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**WOODY
ALLEN:**

**THEOLOGIAN
OF THE YEAR**

Woody Allen, theologian

A short analysis of Woody Allen as theologian in American culture

Stanley D. Williams

Department of Communication

Wayne State University

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John Spalding, Ph. D.

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Introduction

Some would argue that Allen is no more a theologian than the Pope is agnostic. Yet, the films of Woody Allen consistently deal with issues as theological as papal encyclicals or the Ten Commandments. They deal with God's existence, stealing, deception, envy, murder, and adultery. But, such a list is too simplistic, for Allen doesn't just dabble in these themes. He's overwhelmed by them, ambivalent toward them, and yet at once obsessed with them. His films ~~have~~ for the most part display a neurotic protagonist, who questions God's existence, seeks sexual liberation, and fears death.

Whether Allen is *personally* obsessed with these topics (many say he is), or whether he recognizes a market for those issues on which American ideals teeter, really doesn't matter. Although, like all good authors or autuers, Allen probably writes about what he knows best, and because he makes himself transparent to his audience, his viewers quickly identify, laugh and squirm—identifying with the struggling characters on screen. Thus, the similarity between Allen's neuroses and those of American society makes his films popular.

A European once told me that Americans are neurotic about most anything meaningful and hopelessly addicted to that which is meaningless. In other words, Americans allow themselves to become addicted to meaningless ideologies as a catharsis for ignoring those

ideologies of meaning and purpose—addiction in place of purpose. Such a description fits much of Allen's work, where the addiction is the process of debate or questioning. As an introduction, allow me to point out three examples.

The neurosis over God (and the ultimate reason for existence) is best exemplified in the concluding discussion between Cliff and Judah in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. Their discussion of the murder centers on the debate of God's existence and His forgiveness. In the final scene, Cliff remarks to Judah that if God does not exist, "then his worst beliefs are realized" for hopefully the murderer has violated a moral, orderly, world, in which forgiveness is available to remove the guilt. But, if order doesn't exist, the murderer is condemned to carry the guilt to the grave. Because the characters are addicted to their own self-grandizement (in Judah's case) or self-pity (in Cliff's case) the addiction to questioning God's existence is prolonged past the end of the film and the contradiction of the two men's lives continues. Thus, addiction to debate becomes the catharsis for facing reality and thus life's meaning.

The neurosis over sex is found often in Allen's films as he positions sexual entitlement against the commands of God. One example is in *Alice* where Allen juxtaposes the Ten Commandments (Alice says to Dr. Yang. "I believe in fidelity. I can't go out and commit adultery) with Alice's ultimate affair with Joe. Allen then depicts Alice balancing her guilt by: 1) her confession to her sister (via an opium induced dream!); 2) her articulation of her desire to be closer to God (helping the helpless); and, 3) her discovery (again via drugs) that her husband Doug has been sleeping around for years. The answers are unclear; the addiction

(metaphored with Dr. Yang's drugs) to a debate over sexual entitlement becomes the catharsis for facing the reality of fidelity.

Finally, there is the neurosis of death: when you die you *meet* God . . . don't you? For example, in *Love and Death* Sonia suggests to Boris that they commit suicide—"after all, if there's no God, there's no reason to live." Yet, Sonia and Boris find reason to live without fully answering the question, somehow staving off the inevitable. The addiction to the debate takes the place of an answer—questions become a catharsis for a clearly articulated end.

The Premise

Thus, Allen articulates God the creator, sex the procreator, and death the attenuator—a trinity if you will—for they all involve the study of the nature of God and religious truth—that is, theology. This paper is too abbreviated to examine exhaustively Allen's dealing with God, sex, and death in particular (let alone all three). Instead, I will provide evidence that because of the predominance of this trinity of themes, regardless of their orthodoxy, Allen is a theologian; and more specifically, I will report on cursory research which attempts to describe how Allen's perchance for theology has changed over the years.

Methodology

To investigate these issues, preliminary qualitative research was conducted during the screenings of Allen's films for SPR 502/852. The principle question I asked myself during each of the screenings was, "How often and in what ways does Allen depict Judeo-Christian beliefs? Does he depict them in a positive light or a negative light?" From the start I realized it would be too difficult to accurately describe each and

every occurrence, but I believe it was possible to document whether or not Allen looked with respect on the traditional religious establishment.

