HOLLYWOOD'S PORTRAYAL OF RELIGION

Peter E. Dans

***Christians in the Movies: A Century of Saints and Sinners* by Peter E. Dans (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers)**

This book documents the changing portrayal of Christians in film from 1905 through 2008. Films respectful of Christianity such as "Lilies of the Field," "The Greatest Story Ever Told," "The Sound of Music," and "A Man for All Seasons," were made well into the 1960s. This changed to disparagement and outright ridicule around 1970. The principal reasons were the abolition of the Motion Picture Production Code (the Code was replaced in 1968 by a weaker Motion Picture Association of America film ratings system), the elimination of the Legion of Decency, and a radical change in American culture.

In 1922, reacting to complaints by predominantly Protestant groups about Hollywood sex and drug scandals as well as the proliferation of movie censorship boards, filmmakers established the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America with Will Hays, a Presbyterian, as director. Hays' efforts to reconcile disparate censorship criteria led to the 1930 Motion Picture Production Code aimed at maintaining good taste, especially when filming scenes that involved sex, violence, religion, and other sensitive subjects. The "Hays Code" required that "the sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home should be upheld" and that no picture should glorify "crime, wrongdoing, evil, or sin." It also stated that "No film or episode should throw ridicule on any religious faith. Ministers of religion in their character as ministers of religion should not be used as comic characters or as villains. Ceremonies of any definite religion should be carefully and respectfully handled." Hays hired as his deputy

the devout Catholic, Joseph I. Breen, who became the face of the Production Code Administration Office to the industry.

In 1933, partly in response to films flouting the Code, like "Sign of the Cross," American bishops established the Catholic Legion of Decency. Because many Protestant and Jewish clergymen signed on, the name was changed to the National Legion of Decency in 1934. The Legion rated films from "acceptable for all" to "condemned" and wielded great influence because the economic clout of the large Catholic population could be harnessed through the extensive network of Catholic schools and churches. Breen and Legion director Martin Quigley were often consulted about scripts and final cuts in enforcing the Production Code. Although many critics denigrate the Code as censorship, the inconvenient truth is that its enforcement coincided with "Hollywood's Golden Age," with 1939 recognized as the "Golden Year."

In the 1940s and 1950s, Howard Hughes, Otto Preminger and others challenged the Code's strictures. The importation of critically acclaimed, sexually explicit foreign films, which were not subject to the Code, added pressure to modify or abolish it. The official end came in the legal challenge to Dallas banning the French movie, "Viva Maria!", starring Brigitte Bardot and Jeanne Moreau. In April 1968, the Supreme Court upheld the First Amendment rights of filmmakers to show their films, but ordered the Motion Picture Industry to develop a self-policing system promptly, which it did.

In the mid-60s, the Legion of Decency was replaced by the National Catholic Office of Motion Pictures' much more permissive advisory rating system. At the same time, the decrees of Vatican II led to sweeping changes in distinctive practices, many of which were used as convenient shorthand for depicting Catholicism in films. These included the abandonment of the proscription against eating meat on Friday, the need to fast overnight before receiving Communion, the requirement that nuns wear distinctive habits, and the use of Latin in the

Mass. These changes sent shock waves through Catholic circles, polarizing many believers. The next few decades saw a sharp drop in vocations to the religious life, the release of many priests and nuns from their vows, a decrease in attendance at Sunday Mass, and the marked diminution of regular confessions, which had also been a favorite staple in movies with Catholic themes. After Vatican II, catechetics and liturgies were watered down and an increasing number of those identifying themselves as Catholics began to reject Church teaching beginning with birth control, premarital sex, divorce, abortion, homosexuality, and later in vitro fertilization, embryonic stem-cell research, assisted suicide, and, in rare instances, cloning.

Protestant and Jewish denominations attempting to hold on to orthodox dogma that codified right and wrong with regard to abortion, premarital sex, and homosexuality, also saw declines in membership. By the 1970s, the so-called "Me Generation," began to turn more inward, placing more emphasis on self-actualization and self-fulfillment. As Americans became more affluent and secure, there seemed to be less of a need for regular Church attendance and practicing a faith whose God demanded behaviors that restricted lifestyle choices. This was replaced by widespread attitudes of cultural relativism and the philosophy of secular humanism.

