

1 INTRODUCTION

...the film which a quarter-century of ritual telecasts (not to mention its own natural charm) has made the most universal cult movie of them all...[is] clearly an integral part of the national collective unconscious.

—From a review of *The Wizard of Oz*¹

Only in America....When this phrase first became popular, it was used by Jewish immigrants discussing the marvels of life in the New World. Very quickly, however, it took on slightly humorous connotations. America was the land of freedom and opportunity, to be sure, but also of *mishegass* in this case, (disorienting but charming nonsense). It was with this in mind that Harry Golden entitled his collection of nostalgic anecdotes about growing up on the Lower East Side of New York, *Only in America*.² What can one say, after all, of a nation in which grown men and women gather every year to discuss a fantasyland called Oz? What can one say of a nation in which a disintegrating pair of "ruby slippers" is auctioned off for \$165,000? What, indeed, can one say of a nation in which "We're off to See the Wizard" is by now as familiar as any traditional hymn or even the national anthem? Only in America....

In fact, a great deal can be said. Over fifty years after it was first released in 1939, *The Wizard of Oz* has become much more than a cult classic. By definition, cult classics are restricted to small groups of aficionados; this movie, on the contrary, has earned a place in the hearts and minds of ordinary men and women (not to mention boys and girls) across the length and breadth of America.³ Its popularity, indeed, is so massive and so enduring that the phenomenon demands an explanation. What is really so extraordinary about this movie?

Can its popularity be explained solely in terms of technical virtuosity, fine performances, and the mystique of Judy Garland? Many movies are well produced yet remain of limited appeal (or of great appeal to a limited number of people). This is the case, for instance, with *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941). Because of its many innovative techniques, it is generally considered by film critics and historians to be a cinematic masterpiece. A great deal has been written about it. Nevertheless, it is seldom shown on television and has not become part of the popular imagination in the same sense as *The Wizard*. Although many Americans have seen *Citizen Kane* and even more have heard of it, few would be able to quote lines from the script, tell the story or even identify the major characters. Aside from a single shot that is sometimes used to parody politicians (Kane standing on the stage with his campaign poster looming ominously in the background), visual references are seldom quoted or exploited for commercial purposes. In spite of its artistic value (or, some would say, because of it), *Citizen Kane* has been celebrated primarily in academic circles. *The Wizard*, on the other hand, has become the cultural property of almost every American. According to Aljean Harmetz, "*The Wizard of Oz* has become an American artifact, a piece of pop culture as tangible as a pottery shard. Over the last twenty-nine years, it has been seen in 436 million homes."⁴ Not surprisingly, it continues to be massively popular whenever it is broadcast on television. According to Mike Eisenberg, director of audience measurement of CBS, "This movie will always work. . . . It's one film that we put on regularly that we don't get concerned about how it's going to do."⁵ Apparently, *The Wizard* "destroys the conventional wisdom that theatrical movies, particularly repeats, are not thriving on commercial television because of the competition of pay-cable and videocassettes."⁶ Marvin Mord of ABC, includes it with *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939) and one or two others as the most consistently successful productions. Market researchers, in fact, have understood that references to it on television commercials will be immediately understood by almost everyone. Moreover, it is associated with phenomena that look something like liturgy: audiences are filled with people who recite the dialogue and sing the songs as the movie is shown.

What makes this possible, of course, is the frequency with which *The Wizard* is shown on television. It is broadcast annually as a special event (which is to say, it preempts regular shows). This does not make it unique. Several other movies are also broadcast regularly

as special events. These include *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), *The Ten Commandments* (Cecil B. De Mille, 1956), *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946), *Miracle on 34th Street* (George Seaton, 1947), and one version or another of *A Christmas Carol* (Edwin L. Marin, 1938; Brian Desmond Hurst, 1951; Ronald Neame, 1970; Clive Donner, 1984). This link between movies with no obvious reference to religion (such as *The Wizard* or *Gone with the Wind*) and those movies that are explicitly associated with religious festivals such as Passover, Easter, and Christmas suggests the possibility that they have come to function in similar ways.