With some level of accuracy it was necessary to define what a “depiction” was and assign attributes to “positive” and “negative” depictions. A depiction was defined as any single scene in which God or moral values were directly raised as part of a Biblical perspective. No attempt, however, was made to evaluate whether or not the depiction agreed with Biblical teaching. This cursory methodology was necessary insofar as there was only time to view most of the films once, and in a venue where scenes could not be replayed. The analysis included 19 of the 21 Allen films viewed. Two films, *What’s up tiger lily* and *Everything you wanted to know about sex...* were excluded from the analysis due to the lack of data. An attempt was made to avoid the denotation of implicit theological ideology such as the vast references to what I call Allen’s ideology of sexual entitlement—if you’re single it’s acceptable and expected that you’ll have multiple sexual partners. Nor was reference made of those depictions when one of the Ten Commandments was obeyed or disobeyed. Again, only explicit references to God or the church, or when sex or death *and* God or the church were depicted together, were scored. Consequently, the depictions per film were low. At best this type of study is preliminary, indicating if there is something worth looking into in more depth at a later time. It is at worse cursory, and at best exploitative, but it is a place to start.

Positive depictions of God, sex, or death involved occasions when action or dialogue showed respect (regardless of the explicit action or words) for a Biblical perspective. If a character was shown rationally

rejecting a Biblical perspective, then the depiction was also scored positive. In short, positive depictions left the viewer with a feeling that the writer held issues of sex, death, or God, as worthy of rational debate.

Negative depictions of God, sex, or death, involved occasions when action or dialogue showed disrespect (regardless of the explicit action or words) for a Biblical perspective. If a character was shown irrationally accepting a Biblical perspective, then the depiction was scored negative. In short, negative depictions left the viewer with the feeling that the writer held issues of sex, death, or God, as not worthy of rational debate.

Results

Table 1 and Chart 1 summarize the results of the data which are ordered chronologically by year of the title's release. It shows that the films from 1969 to 1975 significantly depicted negative theological perceptions of God, sex, and death, while those since depicted positive theological perceptions. What is even more uncanny is that only one of the films had significant contradictory perceptions (*Love and Death*) ; otherwise the depictions were all positive or all negative. Furthermore, there is a marked trend directly relating Mr. Allen's age with positive depictions. Is that a sign of maturing theology—the closer one gets to death the less one wants to offend his maker? Of interest is the decline of positive depictions in 1979 - 1983. I am not equipped with a history of Mr. Allen's life to decipher any meaning to his discontinuity or the recent drop since *Crimes and Misdemeanors* in 1989. But, overall there are obvious and interesting trends. The one discontinuity I might easily offer an explanation for is *Radio Days* (1987), a film which was weak in explicit positive depictions but very strong in implicit positive

depictions. If I had devised a method of correlating both implicit and explicit depictions it is possible that *Radio Days* would have scored easily between *Hannah...* and *Crimes....* .

As Kitty sings in *Radio Days* , "One day at a time,.. " let's look at one film at a time and provide at least one example from each of the type of depictions which resulted in the scores presented.

