

Christianity and the Cinema:
An introduction to their relationship

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Mass Communication & Society

2001

Christianity and the cinema have had a long relationship dating back to the very beginnings of cinema. Though only an introductory look into this complex relationship, my research attempts to highlight some events throughout its history and bring into discussion various aspects of this relationship, including the role of cinema and art in the church, portrayals of Christ, Christianity, and Christians in the movies, the Production Code and its implications, and protests against movies deemed disrespectful of the church, such as *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988). My research materials and methods included reading several books on the subject of theology and film, looking back to a text from a film history course, and watching several films which dealt more or less directly with the subject of Christianity or which involved one or more characters who were Christians. In addition, I surveyed several people on three recent films in order to gain an understanding of what some others felt about recent portrayals of Christianity. As mentioned earlier, this paper is only a beginning of a body of research of which I have been prompted to pursue, for it involves the two most important aspects of my own life.

From the very beginning, Christianity has had a formative relationship with the cinema. “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1:3-4). “The next step was taken in 1887 in Newark, New Jersey, when an Episcopalian minister named Hannibal Goodwin first used celluloid roll film as a base for light-sensitive emulsions” (Cook 4). This is the same celluloid roll film that George Eastman began to mass-produce and market in 1889. Some of the first films ever made featured Christianity, such as *The Passion Play of Oberammergau* (1898), patterned after medieval Passion plays and featuring thirteen minute-long tableaux from the trial and death of Jesus, and *The Temptation of St. Anthony* (1898) by Georges Méliès, the director of the well-known film *A Trip To The Moon* (1902) (Miles 6).

In the 1920’s, the American cinema saw a proliferation of films depicting, and sometimes glorifying divorce, alcoholism, drug addiction, and adultery, reflecting the Jazz era’s “new morality.” The advent of sound ushered in an increased realism in depictions of violence and allowed vulgarity to be heard by the audience. This immorality depicted in films, coupled with

Hollywood scandals such as Fatty Arbuckle being charged with rape and murder, brought about a public outcry to clean up the movies. This public outcry resulted in the undertaking of the Payne Fund Studies during the years 1929-1932. Nationally known university psychologists, sociologists, and education specialists conducted this series of twelve investigations of the effects of motion pictures on children. “The Payne Fund findings confirmed the worst – the movies did seem to bring new ideas to children; did influence interpretations of the world and day-to-day conduct; did present moral standards, particularly with regard to sexual behavior, different from those of many adults” (Cook 281). These findings in turn brought about the “Legion of Decency” and the Hays Office Production Code. The “Legion of Decency” called for a nationwide boycott of movies deemed indecent by the Catholic Church in 1934. This, just after the Depression and its financial problems, greatly intimidated the Hollywood studios, thus bringing about the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) which was an organization formed by the industry itself in order to avoid government censorship. It in turn appointed Will Hays to supervise a self-censorship program. Will Hays, being the Postmaster General of the United States, the chairman of the Republican Party, and an elder in the Presbyterian Church, gave Hollywood a strong sense of respectability and morality. The Production Code of 1930, known as the Hays Code, dramatically affected the entire industry’s movie production. I found a copy of the Code on a website named artsreformation.com. The Production Code’s General Principles stated:

1. No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.
2. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
3. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

Under these general principles, there were such specific applications as “the technique of murder

must be presented in a way that will not inspire imitation”, “illegal drug traffic must never be presented”, “miscegenation (sex relationships between the white and black races) is forbidden”, and “no film or episode may throw ridicule on any religious faith.” The way in which the Hays Code operated was that scripts were submitted for approval by the Hays Office, and if they were not acceptable, they would have to be rewritten or would not be produced. At this time, many of the nation’s movie theaters were owned by the Hollywood studios, so if a movie wasn’t presented by the studio, then chances are that it wasn’t presented at all. Thus the Hays Code was very effective in preventing the production of that which it deemed immoral. Though this code did help to clean up the movies in some respects, it also promoted as “moral” some values, such as “white slavery shall not be treated” or “the use of the Flag shall be consistently respectful,” which were simply middle American values and had nothing to do with any Biblical right and wrong. The Hays Code may have done more harm than good, since it deemed the mere depictions of some things immoral. As I will discuss a little later, some view the cinema, and all of art for that matter, as performing a sort of “cultural exorcism,” and the Hays Code in preventing the depiction of some major cultural problems of its time may have actually prevented society from dealing with those very problems. A U. S. Supreme Court ruling in May 1952 brought First Amendment protection to the movies. Before this, the movies were not considered as part of the press and therefore were not under the First Amendment’s protection. The rise of independent productions, foreign films, and Supreme Court rulings caused the Production Code to fall by the wayside. Much immorality thus proliferated in the American cinema. It is quite possible that the presence of the Code may have had just as much to do with this proliferation as did its removal. In any case, a new ratings system was put in place in 1968 by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) which simply classified movies by which age group or segment of the population for which each movie was appropriate (Cook 514). Thus was the end of Hollywood’s official self-censorship.

