religion operates within the film, particularly in shaping the meaning system.

Within the dark and morally intricate world depicted in *The Devil All the Time* (2020) (Campos, 2020), religion conspicuously emerges as a pivotal force guiding individual actions. It functions as a system through which meaning is constructed in their lives, illustrating how religious convictions shape their responses to ethical challenges and their navigation through complex situation. All previous discourses on religion appear to be characterized by a high degree of complexity and abstraction. Thus, the main goal of this research is to decode – understanding the significance of information presented in a complicated manner – the manifestation of religious meaning system within *The Devil All the Time* (2020).

## 2. Methods

In this research, the writer applies qualitative research method and focused on the library research. Library research is a research method that involves the systematic exploration of existing literature, documents, and information sources to gather insights, facts, and data on a particular topic (George, 2008). The primary data for this research centers on the film *The Devil All the Time* (2020) directed by Antonio Campos. Additionally, the writer gathered secondary data from various sources, including books, scholarly articles, and theses, all pertaining to *The Devil All the Time* and the exploration of religion's role in society. This research also applies an objective approach because it examines the extent to which the work stands as a self-contained entity, regardless of the author's intent or the viewer's response, focusing on intrinsic elements (Suryajaya, 2023). In this research, the writer also incorporates a psychosocial approach to unravel the function of meaning system within the movie.

### 3. Result and Discussion

Religion is not merely a theme in *The Devil All the Time* (2020), it is a double-edged sword that both sanctifies and corrupts that profoundly shapes the characters' identities. The fervent belief and rigid practices are depicted as both guiding and destructive influences which reveal the duality of faith (Pargament, 2002). Distinctive religious meaning systems, similar to unique non-religious frameworks serve as interpretive lenses through which individuals perceive and understand reality (Silberman, 2005).

#### 3.1 Religion as Meaning System

Religion, as a system of meaning, is distinguished by its emphasis on the sacred, encompassing concepts of higher entities such as the divine or the transcendent. These entities are endowed with sanctity and set apart from the mundane aspects of daily life (Silberman, 2005).

##### 3.1.1. Self and World Beliefs

When religion is integrated into an individual's meaning system, the concept of the sacred becomes deeply intertwined with beliefs about the essence of humanity, the self, the world, and any transcendent entities that may exist beyond it (Silberman, 2005). This integration influences a person's entire worldview, shaping their perceptions and interpretations of fundamental aspects of existence. For instance, religious systems often incorporate teachings about human destiny, the nature of good and evil, and the moral attributes of individuals. These doctrines provide a framework for understanding the human condition, guiding behavior, and offering explanations for the complexities of life and the universe. Religious principles, values and symbols are not discrete elements; rather, they are integral components that shape an individual's overarching worldview.

In the film, the manifestation of this theme is embodied in Willard's poignant gesture of fashioning a cross from wood gathered in his yard. This intimate act symbolizes Willard's attempt to forge a symbolic link between the sacred and the mundane. His beliefs about the self and the world are depicted through his reaction to the brutal realities of war, motivating him to create a personal emblem of faith. The wooden cross serves as a tangible representation of his convictions regarding the fundamental aspects of humanity, the self, and the world, demonstrating how personal spirituality can foster transformation amidst traumatic experiences. Additionally, the modest construction of a place of worship illustrates his efforts to establish a connection with the divine. Therefore, the creation of his own sacred space emerges as a pivotal element in the film's exploration of interconnected themes concerning individual beliefs about the self and the world. Following his harrowing wartime ordeal, Willard seeks solace and significance by delineating his spiritual domain.

##### 3.1.2. Contingencies and Expectations

Religious systems of meaning frequently encompass beliefs about a range of potential outcomes and anticipated consequences (Silberman, 2005). One common contingency posits that virtuous individuals should receive rewards for their virtuous deeds, while those who commit sins should face consequences for their actions (Kushner, 2004). Such systems may also involve individuals' beliefs in their own ability to effect change in themselves and the world around them (Thurman, 1998). Additionally, they may include optimistic or pessimistic expectations about the future of the world, ranging from visions of utopian renewal to notions of destructive apocalyptic scenarios.