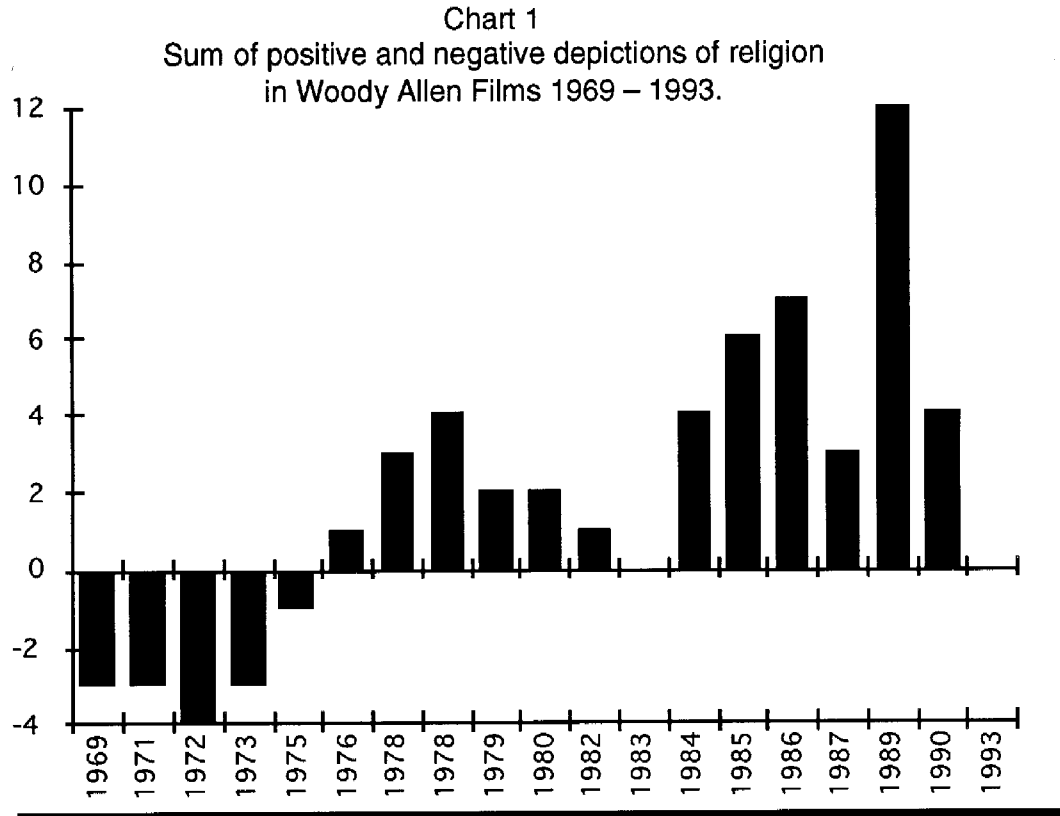


Table 1
Data supporting Chart 1.

Title	Year Released	Sum	Positive Depictions	Negative Depictions
Take the Money & Run	1969	-3	0	3
Bananas	1971	-3	0	3
Play It Again, Sam	1972	-4	0	4
Sleeper	1973	-3	0	3
Love & Death	1975	-1	4	5
The Front	1976	1	1	0
Annie Hall	1978	3	3	0
Interiors	1978	4	4	0
Manhattan	1979	2	2	0
Stardust Memories	1980	2	2	0
A Midsummer Night's Sex...	1982	1	1	0
Zelig	1983	0	0	0
Broadway Danny Rose	1984	4	4	0
The Purple Rose of Cairo	1985	6	6	0
Hannah and Her Sisters	1986	7	7	0
Radio Days	1987	3	3	0
Crimes & Misdemeanors	1989	12	12	0
Alice	1990	4	4	0
Manhattan Murder Mystery	1993	0	0	0

Take the money and run.

This is the story of an inept criminal, Virgil Starkwell, whose parents are so embarrassed they wear Groucho masks for their on-camera interview. Such visual devices discredit the Starkwells, such that when Mr. Starkwell says of his son, "He was an atheist. I tried to beat God into him," we're not convinced that Mr. Starkwell knows much about God at all. Allen also makes negative sense of God with his mixture of metaphysics and the mundane. One example is when Louise Lasser's character's mother is described as someone who is fanatically religious, beats her daughter, and has conversations with God about salvation and interior decorating. The film well earned its -3, if not a -4 rating.

Bananas

Bananas also received a -3 rating for hanging a picture of Christ next to the picture of the San Marcos' president—a reputed crook who killed the previous president and now demands his weight in gold but is only going to get his weight in horse manure. Another scene parodies Chesterfield cigarette commercials with Catholic priests who, while serving communion, authoritatively intone, "You stick to New Testament cigarettes and all is forgiven."

Play it again, Sam.