Any discussion of Christianity and the cinema, Hollywood of the 1920’s and 1930’s, and the Hays Production Code would not be complete without mentioning Cecil B. DeMille. Cecil

B. DeMille (1881-1959) created some of the greatest religious spectacles in movie making history, including *The Ten Commandments* (1923), which he remade in 1956 in a full-color widescreen edition, *King of Kings* (1927), *The Sign of The Cross* (1932), and *Samson and Delilah* (1949). DeMille “gave the public what they wanted – a religious gloss over salacious scenes.” (Johnston 33). DeMille’s religious epics drew much public approval, but also drew much church opposition. Under the Hays Code, DeMille was able to vividly depict sin and debauchery as long as it was ultimately punished. Though ending with the punishment of sin and the presentation of some moral lesson, his movies were accused of overindulgence in violence, sex, murder, and torture. Though religious himself, DeMille became the target of religious opposition. Perhaps he did overindulge in the depictions of sin, but perhaps as a whole, his movies were in fact moral. For, according to Anthony Schillaci, “If we portray sin as completely without lure, then we are not being moral, but immoral, in the sense of unrealistic” (37).

With a bit of history out of the way, I now venture into some of the theory involved with the relationship between Christianity and the cinema, the role of art in the church, and cinema taking that role. Art and imagery have always had a very important place in the lives of Christians. “Within historical Christianity, religious images gave a focus to and informed piety. Cinema can be seen as continuous with a long tradition in which images have been used to produce emotion, to strengthen attachment, and to encourage imitation” (Miles 3). While attending a Catholic grade school, I can remember going through the “Stations of the Cross,” which were representations of the events during the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. These images provided me with a mental picture of what took place during these crucial events in the life of Jesus. I had an image to put along side the words of the account. How much more vivid is a filmic presentation of these events. Imagery is what helps us to visualize the invisible. Though images have been an integral part of historical Christianity, especially within Catholicism, some in Protestantism have often times equated the use of imagery in the church with idolatry. Some have viewed the commandment, “You shall not make for yourself an idol... You shall not bow

down to them or worship them” (Exodus 20:4-5) as meaning that the image itself was inherently an idol, whether used that way or not. However, as Martin Luther, the first Protestant, has stated in regards to the use of images:

It is possible for me to hear and bear in mind the story of the Passion of our Lord. But it is impossible for me to hear and bear it in mind without forming mental images of it in my heart. For whether I will or not when I hear of Christ, an image of a man hanging on a cross takes form in my heart just as the reflection of my face naturally appears in the water when I look into it. If it is not a sin, but good to have the image of Christ in my heart, why should it be a sin to have it in my eyes? (qtd. in Johnston 75)

In recent times, there is not much debate over whether images are idols or not, but there are those among the Christian community who regard film and all “secular” entertainment as having no part in the life of a Christian. In this case it seems that “the relationship between art and morality is unclear, so that one is invited either to divorce the two completely, or to suspect any attempt to relate them” (Schillaci 22). However, as Robert Johnston points out, “Escaping society has little Biblical warrant,” and “It is also the case that all the positions except avoidance can be given strong theological support” (59). If Christianity is to be relevant in the society at large, it must speak in that society’s language. Cinema is to a large degree, today’s language. It transcends class, race, age, and nationality. Does this mean that cinema is simply another means to “preach the Gospel”? The answer is, of course, yes and no. Schillaci says that, “Each age must experience a new incarnation of the gospel ‘message,’ one that communicates with the age on its own terms” (77). And so it is true that cinema is a means to put forth Gospel truth, however, as Margaret Miles states in Seeing and Believing, “to assume that visual pleasure serves only to seduce viewers into mindlessly accepting the film’s values distorts a spectator’s experience and eliminates the primary motivation for analyzing a film” (11). A film’s message does not stop when it is created, but it continues to live in the minds of the spectators who in turn, with different life experiences and preconceived ideas, mold the images into unique cinematic