Television has clearly made *The Wizard*'s popularity possible. Without repeated broadcasting, far fewer people would see it. But has television actually caused this popularity? Aljean Harmetz points out that some of the actors involved were themselves convinced that the success of this movie owed more to exposure on television than to any intrinsic cinematic merit. According to Jack Haley, for example, "It's like a toy. You get a new generation all the time because of television. The film didn't bowl anyone over when it first came out. It was never the big smashing hit that television made it."⁷ But according to Harmetz, "the movie is repeated each year *because* it has become part of American culture."⁸ In other words, being broadcast on television every year has been both a cause and a result of its popularity. In fact, it would be unreasonable to assume that popularity can be generated merely by showing a movie repeatedly. If network executives at CBS agreed to broadcast *The Wizard* annually at \$225,000 for each of the first two years—an astronomical amount in 1956—and for several more years at \$150,000, it was because they expected the deal to be profitable. And from the beginning, ratings for *The Wizard* have indicated exceptional popularity.⁹ Because popularity is normally exhausted, not enhanced, by repeated broadcasts at close intervals, the continuing success of *The Wizard* is noteworthy. In short, television is only one factor, and not necessarily the most important one, involved in placing *The Wizard* somewhere near the heart of American culture.

*

The phenomenon under discussion is based on two cultural productions: a book, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (written by L. Frank Baum, published in 1900) and a movie, *The Wizard of Oz* (directed by Victor Fleming in 1939). In addition, there have been several spinoffs;¹⁰ these are interesting in their own right but the fact remains

that this particular book (along with a few others in the series by Baum) and this particular movie version remain the passports to Oz for most people.

In 1900, Baum wrote the first in his long series of Oz books. (His success was such that the series was continued even after his death; indeed, it continues to this day.) According to estimates, it had been read by around 80 million people by 1939. "It is one of the fifteen best-selling books of this century," writes William F. Brown, "with more than ten million copies now in print in twenty-two languages—including Tamil and Serbo-Croatian."¹¹ And according to Martin Gardner's introduction to a recent reprint, "*The Wizard of Oz* has become the country's greatest, best-loved fairy tale. It has never been out of print, and so many editions have been published, in the U.S. and abroad, that no one knows how many millions of copies have been sold."¹²

Baum had a great deal of respect for the works of the Grimm brothers, Hans Christian Andersen and other traditional stories for children. In his introduction to the first Oz book, he made his aims quite explicit. He wanted to write a fairy tale.

Yet the old-time fairy tale, having served for generations, may now be classed as "historical" in the children's library; for the time has come for a series of newer "wonder-tales" in which the stereotyped genie, dwarf and fairy are eliminated, together with all the horrible and blood-curdling incidents devised by their authors to point a fearsome moral to each tale. Modern education includes morality; therefore the modern child seeks only entertainment in its wonder-tales and gladly dispenses with all disagreeable incidents. Having this thought in mind, the story of "*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*" was written solely to please children of today. It aspires to being a modernized fairy tale, in which the wonderment and joy are retained and the heartaches and nightmares are left out.¹³

This however, has not prevented controversy over Baum's work. Recently, for example, parents in some communities have asked that their children not be exposed in the public schools to the "unchristian" messages of these stories.¹⁴ For generations, in fact, librarians considered the Oz books to be hackwork and refused to make them available to children. One explanation for the hostility of educators and librarians is that the style is too simple to be considered literature. Nevertheless, psychoanalyst Justin Call suggests that "the thinking processes in the book are similar to the thinking of a child. There is a great deal of primary process thinking—thinking dominated by

wishes, fears, and visual imagery; magical thinking with no respect for time, or causality, or logic."¹⁵ This may be why children themselves have always been so fond of the Oz books no matter what the authorities on children's literature said. Baum himself had no intention of writing a series of Oz books. Because few of his other books were successful, he kept returning to Oz. Indeed, children kept writing him letters asking for more Ozian adventure stories and even offering suggestions.¹⁶

There are several important differences between the book and the movie. Carol Billman has described these in "I've Seen the Movie: Oz Revisited." She prefers the filmed adaptation to the original. This is surprising because most literary critics prefer original novels to filmed versions; the latter are usually attacked as superficial renderings of the former. In this case, however, Billman points out that the movie is a significant improvement over the book in several ways. As a professor of children's literature, she notes the following:

Each semester I learn anew the omnipotence of the MGM film. Students inevitably come to the prose after the film version has been firmly impressed upon them, and they continue to read and analyze *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in terms of the later visualization. Secondly, the extraordinary number of plays and films based on the Oz fiction and especially the unequivocal success of the 1939 film raise interesting questions about the inclination to and the possibilities inherent in actually creating in visual form the world Baum imagined. The Victor Fleming film reworks both the strengths and the weaknesses in Baum's first Oz novel and in so doing earns the position it occupies in my students' minds as the authoritative work to which all other tellings of the story, even the original one, must answer.¹⁷

