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The Purpose of Religion in *Before Sunrise*

At first glance, it is easy for some viewers to assume that Richard Linklater's *Before Sunrise* is packed full of heavy handed religious themes. Strangely enough, another viewer might well say that there are no religious themes at all. Whether religion plays a part in the film's narrative is largely up for interpretation, but I believe that both the assertion that religion is a central theme in *Before Sunrise* and the assertion that it is entirely absent are equally incorrect. There are scenes pertaining to religion and religious themes in *Before Sunrise*, but they serve, not as commentaries on religious concepts in and of themselves, but rather as utilities to further expand upon the identities of the characters.

First, it is important to note that *Before Sunrise* is not interested in pushing a religious thesis on its audience. That is to say, it is not interested in the backing of one particular faith or lack thereof. There are a number of scenes which pertain to religion. One of the first dialogues between our central couple is Jesse telling Céline about seeing the apparition of his dead grandmother through a screen of water, immediately raising the question of an afterlife, but the question doesn't stay raised long. Céline doesn't argue or try to debate with Jesse over his assertion, she merely takes the story in stride, and the dialogue continues. We have a similar thing happen when Jesse and Céline are sitting in a church together. The ideas of religion and atheism both come up during their conversation there, but neither view is ever taken up with any kind of conviction by either character. We hear about strong theists and strong atheists, but neither of our protagonists asserts either position, preferring to dance around the subject. When Jesse brings up the tradition of Quaker weddings and the way in which they occur, Céline does not argue against the thesis that God could potentially move one to speak, she merely comments that it is a beautiful tradition. So if religion isn't being used as part of the film's message,

then it must be utilized either in character development or in plot advancement, but the plot of *Before Sunrise* isn't at all moved forward by the religious scenes. It would be a stretch to call *Before Sunrise* "plotless," but I believe it would be fair to say that its plot is very thin. My case for why the religious scenes do not exist to advance the thin plot is simple. If you remove the scenes entirely or replace them with something else, the basic plotting of the film (i.e. two twenty-something strangers walking around talking and falling in love) would not change. Therefore, the religious themes of the film must be in service to character development.

If that is the case, then how? In what way do the religious scenes enrich the way that we see the characters? Céline makes her relationship with the concept of religion the most obvious. When she walks into the church with Jesse, she states that she is not, nor has she ever been a religious person, but she still seems to maintain a respect and admiration for the concept. For instance, we seen in any moment when confronted with the vaguely supernatural (when visiting the graveyard, when having her palm read, when hearing about Quaker weddings, and simply when entering the church) Céline's demeanor shifts toward the romantic. She views religious faith in the same way one might view an old story about knights and dragons, and through this view on things she does not necessarily believe in, we learn several things about Céline. She is a romantic. She is not bitter. She is not judgmental. Her fear of death is ultimately a fear of the unknown stemming from her agnosticism. Jesse's involvement with religion is a bit harder to pin down. At first glance, his attitude toward faith seems vaguely flippant and irreverent, but his relationship to the supernatural almost seems technically stronger than Céline's. Céline lacks a strong belief in life after death, which, as mentioned earlier, fuels her constant fear of it. Jesse, on the other hand, clearly has a strong sense that there is an afterlife, as he still seems very certain that his grandmother's soul still exists somewhere. In this way, I think it might be fair to say that while Jesse is more hardened and cynical toward the concepts of religion and spirituality, he is, as it were, more faithful than Céline. With this information, we begin to see the ultimate conclusion of religion as a concept as it relates to character development come together. Céline is a romantic who is

paradoxically pessimistic. Jesse is a cynic who is paradoxically optimistic. *Before Sunrise* is not ultimately a story about concepts. It is a story about people and emotions, and it uses concepts to springboard its characters. As such, it is no surprise that *Before Sunrise* contains no direct religious message but uses religion to develop its characters.