experiences. In the translated words of Russian filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein, “The spectator is compelled to proceed along that selfsame creative road that the author traveled in creating the image. The spectator not only sees the represented elements of the finished work, but also experiences the dynamic process of the emergence and assembly of the image just as it was experienced by the author” (32). Without going too far into film montage theory, a film is a montage, which is to say that it is a collection of images juxtaposed in such a way so that the ideas of different images combine in such a way as to create a new meaning. This meaning is also dependent on the spectators’ ideas of these elements. The filmmaker, as well as the spectator, takes part in carrying out the creation of a movie. We err when we deny the power of cinema to connect with the audience in this manner, and we err when we base our morality solely on the movies as well, but we also err when we view movies as mere entertainment.

We are accustomed from religious instruction to derive a practical “moral” from every word or event. But we sometimes fail to realize that Christ himself took a somewhat different approach. He most often merely told a story, a parable, and let the people draw their own conclusions. We are very much like the Apostles: we can’t enjoy the simple, moving story, but immediately demand, “What does it mean? What should we do?” (Schillaci 25)

In this, Schillaci says that we should not always try to squeeze a moral out of a story; sometimes a movie is best left to stand on its own. However, maybe in the instance of the parables that he taught, Christ wanted his disciples to ask those questions. Perhaps it was the stories that actually prompted them to seek the morals and lessons in order to apply in their lives. Movies can do the same, by prompting people to ask questions when viewing them, instead of simply “killing time.” The cinema has proven to be a great vehicle, though it is much more than simply a vehicle, for portraying Bible stories in visual form. From the various reenactments of the life of Jesus, including *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965), *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (1964), to the Turner productions of other Biblical personas including, *Moses* (1996), *Abraham* (1995), *Jacob* (1994), and *Joseph* (1995), these portrayals are brought to life on the screen, thus

bringing the stories a little closer to people's minds and memories. Other films, such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) or *Godspell* (1973), set the life of Christ in a different context or time setting. Though one can find moral lessons in movies, and one can use the cinema to spread a message or retell Biblical events, the dynamics of the cinema, as an art and as a mass medium, dictate that there are other, perhaps even more effective, ways of using the cinema to the benefit of church and of society.

The cinema has various roles to play in the Christian church, as well as society in general. These include that of modern man's "morality plays", prophet, and "cultural exorcist." Movies can and do play an important role in discussing current moral dilemmas. So, as a "morality play," a movie can present a moral dilemma, offer a solution, and thereby raise consciousness of it and promote discussion in the society. Margaret Miles shows two ways in which this role is played out. "Film is an accessible medium in which competing issues of public and private life in a pluralistic society are formulated and represented for consideration and interpretation" (Miles xv). In this way, the issues are "put on the table" so to speak in order to raise awareness of them in the society. Moral dilemmas are therefore presented. "A director can imagine, and a film can visualize, the resolution of a situation so that cinema audiences can picture more concretely how the issue might be dealt with, what it would look like and feel like if a particular resolution were to be adopted" (Miles 18). In this sense, the movie presents a solution to a moral dilemma. It may be because the author feels that this is the correct solution, or it may be to imagine what would happen if this particular instance was the solution. Trends in society are many times started in movies, but many times the movies give us a view of societal trends that are already in existence. Sometimes we are unaware of social change until we see it in the popular media, especially in cinema. "Art in this role is a prophet. And one of the prophetic roles of art is to reflect social change before we are aware that it is taking place," says Schillaci (12). Speaking of "cultural exorcism," he argues that, "the artist has become the Cultural Exorcist, driving out of the society the subpersonal demons which warp and twist human life" (20). Perhaps he and Michael Medved would disagree as to the reasons why so much violence is

shown in the movies today, but to some degree, the movies may actually help to bring up, in all their ugliness, the pervading sins of a generation. The next step would then be to face and deal with these sins that have shown themselves in the popular media.