The film eliminates many of the charming but distracting episodes, for example, that do nothing to advance the story. Then, too, the movie provides a single narrative point of view: that of Dorothy. We see events unfold through her eyes. In the book, no perspective is clearly defined. Readers are not encouraged to identify themselves with any particular character. The book portrays Kansas as a place of unrelieved grayness and gloom. Why, then, is Dorothy so eager to return? Her attempts to do so are quite inadequately motivated. The movie, on the other hand, represents Kansas nostalgically as a cozy, turn-of-the-century farmhouse. Dorothy's family and friends are overworked but not unloving. Her desire to return is, therefore, adequately motivated. Apart from stylistic flaws in the book that are "corrected" in the film, however, there is another reason why the latter is more

successful. Baum's work relies heavily on visual imagery and color. These, of course, are used with spectacular results in the movie.

The urge to visualize children's fantasies in live action film has long been in evidence, from the adaptation of Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (which also blends color with black-and-white scenes) to more recent attempts like Disney's *Mary Poppins* and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. But none of these efforts is as technically creative or as popular as *The Wizard of Oz*. Cinematic adaptation of children's fantasy is not as easy to do successfully as it is likely to do in the first place, as the furor over Disney's animated interpretations demonstrates. But *The Wizard of Oz* transcends its original in American popular culture, and by acts of both omission and commission the makers of the film produced a vision that deservedly overlays and conditions readers' responses to L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. The film's inventive approach to make-believe is, after all, what wizardry is all about.¹⁸

Harmetz describes the care lavished upon MGM's production of *The Wizard*. Apparently, no expense was spared; in the end, it cost \$2,777,000. It "was from the outset considered an important film," she writes. "It cost more and took longer to make than any other MGM film made that year."¹⁹ And although it took over twenty years to make a profit, according to Harmetz, "the picture was probably never intended to make money. . . . *The Wizard of Oz* was intended as a prestige picture that would more or less break even."²⁰ As a result of the time and money lavished upon it, this movie is a piece of cinematic virtuosity. Not surprisingly, almost everyone associated with its production is now remembered primarily for working on it.²¹

Popular culture is saturated with references to Oz. Countless games, toys, books, articles of clothing, postcards, souvenirs and other artifacts are based on it. Consequently, it is only to be expected that references to Oz abound in other movies and even in advertisements and commercials. Possibly the most striking illustration of its place in American life was provided by an Independence Day concert in Boston. On July 4, 1987, the Boston Pops Espalade Orchestra, directed by John Williams, played "The Star Spangled Banner" and then launched immediately into selections from *The Wizard*—"We're Off to See the Wizard," "If I Only Had a Brain" and "Over the Rainbow" (see Figure 1). (For a fuller discussion of *The Wizard* in popular culture, see Appendix 2.) The success of *The Wizard* has been so massive and so enduring that its place in American life (quite apart from that of the book) requires an additional explanation, one that

goes beyond its ability to provide casual entertainment. What is it about this movie that transcends the boundaries separating races, classes, sexes, generations, and regions? This is the question to be answered here.

At issue, then, is not whether anyone involved in producing *The Wizard* consciously set out to create a secular myth. The conscious motivations of the MGM team may well have focused on more worldly aims. It is safe to assume that studio officials were interested primarily in making a profit at the box office (or, as Harnetz points out, earning prestige that would be translated into box office revenues from other studio productions). Their subconscious motivations are another matter. If this movie was not the result of their conscious decision to create a secular myth, it was not the result of pure chance either. Hollywood has always been famous for its ability to reflect the values and give expression to the collective daydreams of America. To a large extent, this can be explained by the fact that intuition is rewarded in the movie industry. Movies are financially successful, after all, only when millions of people find that their needs or desires are satisfied. And they become classics (or myths) only when millions of people over several generations find that their deepest needs or desires are satisfied. If *The Wizard* has become part of the collective mentality, it is at least partly because it was produced by people who were sensitive to symbolic associations deeply embedded in the fabric of American culture. Like those responsible for every other great work of the imagination, the creators of this movie were guided by impulses they themselves may not have fully understood. But whatever they were trying to do, consciously or unconsciously, is not the main issue here. This book is not about the few hundred people who produced *The Wizard* in 1939 except insofar as they were like the millions of people who have loved it ever since. It is not about why decisions were made but about why those decisions have succeeded so brilliantly.