Religion frequently underscores contingencies and anticipations through the establishment of beliefs concerning the repercussions of actions and the potential outcomes that may ensue. In *The Devil All the Time* (2020), characters' religious convictions propel them towards particular actions that are driven by the expectation of impacting forthcoming events. Within, these beliefs significantly mold their choices and behaviors as they strive for favorable outcomes. Confronted with his wife Charlotte's severe illness, Willard engages in a profound religious act of sacrifice,

believing that demonstrating faith requires tangible proof beyond prayers and sincerity. He makes a painful decision to sacrifice Jack, his son Arvin's beloved dog, in a desperate plea for Charlotte's recovery. This sacrificial gesture epitomizes Willard's interpretation of religious contingencies and expectations that reveal the lengths to which characters are willing to go to fulfill perceived divine mandates. It underscores the intricate dynamics of faith as individuals navigate the complexities of religious belief, morality, and the pursuit of divine favor amidst personal crises.

### 3.1.3. Goals

The primary objective of religious systems is to facilitate the alignment with or embrace of the sacred. Nevertheless, any objective, spanning from those rooted in kindness, forgiveness, and altruism to those associated with harm and dominance, can be imbued with religious significance when linked to the sacred (Silberman, 2005).

Religious systems generally promote individuals aligning themselves with what is deemed sacred. In the film, characters such as Lenora, influenced by their religious convictions, strive to achieve this alignment through acts of kindness, forgiveness, and altruism. Lenora's reverence for Pastor Teagardin and her dedication to the church illustrate her pursuit of spiritual alignment and embracing the sacred.



**Figure 1** Lenora is bewitched by Teagardin's preaching  
(*The Devil All the Time*, 2020, 00:55:00 – 00:55:35)

In the portrayed sequence, Lenora emerges as the focal point, visibly entranced by the arrival and preaching of Pastor Teagardin. Framed strategically within the scene, her countenance reveals a profound sense of awe and respect directed towards Teagardin, who embodies a charismatic figure of religious authority. This pivotal moment serves to emphasize Lenora's overarching objective that is shaped by her deep-seated religious beliefs to seek spiritual enlightenment and foster a meaningful connection through her admiration for Teagardin's compelling presence and teachings.

### 3.1.4. Actions

Religious systems often prescribe guidelines concerning acceptable conduct and behaviors deemed inappropriate. While certain actions, such as prayer, are inherently recognized as religious or spiritual, a wide spectrum of human behaviors—ranging from compassionate and charitable deeds to acts of violence and terrorism—can be imbued with sacred significance through mechanisms such as the process of sanctification (Silberman, 2005). This attribution of sacredness to diverse human actions underscores the expansive influence of religious frameworks in interpreting and shaping moral conduct within societies.

Religion can profoundly shape an individual's identity by influencing their moral framework and offering a set of guidelines or commandments that delineate acceptable and forbidden behaviors. The belief in divine rewards or punishments that coupled with the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment can motivate individuals to align their actions with the ethical principles outlined in their religious teachings.



**Figure 2** Lenora is praying while being bullied  
(*The Devil All the Time*, 2020, 00:48:38 – 00:48:43)

In this scene, Lenora's mistreatment and bullying starkly illustrate the harsh reality she endures. Confronted with such adversity, Lenora's reaction profoundly reflects the influence of her religious convictions. Instead of succumbing to despair or retaliating with violence, she turns to prayer, seeking solace in her faith. This moment poignantly underscores the role of religious systems in guiding individuals toward acceptable actions during times of hardship. Lenora's reliance on prayer and endurance transcends personal coping; it embodies the broader theme of how religious beliefs shape the moral compass and responses of individuals within the narrative. The film, through this scene, emphasizes the nuanced ways religious systems influence characters' actions and behaviors, particularly when facing adversity and mistreatment.