The negative depictions in *Play it again, Sam* are more mild than earlier depictions, but they still cast a pall on the concept of religion, using it as a crutch or comic device. Allan tells the motorcycle thugs, "I'd love to stay but I gotta be up early tomorrow; go to temple. It's my people's Sabbath." and a moment later to his date, "Don't look back, I don't have

my Bible." Whatever that means is not clear, but it's obvious to the audience that Allan doesn't go to Sabbath meetings, and not only doesn't he read his Bible, he probably doesn't even have one. Implicitly, this film caters strongly to the "Sexual Entitlement" philosophy. A -4 is letting it off lightly.

Sleeper.

Sleeper richly deserves its -4 rating with comments like, "This is Billy Graham. He knew God personally, he used to double date with God." Also contributing to the score, is reminding the audience that God spelled backwards is "dog" and a moment later hearing "God damned, dog." Or, consider Miles' comment to Arlene, "You remind me of an old girlfriend who . . . became a Jesus freak and was arrested for selling pornographic connect-the-dot books."

Love and death.

This film begins the climb out of the basement with a -1. As Brodie suggests it is a transitional film from Allen's earlier parodies to his later more serious films. Interestingly, it is also a transition from his negative depictions of religion and those that are positive. It is the only film with both positive and negative depictions. Negative images in this film show: Boris as a child hanging on a cross like Christ; when Boris asks God for help he gets a loud "cough" for an answer; and when Boris describes God with the line, "He isn't evil, he's an under-achiever." On the positive side: the three embodiments of life include the *spiritual*; life after death is seriously questioned and not ridiculed; and most significantly, Sonia suggests that they commit suicide, "for if there is not a God, there's no reason to live"—not a joke, but serious rhetoric.

The front.

The front crawls out of the basement with a +1. This film does not deal with God things very much at all. But Heckie's funeral, which is watched by Howard from across the street is a very serious matter. There are no jokes here about the Jewish or Christian church. In fact, the antagonist Hennessey is seen taking pictures of the funeral as if the synagogue was a meeting place for Communist spies, something which, in the audience's eyes, engenders religion with credibility, much like the underground church and the Jews in hiding during WWII in Germany.

Annie Hall.

In *Annie Hall* Allen proclaims proudly (although with some paranoia) that he is Jewish: Alvy thinks the waiter said "da Jew" instead of "do you?" When Annie identifies Alvy as Jewish there are no backyard jokes associated with Alvy's response. We may ask what a Christmas tree is doing in a Jewish home in this film, but when the music is clearly heard at the Hollywood Christmas party are clear and unchallenged, "Remember Christ our savior . . . on Christmas day. . ." The scene is allowed to exist without commentary—Christmas and Christ are serious enough to be part of the film's accepted ideology.

Interiors

Here Allen looks deeply into the mind. The metaphor of interior decorating graces the life of Eve, the mother, who is attempting to pull out of a mental breakdown. Toward the end of the film Eve, from a bed, watches a Christian talk show about Jewish people. Allen refrains from belittling the scene by linking the mentally incapacitated with religion. In fact, a while later Joey proclaims to her sister that all of Eve's "Jesus

Christ nonsense is actually somewhat of a help.” It is also significant that Allen wonderfully crafts the tension between father and mother by selecting the New York Cathedral for the location where the father suggests they finalize their divorce. It’s a tense scene primarily because of the location, and Allen knows it. This is not a deeply theological film, but when religion is breached, it is taken with respect.

Manhattan

The neurosis of sexual liberation and sexual fidelity is strong in this film—love and sex are continuously confused. But a few spots indicate that Allen still thinks of religion with respect. Ike’s conversation with Tracy is somewhat contradictory to his actions, but the lines come across seriously and not sarcastically, “I’m old-fashioned. I don’t believe in extramarital relationships. I think people should mate for life, like pigeons or Catholics.” Mary tells Ike, “I’m from Philadelphia. I believe in God.” Scenes like this, although not very profound support Allen’s sacred search for God, after all, Ike says to Yale, “I have to model myself after someone.”

Stardust memories

Stardust scores a modest two on the God scale. Allen plays the part of, Sandy, a frustrated filmmaker fighting to change his life. At one point Sandy makes the comment, “To you I’m an atheist, to God I’m the loyal opposition. This comment, of course, assumes the existence of God through and through. Sandy also asks at another point, “If there a God, if nothing lasts, why am I bothering to make films?” Thus, Allen refuses to poke fun at God, and instead hopefully call on him as an accomplice.