*

To date, very little research has been done on *The Wizard*. Virtually every book on the history of American film mentions it, of course, because of its continuing popularity and its technical virtuosity. In other words, it is generally taken at face value as a movie that entertains children superbly but does little else. It is true that several works on Oziana have appeared recently.²² In addition, several books and articles on the movie itself have

been published. These include: *The Munchkins Remember*, by Stephen Cox; *Down the Yellow Brick Road*, by Doug McClelland; *The Making of The Wizard of Oz*, by Aljean Harmetz; and *The Official 50th Anniversary Pictorial History*, by John Fricke, Jay Scarfone, and William Stillman.²³ Unlike some beautifully illustrated but anecdotal works, the last two provide thorough accounts of the movie's production during the halcyon days of Hollywood's studio system—scripts, music, casting, directors, costumes, sets, special effects, and so forth—the reception given it by critics at the time, and the countless spinoffs that have been associated with it ever since. But they are historical rather than analytical in approach. Some attempts at analysis, though, have appeared in collections and journals.

The most common analytical approach seems to be psychoanalytical.²⁴ David Magder²⁵ suggests that *The Wizard* be considered a "parable of brief psychotherapy." In his words, "The Scarecrow, the Tinman and the Cowardly Lion represent syndromes with which most therapists are familiar: low self-esteem based on the sense that one is not intelligent or capable of dealing with the world as one would like to, or sense of inability to respond emotionally or affectively, and anxiety or fearfulness in dealing with the day to day problems of living."²⁶ Consequently, they seek therapeutic help from the Wizard. When he points out that all they lack is belief in themselves and that they have already demonstrated the very qualities they imagine are lacking, they are immediately cured.

Apparently, the three friends—Magder does not discuss Dorothy herself—are just like his own patients. Since the disorder in question is not traumatically induced, therapy based on cognitive readjustment is effective. He cites several case studies. A graduate student, for example, worried about not being intellectual enough; believing himself incapable of doing original work, he plagiarized the work of others. A university professor, on the other hand, worried about being too intellectual; believing himself incapable of sustaining emotional ties with his wife, he was ready to give up on his marriage. And a clerk in the cancer ward of a hospital worried excessively about her own mortality; believing herself incapable of functioning under stress, she relied on tranquilizers. In each case, the patient failed to observe behavior that contradicted the negative self-evaluation. The student devoted so much time to concealing his plagiarism that he was, in effect, producing original work; the professor's distress over marital problems revealed him as anything but unfeeling; and the clerk's performance in the hospital indicated that she was very much in control of the situation. As in the book or the movie, then, therapy depended on showing patients that "their worst fears about themselves were not only groundless but totally the reverse of the situation."²⁷

Magder also notes several other parallels between the book or the movie and psychotherapy. Even after the Wizard is exposed as a charlatan, Dorothy and her friends are still impressed by his confident, persuasive, commonsensical approach to their problems. Magder says that "This reflects the idea...that expectancy and beliefs in a therapist play a major role in any therapeutic endeavor."²⁸ Moreover, he notes that there is a link between success in the task of killing the Witch and the cognitive-behavioral shifts that take place later on in connection with the Wizard. In successfully completing the task, each of the friends has had occasion to do something that disproves his former self-image. The Scarecrow demonstrates cunning; the Tin Man demonstrates devotion and loyalty to his companions (not to mention anger at possible harm to them); and the Lion demonstrates ability to overcome fear in the service of others. As a psychotherapist, the Wizard had only to remind his patients of what they had obviously done for themselves. These parallels with psychotherapy "could be considered just a whimsical footnote in the history of behavioral change," writes Magder, "except for the fact that the popularity and familiarity of the story make it a useful metaphor for illustrating and teaching therapeutic techniques which have major clinical application."²⁹

Daniel Dervin and Harvey Greenberg are more ambitious. They use Freudian psychology to probe subconscious levels of meaning in *The Wizard*. In "Over the Rainbow and under the Twister,"³⁰ Dervin explains that Dorothy is troubled by conflicts over identity that arise from witnessing the "primal scene" (that is, sexual intercourse between her parents). Her adventure in Oz represents every young girl's passage through the phallic and oedipal phases of psychological development. In "*The Wizard of Oz*: Little Girl Lost—and Found,"³¹ Greenberg takes a revisionist approach to Freudian analysis. This allows him to present a somewhat richer and more convincing interpretation. For him, Dorothy is not an infant of three or four but an adolescent moving quickly into adulthood (which corresponds to the age of Judy Garland when she played the role of Dorothy). Since I discuss both of these psychoanalytical interpretations in detail later, I will indicate here only that they are both flawed for similar reasons. The former depends on evidence not supplied in the movie itself while the latter ignores evidence that is supplied. Even though both are very suggestive, they are only partially satisfactory.