The Last Temptation of Christ, by Martin Scorsese, has proven to be probably the most controversial films involving Christianity. On August 11, 1988, the day before its release, more than 25,000 protesters gathered in front of Universal Studios to protest *The Last Temptation of Christ*, “in the largest protest ever mounted against the release of a motion picture” (Medved 37). Those who protested the release of the film included the National Council of Catholic Bishops, the National Catholic Conference, the Southern Baptist Convention, the Eastern Orthodox Church of America, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Archbishop of Paris, twenty members of the U. S. House of Representatives, the Christian Democratic Party of Italy, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta. As Michael Medved reports in his book *Hollywood vs. America*, the news media reported that the protesters consisted of those on the lunatic fringe, and were only upset at the depiction of one short scene in which Christ has sex with Mary Magdalene. However, as one can see, those listed above who were represented in the protests include a highly influential and respected bunch. The protests were in reaction to other problems in the portrayal of Christ in the film, besides the sex scene. In *Last Temptation*, the movie begins with Jesus Christ building crosses to be used in crucifixions. Throughout the movie, Jesus, played by Willem Dafoe, is portrayed as being quite unsure of his calling. He seems to be a very weak, unwilling leader. It is Judas Iscariot, played by Harvey Keitel, who actually sees to it that Christ follows the will of God. While on the cross, Jesus is visited by an angel who convinces him to come down and live a normal life with woman (the angel says that all women are one woman, just with many different faces, so he becomes married with “woman” and fathers several children.) In Jesus’ old age, his apostles visit him, and Judas, upset that Christ didn’t finish his work on the cross, rebukes him and says that he has failed mankind. The film then ends with Christ back on the cross. His coming down from the cross was actually a dream. “In interviews, director Martin Scorsese, a Roman Catholic who once studied for the priesthood, spoke of his own faith and his

struggle to make the film as a ‘personal religious testimony.’ He wanted, he said, to make a film about Jesus that represented ‘how it felt’ to be simultaneously fully God and fully human” (Miles 33). Although there was much opposition to the film from among the Christian community, the response was actually quite varied among Christians. I remember reading one review of *Last Temptation* in a zine, published by a Christian, saying that the movie was an account of how he might have acted if he were Jesus. Another friend, with a Catholic background, said that the movie actually increased his faith at a time in his life when he was not particularly faithful. It’s easy to see that the film can be considered as a deeper look into what the actual struggles were in the life of Christ and how one would react to those struggles. It is also easy to see how this portrayal can distort the account of the life of Christ if one does not know it already. It is arguable, then, that this portrayal could be dangerous to the Christian faith, and it is understandable that people would be offended by the material and in turn protest its presentation. On the other hand, many who did protest the film did not in fact view the movie. Of course, I believe that the aim of the protests, seeing that they were conducted prior to the film’s release, was to generate a boycott of the film in response to the way the movie was supposed to portray the life of Christ. When I viewed *Last Temptation*, on video, the first thing I saw was a message saying that the film was not based on the gospels, but on the novel written by Nikos Kazantzakis. This disclaimer, (I don’t know if it was there at the time the film was released in theaters), attempts to say in effect that *The Last Temptation of Christ* is not a distortion of scripture, but a fictional story only based loosely on the actual accounts of the life of Christ. Does this disclaimer justify the fictional account of the Son of God as a weak and mentally unstable leader who gives up the call of God to live a “normal” life with Mary Magdalene? Does this portrayal diminish the work that Jesus did here on earth? I think before answering these questions, one must ask if this portrayal could possibly, in being compared with the Biblical accounts, help us to see just how difficult following God’s will was for Jesus. *The Last Temptation of Christ*, in showing Jesus as ultra-human, can actually play a positive role in helping one see the struggle that may have taken place in the life of Christ, therefore helping us to realize more profoundly

the impact that Christ's life can have in ours. We see in the instance of this movie, how different the interpretations of a movie can be.