This philosophy was reinforced by Supreme Court rulings beginning in the 1940s regarding various "church-state" issues. The result is that, as Yale Law professor Stephen L. Carter noted in his 1993 book *The Culture of Disbelief*, a wall of separation has been erected between church and state such that believers are encouraged "to act publicly, and sometimes privately as well, as though their faith doesn't matter." Indeed, the courts have increasingly become the principal venues for adjudicating contentious and complex moral issues. This has led to an escalation in the conflict between the orthodoxy of religious believers and that of secular non-

believers as Princeton professor Robert George pointed out in his 1999 book *The Clash of Orthodoxies*.

That such a gulf in orthodoxies exists between filmmakers and their audiences was shown in a 1998 University of Texas survey of a representative sample of Hollywood writers, actors, producers, and executives in that only 2 to 3 percent attended religious services weekly compared to about 41 percent of the public at that time. This cultural disconnect was reflected in their movies and the reaction to "The Passion of the Christ" (2004). Although many believers and nonbelievers were moved by the film, most critics seemed both incredulous and seemingly threatened by its broad popularity. However, that the film went on to earn over $700 million did not escape Hollywood's notice.

Fundamentalist Christians have been almost uniformly portrayed negatively as charlatan preachers, unenlightened dupes, and mean-spirited hypocrites, the only saving grace being their appearance in relatively few films. Mainstream Protestant sects, once prevalent in movies, have virtually disappeared from the screen. Catholics turn out to be the most ubiquitous in film, both favorably early on and disparagingly after 1970. In part, this is due to Roman Catholicism being the largest Christian sect in America, and because of the Church's role in the strict enforcement of the Hays Code and its adherence to politically incorrect dogma. Anti-Catholicism, which Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger, Sr. called "the deepest bias in the history of the American people," persists. As Philip Jenkins describes in his 2003 book, *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Respectable Prejudice*, the animus against the Catholic Church is now most evident in academic circles and those media outlets which seek out dissident Catholics whenever reporting on controversial moral issues.

Ironically, though, many of the contemporary films that ridicule Catholicism most severely have been made by "cradle Catholics" who attended Catholic schools. These directors have

either become “fallen-away Catholics” (or “recovering Catholics” as some prefer to be called) or “liberal” Catholics who reject much Catholic dogma. Prominent examples include Robert Altman, who aimed some of his sharpest barbs at Christianity in “M*A*S*H,” and Kevin Smith, who considers himself a devout Catholic while not buying into Church dogma on abortion, homosexuality, etc. His disdain for dogma and the institutional church permeated his 1999 film “Dogma.”

By contrast, the only unalloyed encomia Hollywood has recently bestowed on believers seem to be reserved for those who practice Eastern religions like Buddhism, as in the 1997 films “Kundun” and “Seven Years in Tibet,” or forms of New Age spirituality as in the 1996 film “Phenomenon” and the numerous “angel” films. The major distinction here is that unlike Christianity and Orthodox Judaism, they are more personal in nature and can be embraced without requiring any commitment to specific dogmas, especially those related to sexual and reproductive matters.

Why should Christians care about how film and the other media portray them? The simple answer is that feature films remain, as they have been since their inception, powerful tools for framing public opinion. Admittedly, Christians, including Catholics, may not have been as good as they were depicted in their glory days, but they are certainly nothing like the hateful stereotypes in today’s movies. In short, it’s time to restore balance. Constant negativity is not only detrimental to institutions and professions, but has a polarizing and corrosive effect on society.

My wish is that this book will stimulate readers to take another look at films they once enjoyed and to discover hidden gems that they have never seen before. I also hope it will encourage orthodox Christian believers who have stopped going to movies to get more involved in helping to reshape this important industry, which all agree has badly lost its way. As the Christopher movement points out, if one of us lights a

candle, we can illuminate our space but if each of us does, we can illuminate the world.

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