At least one Marxist interpretation has appeared. In "Over the Rainbow: Dialectic and Ideology in *The Wizard of Oz*," Gregory

Renault argues that *The Wizard* is a response to advanced capitalism. It is a "critique of false values, a denunciation of the reification of the goal of an activity, and of the purely instrumental rationality used in pursuit of that goal."³² In other words, all the major characters in Oz, except for Glinda and the Wizard, are seeking something they already have or are in the process of discovering in themselves. They mistake the quest for a means to some other end instead of realizing that the quest is an end in itself. Renault's interpretation is based on the assumption that Oz is unreal. Although Dorothy learns a great deal about means and ends, about interdependence and so forth, she is left to work out the implications of this alone when she wakes up in Kansas, which, for Renault, is the real world of everyday life. What troubles him is the fact that although *The Wizard* correctly identifies a major source of alienation in American life, it fails to solve the problem. By suggesting that alienation can be ended by simply looking into oneself and changing one's own attitude, the movie implies that external and systemic forms of evil and alienation are inconsequential. In fact, he says that this

amounts to an affirmation of the essential benevolence of the existing order of things. The emphasis is on the self-sufficiency of the micro-cosmic, private, sphere of life. The message is clearly that we need not seek outside for what is already inside—that one should not envision as an end-object what is already present within the very process of seeking.... Thus the ethical stance of the Judaeo-Christian tradition preserved in liberal theology is perpetuated within the film's contemporary analysis of alienation.... The Procrustean reduction of social problems to matters of individual cause in *The Wizard of Oz* leaves the film's basic issue unresolved.³³

Renault is too hasty in assuming that Oz is unreal. As a dream, of course, it could be considered unreal. This may have been the way it was intended to be understood. And this is certainly the way most people think about it. But I have found that, on a deeper level, Oz corresponds in many ways to conditions in the real world of everyday life. Implicitly, if not explicitly, the situation is more complicated than Renault allows. If I am correct, then his conclusion is superficial. It is precisely in Oz—a confusing, alienating, and dangerous world that, not unlike our own, offers glimpses of the sacred—that Dorothy cooperates with friends to defeat and even transform evil.

Linda Hansen, on the other hand, argues that *The Wizard* is a theological reflection, disguised in secular terms, of the classic religious quest. In "Experiencing the World as Home: Reflections on

Dorothy's Quest in *The Wizard of Oz*,"³⁴ she argues that the goal is Home. By this, she refers not merely to Dorothy's particular home on a farm in Kansas but to the state of being at home in the world. Home is the state of mind in which we feel joy at simply being alive, being who we are and being with others. On the quest, we learn that being truly at home in the world means empowering others and being, in turn, empowered by them. For Hansen as for Renault, Kansas is the real world of everyday life (although it will be transformed after the vision or revelation of Oz has been assimilated). But Hansen agrees with Dorothy, unlike Renault, that Oz, too, is real. "I realized," she writes, "that Oz only seems unreal if we dismiss the reality of dreams."³⁵ What makes Dorothy "religious," thinks Hansen, is her persistent belief in Oz and in the joy that is possible even in Kansas. "Dorothy's concern for joy," says Hansen, "is not wishful thinking, not foolishness, but the expression of her sense that joy has a reality, or deeper reality, even than the grayness of Kansas which seems like the 'real world' most of the time to most of us."³⁶ In short, "Oz is best understood by Dorothy the way we understand dreams, art, literature, therapy: not as a way of escaping Kansas, but as energizing her for Kansas, for the work of bringing joyful possibilities to life there. This integration of Oz and Kansas is Dorothy's task; because of Oz, she is ready now for Kansas to be home. And this integration of the possibility of joy in this world in which we live is also, I believe, the task of the religious life."³⁷

For Hansen, in other words, Oz is a kind of liminal experience, a glimpse of the sacred that sends us back into the profane world with the intention of sanctifying it. Hansen also sees *The Wizard* as a critique of power—including religious power. Seeking it, the Witch is destroyed by it. Pretending to have it, the Wizard is exposed as a fraud. Using it to empower others, however, Glinda alone truly understands it. Accordingly, this kind of empowerment is at the heart of what it means to be at home in the world.