The protests surrounding *The Last Temptation of Christ* bring up another recent issue in the relationship between Christianity and the cinema. It sometimes seems as if there's a bit of hostility between the two, in both directions of course. There is definitely a lack of fair representation of Christianity in Hollywood. Movies many times reflect a society's preoccupations and beliefs. However, it seems that in the case of Christianity, the representations in Hollywood are disproportionately inaccurate or simply not present. Under the Hays Production Code, "No film or episode may 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," and "Ceremonies of any definite religion should be carefully and respectfully handled." Today, on the other hand, it seems that Hollywood still has a vendetta against the old Production Code. According to Michael Medved,

In the last fifteen years, Hollywood has swung to the opposite extreme – presenting a view of the clergy that is every bit as one-sided in its cynicism and hostility as the old treatment may have been idealized and saccharine. Whenever someone turns up in a contemporary film with the title "Reverend," "Father," or "Rabbi" in front of his name you can count on the fact that he will turn out to be corrupt or crazy – or probably both. (52)

First of all, there are not many movies being released that feature Christians or Christianity, and when they do, those representations are many times quite inaccurate or only focus on the phonies. Michael Medved, film critic of the New York Post and co-host of the weekly movie review show "Sneak Previews," gives some examples of movies that show Christians, Catholic and Protestant alike, in a demeaning manner. Medved says of *The Pope Must Die* (1991), "This putrid comedy trots out every hoary anti-Catholic canard of the last two thousand years, including sultry and seductive nuns who provide the Holy Father with his own private harem, and conniving cardinals who control illicit arms deals, organized crime, and sleazy banking

around the world” (54). He says of *Poltergeist II* (1986), “This sorry sequel to the successful horror film of 1982 featured a hymn-singing preacher from beyond the grave who leads a band of demonic Bible-belters in trying to drag a hip suburban family down to hell” (56). Medved goes on to mention other films that cast Christians in a negative light. Though some may see this as a conspiracy among the Hollywood elite to undermine the values of the American public, concerning this problem of misrepresentation, Medved asserts, “I would never suggest that offensive movies...are the products of some self-conscious cabal, nor can I imagine a group of conspirators getting together in some sealed room to figure out how they can insert antireligious messages in the latest Star Trek movie...it arises out of the personal prejudices and preferences of the people who create that culture” (87). It is not a very large amount of people who make up the major forces in Hollywood, and those people spend most of their time among others in the same field, so they may not really understand the values of the faithful throughout America. In order for there to be fair and accurate representations of Christians, or any group for that matter, then those who create the representations must have those convictions and beliefs. It’s like the old adage, “It takes one to know one.” If there is to be any change in Hollywood, then it is necessary for Christians to work more in the film industry.

I will now look at a few portrayals of Christians and Christianity in recent movies. I chose the movies *The Big Kahuna* (1999), *Dogma* (1999), and *The Apostle* (1997) because they are recent and deal directly with the matter at hand. I made a questionnaire in order to survey people on their opinions of these movies. I used four questions in order to gain an understanding of how people’s religious backgrounds may have affected their viewings and how the films may have affected their views of Christianity. Since it was a last minute idea, I was only able to survey eight people for a total of eleven questionnaires. A copy of the questionnaire is attached at the end of the paper.

The Big Kahuna stars Kevin Spacey, Danny Devito, and Peter Facinelli in the film adaptation of the play “Hospitality Suite” by Roger Rueff. The whole film takes place in a hospitality suite of a hotel. It consists of three salesmen trying to sell industrial lubricants to the