A Midsummer night's sex comedy

In this film only one scene stands out as directly dealing with God, which otherwise, implicitly is negative in its ideology regarding sexual fidelity. But, that one scene is unique. In it Leopold sings *The Lord's Prayer* the night before his wedding. While he sings, ". . . and lead us not into temptation, but delivery us from evil . . ." Andrew and Adrian (husband and wife) attempt to make love on top of a cast iron stove. While a very funny scene, there is nothing contradictory in a religious sense with it. For Andrew and Adrian, being husband and wife, are responding to the prayer request that Leopold sings. In the story, if Adrian would warm up to Andrew he wouldn't be led into temptation by Ariel.

Zelig

There is nothing to report here.

Broadway Danny Rose

After the God score drought of '83 this film makes some strong positive depictions. God is revered when Danny says to Lou an effort to get Lou to be true to his wife and forget Tina, "Sooner or later you'll have to square yourself with the big guy upstairs," and "We're all guilty in the eyes of God," and after he names Barney Dunn to the "family" he quite seriously asks God to forgive him.

The purple rose of Cairo

This film takes God to new heights as Cecelia tries to explain to Tom Baxter that God is the creator. There is no doubt in her mind. For once Allen deals with God as an absolute. Baxter even finds excitement and meaning in death—exploring tombs in Egypt and nightclubs in New

York. Cecelia describes the church to Tom in positive tones. In the brothel Tom says some very eloquent things about God and death. He speaks of the miracle of birth and his pure love for Cecelia. The astonishing thing about this scene is the insight Allen has regarding the story in the New Testament about Mary, Martha and Jesus, as well as Jesus' relationship with prostitutes. In the New Testament Martha sits at Jesus' feet listening to him teach while Mary is busy cooking the noon meal. With prostitutes, Jesus opens their eyes to see and understand what real love is all about. In *Purple rose of Cairo* as a prostitute named Martha sits at the feet of Tom Baxter who explains what perfect love is all about. As Jesus was "without guile" and did not find prostitutes a moral problem to be with, likewise Tom Baxter is without guile and is not sexually intimidated by the ladies. Also Jesus opened the eyes of more than one prostitute and so does Tom Baxter. The women in the New Testament fell in love with Jesus, but it was not an erotic love. Likewise, the girls in the brothel fall in love with Tom who is perfectly naive when it comes to sex. "Aren't there any other guys out there like you?" one asks. Then as if Allen were struggling with the identify of Christ, the very next scene finds a movie mogul lamenting the problem of "one minor character taking some action and turning the whole world upside-down." The juxtaposition of this line with the picture of Martha sitting at the feet of Baxter (as Christ) is striking.

Hannah and her sisters

Hannah ... has a number of positive references to the things of God. Here are but a few. Frederick laments the culture as the result of seeing a fundamentalist preacher on TV, "But the worst are the fundamentalist

preachers . . . third-rate con men, telling the poor suckers that watch them that they speak for Jesus . . . and to please send in money. . . . If Jesus came back, and saw what's going on in his name, he'd never stop throwing up." That's a powerful statement of acceptance and respect for Christianity. Other strong scenes include Mickey seeking religion and going to a Catholic priest, "I need something to believe in. I need evidence. If I can't believe in God, I have nothing to live for . . . I need a promise." Perhaps the most poignant scene is Mickey explaining to Holly how he got over his depression after his attempted suicide, "I just felt that in a Godless universe, I didn't want to go on living. . . Then I thought, what if I'm wrong? What if there is a God?," and so forth. For scenes such as these the film deserved a 7.

Radio days

Radio days communicates more implicit God-fearing attributes than explicit ones. The narrator's family is religious to the extent that they're sincere. They try to get the neighbor to turn off the radio because the radio is sinful, "It's hard to pray with the noise." The rabbi, as he criticizes radio programming is not made out to be the fool, even though the film clearly indicates he's not in step with the times. Probably, the one metaphor of the mysterious working of religion and family values that deserves a mention is the Masked Avenger's byline which is repeated twice in the film, "Beware evil doers, wherever you are."