In "Waiting for Godoz: A Post-Nasal Deconstruction of *The Wizard of Oz*," David Downing presents another perceptive, though brief, theological analysis. "The 1939 cinematic adaptation of Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*," he writes, "has been called a film classic. It has been called the ultimate children's fantasy. It has been called a mythopoeic milestone. Yet few have recognized the work for what it really is: one of the most devastating exposés of institutional religion ever to reach the screen."³⁸ Like Renault and many others, Downing assumes that Oz is an unreal reflection of Kansas reality. It is pre-

sented as a dream, after all, and dreams are usually assumed to be unreal. "This, then, is the central thesis of the film: that the metaphysical realm posited by religious devotees is nothing more than a projection of the physical realm, a place in which psychic defenses may be revealed and hidden longings fulfilled."³⁹ Like so many people, he observes, Dorothy is troubled by the inadequacy of the world as it is. She longs for a better world, for "pie in the sky." She succumbs, in other words, to the kind of escapism that, according to Downing, is characteristic of organized religion. Once in Oz, however, she discovers that her fantasy of an ideal world is even more flawed than the reality she had left behind. Almost immediately, she sets off on her "pilgrimage" down the Yellow Brick Road. Joining her on this "Grail-like quest" are three friends who, like Dorothy herself, are troubled by *Angst*, or spiritual emptiness. "The Scarecrow seeks a brain. He goes to the Wizard to find metaphysical certainty, philosophical foundations, a *raison d'être*. The tin man seeks a heart—a transcendent basis for love, a sense of belonging and community. The lion searches for nothing less than, in Paul Tillich's phrase, the Courage to Be."⁴⁰

From the beginning, claims Downing, the experience in Oz is profoundly disillusioning. Even the Munchkins are cynical enough to question the Wizard's existence. According to him, they are agnostics who keep repeating their doubts about supernatural beings who perform signs and wonders: "If ever, oh ever, a Wiz there was...." Downing ignores the fact that the Munchkins have no such doubts when it comes to witches. Nevertheless, he is on safer ground when discussing the Wizard himself. He lives in a "temple" or "cathedral" at the heart of what could be described as a heavenly city. Like the ancient Israelites, the citizens are not allowed to enter the Holy of Holies. In fact, they have never even seen the Wizard. No wonder Dorothy asks them: "Then how do you know he exists?" The question remains unanswered. In spite of all the pomp and pageantry surrounding the Wizard, no evidence of his existence, let alone his power, has been offered. When Dorothy and her friends actually do meet him, however, they find him to be a fraud who is literally projected to larger-than-life dimensions. Mortal though he may be, the Wizard is kind enough and wise enough to help Dorothy's friends. Merely believing in him is enough. "The implication," according to Downing, "is that the religious quest fulfills psychological needs regardless of its actual truth value."⁴¹ Contradicting himself, Downing then observes that if this movie is a deconstruction of organized religion it is not a deconstruction of religion itself. To be sure, the

Wizard is an ordinary person posing as a deity, but this is not true of Glinda. She is a truly supernatural being. Unlike the Wizard, she is not a projection of any earthly character (that is, anyone from Kansas). On the contrary, "Glenda [sic] is always acting, always intervening on Dorothy's behalf. Yet she does so indirectly. She appears according to her own timing, not according to Dorothy's, and she is apparently absent when Dorothy seems most desperately in need of her.⁴² What *The Wizard* rejects, according to Downing, is not the existence of God but the manipulation and exploitation characteristic of organized religion. Glinda herself tells Dorothy that dependence on external sources of power is unnecessary. There is much to be said for this interpretation. Unlike Renault's explanation, Downing's is not arcane. It is in keeping with the tendency toward skepticism and the emphasis on self-reliance characteristic of American society. In brief, it makes sense of the massive popularity of this movie. Nevertheless, the appeal of this movie is by no means restricted to "secular humanists."