head of a company, who they call “The Big Kahuna.” Bob Walker, Peter Facinelli’s character, is new to the team. He is young, idealistic, naïve, newly married, and he is a Christian. Larry Mann, Kevin Spacey’s character, is middle aged, cynical, and sarcastic. He believes only in himself. Phil Cooper, Danny Devito’s character, is nearing the end of his career, and is questioning himself, his life, and the existence of God and the meaning of life. These three salesmen host a business party in order to meet “The Big Kahuna,” and make a big sale to him. During the business party no one notices “the Big Kahuna.” After the business party is over, Larry is very upset that they didn’t meet “the Big Kahuna.” It turns out that Bob had in fact talked to him, but didn’t realize that it was the guy. When Larry asks Bob what they talked about, Bob responded that they had talked about life, death, and Jesus. Larry was naturally upset. Bob had been invited to a party by “the Big Kahuna,” so he was sent in order to make the business deal since they had missed him. When Bob returns from the party, he reports that he and “the big kahuna” did not speak about business, but again spoke about Jesus and God. In one very revealing shot, as the three salesmen are standing on the elevator, the camera pans from Phil, with a frown, to Larry, with a smirk, to Bob, with a smile. In one sense, the three characters represent three different viewpoints of life, and in another sense, they represent three stages of one life. As one person that I surveyed said, “Many young people are faithful and by the time they reach Spacey’s age, they’re cynical.” Bob, the Christian, is portrayed as naïve, not necessarily because he’s a Christian but because he’s young and new to the company and the profession. He is portrayed positively as living by the principles and ideals in which he believes. However, his zealousness comes in the way of doing his job, and he is viewed as being a salesman of Christianity. This film faces the issue of when and how to do one’s job and when and how to preach one’s beliefs. In regards to Bob’s preaching of Jesus, Phil says to Bob, “The question that you have to ask yourself is ‘Has it touched the whole of my life?’” When Bob asks Phil what he means, Phil responds:

That means that you preaching Jesus is no different than Larry, or anybody else, preaching lubricants. It doesn’t matter whether you’re selling Jesus, or Buddha,

or civil rights, or how to make money in real estate with no money down. That doesn't make you a human being. It makes you a marketing rep. If you want to talk to somebody honestly, as a human being, ask him about his kids. Find out what his dreams are, just to find out, for no other reason, because as soon as you lay your hands on a conversation to steer it, it's not a conversation anymore. It's a pitch, and you're not a human being. You're a marketing rep.

He is essentially saying that if anyone is to preach anything, that belief should be in the heart and mind of the person. It must be the essence of the person, and must naturally flow out in conversation. Otherwise, it is only a pitch for a product of which one may or may not be truly faithful.

Dogma begins with a disclaimer stating, "Though it'll go without saying ten minutes or so into these proceedings, View Askew would like to state that this film is – from start to finish – a work of comedic fantasy, not to be taken seriously." Kevin Smith, director of *Clerks* (1994), *Mall Rats* (1995), and *Chasing Amy* (1997), wrote and directed *Dogma*. The movie is a story of two angels, Loki – the angel of death, and Bartleby, who have fallen from Heaven, and have found a loophole through Catholic doctrine that will allow them to reenter Heaven by passing through the archway of a church in New Jersey. God requests the aid of Bethany, played by Linda Fiorentino, to stop them from reentering. Her faith is weak, but she is the "last scion," or the last person in the same bloodline of Jesus Christ. In *Dogma*, God, who at the time inhabited the body of an older man because he likes to play skeeball, is played by Alanis Morissette, Chris Rock plays Rufus the 13th apostle who wasn't put in the Bible because he's black, and the prophets sent to aid Bethany smoke pot, continuously proposition her for sex, and use a lot of offensive language. As Robert Johnston puts it, "The story, like the jokes in the movie, is irreverent, but it also affirms the importance of faith, the benevolence of God, and the divinity of Christ. Here is a movie that is not agnostic or un-Christian in viewpoint, even if it is sacrilegious and sexy in design. After all, as Smith commented, if he were to talk about God to his generation, he wouldn't make *The Song of Bernadette* (1943). Instead, he wanted 'to do

something full of faith that was entertaining enough to keep them [viewers] in their seats” (45). On the other hand, “A spokesperson [Patrick Scully] for the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, however, wrote that ‘the entire plot is one situation after another of making fun of the Catholic faith’” (qtd. in Johnston 45). Johnston points out, “When Kevin Smith’s irreverent yet God-affirming movie *Dogma* opened at the New York Film Festival in October of 1999, it did so over the objections of Cardinal John O’Connor and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. That the movie exuberantly affirms the existence of God and tells the story of a woman’s recovery of faith, or that Smith is a practicing Catholic, was thought irrelevant” (44). According to those I surveyed and spoke to about this film, it seems that it portrays Christ and Christianity positively in that it affirms them, but it portrays denominations, especially Catholic, as negative in that they distort the real message of Christianity. Maybe its irreverent style makes it a positive God-affirming film for the generation of today, but perhaps its God-affirmation is an excuse for bad language and irreverence, as Cecil B. DeMille’s Bible epics were considered. It is difficult to make that call, but if it causes people to separate religion from faith and seek after faith in God, then perhaps Kevin Smith has accomplished that which he wanted to do and that which he felt that he was supposed to do, for written in the credits of *Dogma* is, “The director would like to thank: God – whose idea it was to make both this film and me.” (Personally, after seeing it twice, I still don’t know what I think of this movie.)