Crimes and misdemeanors

This film, because of its religious significance, deserves a paper unto itself. The rabbi is the most respected individual in many an Allen film. The rabbi's council to Judah (the adulterer and murder) is clear and

Biblical. At the beginning of the film Judah recounts his father's advice, "The eyes of God are upon us," and Allen never lets God's eyes depart from Judah's soul. Throughout the film, right and wrong, good and evil are pursued time and time again. When Judah realizes that his mistress has been "hit" his first words, to his brother who has arranged the killing, are deadly serious, "God have mercy on us, Jack." The flashbacks to the temple are portrayed as sacred and right. In this film, the story of Judah is in part the story of the Old Testament Judah who commits fornication with a woman who he thinks is a prostitute. But the prostitute blackmails him, proving herself to be his daughter-in-law. In similar fashion, the Judah of *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is likewise trying to blackmail Judah. The parallel isn't exact, but it again shows Allen's perchance for portraying scriptural concepts faithfully and directly. Later, as Judah comes in touch with his need for forgiveness he says to Miriam, "I believe in God. Without God life is a cesspool." There is not room to cite all the examples of the positive nature with which Allen treats the subject of God, but the final conversation between Judah and Cliff is a monologue on the meaning of life with God. Judah and Cliff conclude that without God, sinful man cannot bear his own sin. The forgiveness, offered by the creator of an orderly universe, allows man to live.

Alice

Alice takes a big fall from *Crimes...* but still Allen avoids negative religious connotations. As mentioned earlier, Alice is quick to point out to Dr. Yang, "I believe in fidelity. I can't go out and commit adultery." Later, Dr. Yang, who by now is discredited because of his drug trafficking

says to Alice tauntingly, "Catholics believe in ghosts." Because, the comment comes from a non-credible source, it receives credibility.

Perhaps the most impressive and positive depiction of religion in *Alice* is the footage of Mother Teresa, and later the declaration by Alice that the only time she felt close to God was when she was helping an old, bed-fast woman.

Manhattan murder mystery

No comment here. The explicit God-topics were avoided.

Conclusions

While the data of this mostly qualitative exploration seems convincing that Allen unabashedly deals with theology, it may be that his inconsistency in its treatment is driven as much out of his desire for *convenience* rather than *reality*. In his *Rolling Stone* interview (April 9, 1987) Allen readily admitted that his desire to write and shoot stories that remain in New York is simply because it's too much work to shoot on location elsewhere. He's done it and he doesn't like it. Out of convenience he has cut shooting days short so he can get home to watch the Nicks game or go out to eat out with friends. Likewise, Allen's theology may simply be out of convenience. In *Crimes and Misdemeanors* he deals with God more than any another film. It no doubt stretched him, forcing him to deal with facts and issues on a level he's never before attempted. Such encounters require work . . . , hard, honest work. Nothing good comes easy, it is said. And so, that may explain why it took only two films later in *Manhattan murder mystery* for Allen to suspend, at least for the time being, all references to God and the like.

Final Thought

In *Interiors*, Joey yells at her new mother-in-law, Pearl, for being drunk at her own wedding party, "Jesus Christ, be careful." It almost sounds as if Joey is blaming God (Christ in this instance) for Pearl's behavior, or entreating Christ's help. Often throughout many films, Allen's included, we hear exclamations with the words "God" or "Jesus" or "Christ" as the proper nouns. Out of context the phrases sound like prayers. Are they? Good Jews or Christians categorize these exclamations as a breaking of the Fourth Commandment—"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God" (Exodus 20:7 NIV). In my travels to a number of foreign countries, I have heard similar use of God's or Jesus' name. Acquaintances that are fluent in foreign languages confirm that these words are used "in vain" widely, regardless of culture. Interestingly enough, Mohammed's name is not used in "vain" nor is Budda's, nor "Krishna's"—only Christ's and Yahweh's. The use in Allen's films only serves to reinforce the seriousness of his theology, his films' ideology—that there is something special about the name of Christ above all others.