These theological analyses are noteworthy. Since only one passing reference to religion is made in the movie, and since popular culture is seldom associated with anything profound such as religion, *The Wizard* is usually assumed to be secular. Although it involves some fantastic events and supernatural beings, these take place in the context of a dream; as a result, they are not taken seriously by many except as dramatic devices to capture the imagination of children. In other words, *The Wizard* is usually seen as a fairy tale—a story told to entertain children and possibly help them cope with the emotional problems of growing up. Even so, the situation may be more complicated. I have already suggested that *The Wizard* has taken on vaguely religious overtones. Because it is broadcast annually as a special event, viewers are able to recite the dialogue and sing the songs along with the actors as if they were participants in a festival liturgy. The races, classes, sexes, and generations of which American society consists are thus united by shared experiences and memories. As we have just seen, moreover, several authors also suggest that this movie is not unrelated to religion, be it through inspiration, satire, or both. At the end of my analysis, I propose that it has some specifically mythic properties. Even a superficial examination, however, suggests that *The Wizard* deals at some level with the great problems of human existence such as Origin (Where have we come from?), Destiny (Where are we going?), Home (Where do we belong?), Identity (Who

are we in relation to other entities?), and Cosmology (Is the world friendly, hostile, or indifferent to us?). Moreover, its use of fantastic imagery is reminiscent of traditional myths that tell of superhuman beings and supernatural forces irrupting into the world of everyday life. In short, *The Wizard* shows signs of being ambiguously related to both religion (especially, myth) and secularity. But what, precisely, is the relation between religion and secularity? Are they mutually exclusive? Can something be both religious and secular at the same time?

*

Ever since the social sciences were founded, a single model of secularization has reigned supreme. This was summarized by Bryan Wilson in a collection of essays commissioned by The Society for the Scientific Study of Religion as an update to an earlier volume on the subject. "In essence," he writes of secularization, "it is related to a process of transfer of property, power, activities, and both manifest and latent functions, from institutions with a supernaturalist frame of reference to (often new) institutions operating according to empirical, rational, pragmatic criteria."⁴³ This notion of the increasing marginality of religion is almost always accompanied by two assumptions: that the process always moves in one direction (from religion to secularity) and that the process is irreversible. Many scholars now reject or modify this rigid definition to account for what they observe in the contemporary world. These revisionists recognize, for example, that industrialization, urbanization, and technological advances do not always correlate with a decline in religious institutions; that religion is no longer always "contained" by formal institutions; that a variety of symbol systems may function to create identity and meaning just as traditional religious systems do; and that the rise of countercultural religious movements and evangelical Protestantism in America, Islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East, and liberation theology in the Third World cannot simply be dismissed as irrelevant anachronisms. According to Peter Glasner, the term *secular* has been so misused by social scientists that its meaning has been obscured rather than clarified. In *The Sociology of Secularisation: A Critique of a Concept*, he states explicitly that "most theories of secularisation are really generalisations from limited empirical findings used by social scientists to bolster an implicit ideology of progress."⁴⁹ This approach to secularity, he argues, is based on three mistaken assumptions about religion: (1) that there was a time when Western civilization was "really religious" or that the most secular form of culture is

modernity (which implies that progress toward the same rational and secular norms can be expected in "developing nations"); (2) that the impact of religion is felt uniformly throughout society; and (3) that religion can be identified with the institutions prevalent in contemporary Western societies (or those institutions at an earlier time). Glasner rejects these generalizations. He notes Roland Robertson's warning against attributing too much importance to the current situation: "Presentism, that posture which tends to claim the uniqueness of the modern period, clouds our judgment as to the long-drawn-out historical unfolding of changes we diagnose in the modern world, and also persuades us that the changes we see are inevitably coming to some early point of termination or fruition."⁴⁵ In effect, Glasner finds that the term "secularity" has been used to promote a "social myth," or ideology of progress that cannot be supported by the evidence. According to the prevailing model of secularity, an empirical, rational, and pragmatic orientation inevitably supersedes religious orientations based on the experience of supernatural beings (spirits or deities) and forces. I suggest that we need a more nuanced understanding of the various ways in which religion and secularity are related.⁴⁶ Otherwise, there would be no way to account for the overlap that frequently exists.