### 3.1.5. Emotions

According to Silberman, religious meaning systems exert influence over emotions through several mechanisms (Silberman, 2003). Firstly, they offer individuals opportunities to experience profound emotional connections with potent spiritual forces. Secondly, these systems can explicitly endorse or discourage specific emotions and emotional states. For instance, they may facilitate positive emotions like joy while discouraging expressions of negativity such as sadness or anger. Thirdly, religious frameworks promote beliefs, goals, or behaviors that can yield both positive and negative emotional outcomes (Silberman, 2005). For example, teachings emphasizing the inherent goodness of the world and the potential for personal growth can mediate the impact of religion on emotional well-being. Likewise, differing perceptions of a benevolent versus punitive deity can influence whether religion positively or negatively affects individuals facing adversity (Silberman, 2005).

Religious meaning systems influence emotions through multiple mechanisms. They enable profound emotional connections to spiritual forces and explicitly endorse or discourage particular emotional states, thereby shaping attitudes towards emotions such as joy, sadness, and anger. Religious beliefs promote certain behaviors that impact emotions positively or negatively.



**Figure 3** Laferty is hiding in his wardrobe to connect with God  
(*The Devil All the Time*, 2020, 00:35:20 – 00:35:53)

In the scene, Laferty, who is driven by intense religious convictions, locks himself in a wardrobe, believing he can encounter God in that confined space. This act signifies his desperate search for a profound connection with the divine and a deeply personal sense of spiritual intimacy. Laferty's unconventional approach highlights the emotional intensity of his religious experience. His belief in encountering God through such an unorthodox method demonstrates how religious beliefs can shape goals and behaviors, influencing emotional experiences. The scene powerfully depicts how

religious meaning systems can profoundly affect an individual's emotions that leads them to seek unconventional means for spiritual connection and divine encounter.

#### 4. Conclusion

*The Devil All the Time* (2020) intricately examines religion as a complex meaning system embedded within its narrative structure. The film demonstrates how, when religion is interwoven into an individual's system of meaning. It becomes a fundamental lens through which they comprehend and interpret their reality. The depiction of religion as a meaning system is meticulously portrayed using Silberman's paradigm through various elements such as self and world beliefs, contingencies and expectations, goals, actions, and emotions.

Willard exemplifies the manifestation of self and world beliefs through his meticulous crafting of a cross from wood and the subsequent construction of a modest place of worship in the woods. This act signifies his attempt to integrate the sacred into his immediate environment, thus bridging his understanding of the self and the world with his spiritual beliefs. The narrative further explores contingencies and expectations through Willard's sacrificial offering of his son's beloved dog, driven by the hope that such a profound sacrifice might invoke divine intervention to save his ailing wife. This act underscores his belief in the transactional nature of divine favor where significant personal loss is expected to yield supernatural salvation. The realization of goals is vividly portrayed through Lenora and the community's aspirations to align themselves with the sacred. Lenora's unwavering admiration for Pastor Teagardin and her devout commitment to the church underscore her pursuit of spiritual alignment and fulfillment. Her response to bullying—choosing prayer and faith over despair and violence—illustrates the embodiment of religiously motivated actions, demonstrating how her beliefs dictate her behavior in the face of adversity. Moreover, the film delves into the emotional dimensions of religious experiences through Laferty's radical act of confining himself in a wardrobe, motivated by his conviction that he can attain a divine encounter in such a confined space. This act not only highlights the emotional intensity and depth of his religious experience but also illustrates how religious beliefs can drive individuals to seek unconventional methods for spiritual connection.

In essence, "The Devil All the Time" provides a compelling illustration of the multidimensional ways in which religious meaning systems influence and shape individual beliefs, expectations, goals, actions, and emotional responses. It offers a nuanced exploration of the intricate interplay between faith and personal experience.

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