The Apostle is probably the single best representation of a preacher, especially a southern Pentacostal preacher, to ever grace the silver screen. Robert Duvall wrote, directed, produced, and starred in this picture. The film begins with Robert Duvall’s character, E. F. “Sonny” Dewey, as a child attending a small predominately black southern church with his black nanny. The charismatic preacher appears to be blind, and in one part of his sermon, he repeats a couple of times the Bible verse, “Blessed are those who have not seen, but believed” (John 20:29). In the next scene, it is the present day, and Sonny, passing by a car accident, goes over to the car where two people are in serious condition and proceeds to tell them about accepting the Lord and going to Heaven. Sonny is a pastor of a church, and his wife, played by Farrah Fawcett, is

having an affair with the youth minister of the church. It seems that Sonny has had a past of womanizing, and now is losing his wife because of it. He ends up killing the youth minister at his children's baseball game and leaves town in order to evade the law. He goes to a small Louisiana town and assumes another identity as the "Apostle E. F." As the Apostle E. F., he teams up with a retired pastor and starts a new multiracial church in the small town. During this time the church grows and the Apostle begins to deal with his past, and confessing to the other minister, attempts to turn from his old ways. The Apostle E. F., during his time at the small church in Louisiana, leads several people to faith in Jesus, including a racist played by Billy Bob Thornton. After the police come to the small church and apprehend the Apostle, the movie ends as he is leading the other prisoners in a work field in hymns. The Apostle E. F. is portrayed as having a personal relationship with God. He is someone who felt that he belonged to God since he was a little boy. A couple of scenes show him reminiscent of the times that as a child he would preach. He talks to God directly, sometimes even arguing with Him. Though he talks directly to God and is passionate about preaching the Good News, he is portrayed as human and therefore weak. His faults eventually cause him to lose his church and family. He initially runs away from his problems, but realized that he cannot run away from God, and thereby faces himself, while continuing to do God's work. He eventually pays the "secular" consequences by going to jail and accepts this by continuing to do what he thinks God wants him to do. He is not shown as being closed-minded or racist or crazy, like many southern preachers are portrayed, but is shown as accepting different races with no problem and is shown to be in his right mind. He also is not portrayed as perfect or "saintly" as the case may have been if this movie had been made under the Hays Production Code. In a review of *The Apostle* in Film Quarterly, Felicia Feaster says, concerning the character The Apostle E. F., "Though a vastly imperfect man, the E. F. portrayed in Duvall's wily performance is a vehicle through which spirituality acts; the preacher's personal flaws are ultimately irrelevant because of the joy and unity he brings to his congregation" (35). Feaster goes on to say about the film, "The Apostle shares a concern with the dignity of society's more marginal members, people whom Hollywood and the American

public might deem inconsequential. The *Apostle* is an outlaw film for the respect it gives an institution often dismissed by liberals as ignorant and lowbrow, and often approached by conservatives with a bosom-hugging, proprietary obnoxiousness” (36). Robert Duvall wanted to portray the Pentecostal preacher, as well as the south, accurately and fairly. In an interview in Filmmaker, he says, “I just feel that if you’re going to do something, you should try to do it right and accurate... If we do wonderful gangster films and even glorify those guys, why can’t we do a good preacher film?” (qtd. in Cheshire 39). In the only two questionnaires that I had filled out for *The Apostle*, both people were not Christians or religious in any way and said that the film portrayed Christians and Christianity positively. The film was a success in accurately and positively portraying a preacher as well as an artistic success, as evidenced by its being accepted by the religious right, and the liberal left. According to the movie’s producer, Rob Carliner, in *The Journey of the Apostle*, the making-of *The Apostle* documentary, “We’re probably the only film in the history of cinema to be endorsed by both Howard Stern and Pat Robertson.”