Communism, for example, is an explicitly antireligious ideology that, nevertheless, has many characteristics of religion. Like Christianity, it is a system of symbols. Moreover, it presents Marx as the founder-hero, Lenin as the faithful disciple, and *Das Kapital* as the authoritative text. These function, as Clifford Geertz would say, by establishing powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods (hope or expectancy) and motivations (for the class struggle) based on the communist conception of order: fragmentation in space is transcended when the individual merges with the collectivity. Similarly, fragmentation in time is transcended when past and present reach their ultimate and inevitable goals, the classless utopia of the future. Dialectical materialism gives history meaning, purpose, and direction; consequently, the suffering of individuals and communities can be explained in terms of a more universal order. In fact, basic human problems are all explicable through dialectical materialism. Ignorance (false consciousness), pain (poverty and powerlessness), and evil (bourgeois exploitation) can be accepted because they are not ultimate; on the contrary, they are transient and will inevitably disappear in the post revolutionary utopia. The truth of dialectical materialsim is neither self-evident nor empirically verifiable from an external point of view. Like religion, it

is based on belief rather than knowledge; the source of this belief is the authority of Marx himself and his writings. In fact, proto-communist societies have made extensive use of ritual to lend even greater authority to the teachings of Marx and their application by his heirs. Submerging individuals in the collective mass at May Day parades, for instance, or presenting the ubiquitous image of Chairman Mao to them not only expresses the sociocultural system, it also shapes it by providing models to which people may conform. Once people have seen the truth of their own exploitation, once the veil of false-consciousness has been lifted, it is difficult not to see the same forces at work everywhere; with the expectation of similar results, the same logic can be applied to all social, economic, and political problems in all places.

These similarities between communism and religion did not escape the attention of Mircea Eliade. In *The Sacred and the Profane*,⁴⁷ he discussed the functional equivalents, which include not only the obvious symbolic parallels (the "proletariat" for the "chosen people" or the "elect" and the "classless society" for the "Messianic Age" or the "Kingdom of God"), but also an ontological one (an absolute end to history for the eschatology of Judaism and Christianity.) In this, he was unlike some other historicist philosophers for whom the tensions of history are inherent in the human condition and, therefore, can never be escaped. Although Eliade does not go on to say (in this particular passage) why communism is still different from Judaism and Christianity, his basic understanding of the sacred makes the difference clear. In Judaism and Christianity, both the primeval past and the eschatological future are ritually appropriated in the present as sacred time. In communism, there is no corresponding provision for the experience of sacred time. Since the eschatological future cannot be experienced in the present through ritual or hierophany, utopia remains a future projection.

But communism can be seen as a functional equivalent to aspects of religion only in societies where it is the established orthodoxy and given public expression. There are examples of the ambiguous relation between secularity and religion closer to home. By its very nature as an immigrant society, America is religiously heterogeneous. Religion means different things to different people. By its constitutional separation of church and state, moreover, it is also an officially secular society. The relation between secularity and religion in this context is somewhat different. Even though many American churches

are in the process of institutional decline, for example, there is evidence (to be discussed more fully in the concluding chapter) that most Americans still consider themselves religious. Polls consistently indicate that the vast majority of Americans believe in God and life after death (standard indicators of Christian faith). Besides, the evangelical churches are resurgent. The same is true of traditional Jewish groups such as the Hassidim. New religious movements, some originating in the United States and others in Asia, are also gaining popularity. On the other hand, many Americans are indifferent to religion in any overt or traditional form. They associate religion with Christianity and Christianity with superstition. They accept a scientific description of the physical universe and recognize the legitimacy of no other. They expect medical researchers to find cures for diseases and other scientists to cure the problems created by industrial pollution. They do not turn to faith healers or wonder workers for solutions to such problems.

Between these two extremes, however, are many forms of cultural mediation. Many churches, for example, continue to use sacred symbols and rites inherited from the past but interpret them in radically different ways; they no longer refer to an ontologically distinct realm of experience that could be called "supernatural" or even "superhuman" but to ones that could be, and often are, described in purely sociological or psychological terms. And even though science has become a respectable worldview for many Americans, it may nevertheless be only superficially internalized. Evidence for this can be found not only in the resurgence of traditional forms of religion among highly educated Americans, but also in the popularity of astrology and the occult, in the proliferation of movies and television programs that explore the supernatural through science fiction and in the headlines about "creationists" who challenge scientific assumptions about the origin of the present natural order by using science itself, even if adjusted to serve their purposes, as their chief weapon against "secular humanism." In fact, the situation is even more complex. Two prominent features of American life, Christmas and Memorial Day, illustrate the flexible boundary between religion and secularity in America. The former has an explicitly religious origin (the nativity of Christ) that has been transformed into a midwinter festival in which members of secular society (and even members of non-Christians religious traditions) can participate; the latter has an explicitly secular origin (the Civil War) that has been

given explicitly religious expression. (For a fuller discussion of this, see Appendix 3.) *The Wizard*, I suggest, is another form of mediation that illustrates the flexible boundary between religion and secularity, one that is characteristic of American culture in our time.