In another phenomenon associated with Christianity and the Cinema, there have been several films lately, produced by Christian organizations such as TBN, that offer an interpretation of prophecies concerning the coming of the Anti-Christ and the end of the world as-we-know-it. Though there have been similar projects in the past, these come at a time of millennial fever just before and after the turn of the millennium. This millennial fever has also prompted many other “secular” films of the same nature, including *End of Days*, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, and *Armageddon*, which had several bankable stars. Those made by the big studios and those made by Christian organizations share the same idea of an end coming to life-as-we-know-it, the difference being that the Christian versions seem to be interpretations of some Biblical prophecies, and the “secular” versions seem to fit in the genre of disaster films. Those produced by Christian organizations include *Left Behind* (2000), which stars Kirk Cameron of “Growing Pains” fame, *Apocalypse* (2000), *Revelation* (2000), *Tribulation* (2000), *Judgment* (2001), which stars Mr. T, and *The Omega Code* (1999). All except *The Omega Code* were produced by the same organization. It is easy to see, then, that these films do not necessarily

represent the views of all Christians. While most Christians agree that there will be a second coming of Jesus, how and when that happens is quite debatable among Christians. The Bible even says that no one will know when that will happen. Again, I believe that the numerous recent movies dealing with this subject are due in large part to the millennial fever that swept the nation and the world. In viewing *Left Behind*, it seems that in comparison to movies in previous decades of the same sort, those movies produced by large Christian organizations are much better in cinematic quality. Unfortunately, I cannot say the same about *The Omega Code*. It seems that in the case of *Left Behind*, though there is the intent to cause people to believe in Christianity, the producers did pay some attention to the actual filmmaking and attempted to make a movie that could be seen as just a movie as well. The producers of some of the end-times movies may have done better by just spending their money on bullhorns!

The Cinema and Christianity have enjoyed and endured a long relationship with each other. There have been some misunderstandings and upsets along the way, and although recently it sometimes seems that there is a lack of communication between the two, I think that there is hope in their inextricable union. The cinema has proven to be a great aid to the cause of Christianity in its ability to communicate Biblical stories and personas to a large and diverse audience, and in its ability to present current trends in society. Cinema has given society a means to discuss moral, ethical, and spiritual dilemmas, problems, and questions on a grand scale. In movies, Christians gain an understanding of how they appear to others in society, and they also give an accurate presentation of themselves to the world. The cinema has sparked controversy and protests among Christians over films like *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and it has spread the Gospel message in countries all over the world with films such as *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. The past couple of decades have seen a lack of Christian representation in the cinema and a lack of spiritual themes, but with films such as *The Apostle*, *Dead Man Walking*, *Left Behind*, *Keeping The Faith*, and *The Big Kahuna*, we are seeing a reawakening in the interest of spiritual matters, specifically those of Christianity. I project that with the increase of digital filmmaking, and therefore the decrease of the cost of filmmaking, more and more

individuals and independent producers will be able to make their voices heard. This goes for any group, not just Christians. There will be more offerings of fair and accurate representations of Christ, Christians, and Christianity, because those who truly know it and believe it will have the ability to produce those representations. This will happen without the aid of some Production Code, which enforces certain values on those who don't hold those same values. Christians cannot expect non-Christians to produce accurate portrayals of Christians, nor can they expect to find movies that promote Christian ideas to come from Hollywood. Christians will have to produce the films that promote their beliefs, ideas, and concerns.

I think that there is a renaissance in the cinema beginning among Christians. There are some things that must take place within this movement. Some filmic conventions must be developed, or at least made better, to show religious commitment and devotion. There already exists voice over to signify prayer, and close ups on faces during times of enlightenment or contemplation. One can show physical and social action to represent religious commitment, as in *The Mission* (1986), or *Dead Man Walking* (1995). It is difficult to capture a conversion cinematically, however in *The Apostle* there are a couple of good examples. Another thing that should take place, is the laying aside of bullhorns. Though Christians do have a duty to preach the Good News, they also have a duty to make good works of art. If God could create a world of beauty like the one we live in without scripture verses printed under each tree, then in that image, Christians can also make honest, realistic, and artful films of integrity, which can speak much louder and truer of God than any filmed sermon.

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