

UNDERSTANDING HOLLYWOOD

PART II: DECONSTRUCTING CHRISTIANITY*

EDMUND CONNELLY

IMAGES OF CHRISTIANITY IN EARLY HOLLYWOOD

During the early Hollywood era, films that positively portrayed Christianity and Christian values were common. They were often box-office hits. This can be partly explained by the fact that the vast majority of Americans at the time were practicing Christians. Thus, Hollywood needed movies that resonated with its primary audience. The list of movies from early Hollywood celebrating (or at least respecting) the majority's religion is a long one. Biblical blockbusters like *Samson and Delilah*, *David and Bathsheba*, *Quo Vadis?*, *The Robe*, *The Ten Commandments*, and *Ben Hur* "were specifically designed to appeal to the predilections of the pious, and each of these films became the nation's top box-office hit in the year of its release."¹

Golden Era films usually portrayed Christian clergymen in a sympathetic light. Bing Crosby played clergymen in *Going My Way*, *Bells of St. Mary's*, and *Say One for Me*; so did Pat O'Brien in *Angels with Dirty Faces* and *The Fighting 69th* and Spencer Tracy in *Boys Town* and *Men of Boys Town*. In less memorable films, Clark Gable played a minister in *Polly of the Circus*; Frank Sinatra portrayed a parish priest in *The Miracle of the Bells*; and Mickey Rooney impersonated a feisty frontier preacher in *The Twinkle of God's Eye*. As Michael Medved comments:

In all of these films, and many more, the members of the clergy gave hope to under-privileged kids, or comforted GIs on the battlefield, or helped decent but down-and-out families to survive hard times. If a character appeared on screen wearing a clerical collar it served as a sure sign that the audience was supposed to like him.²

* Cf. Edmund Connelly, "Understanding Hollywood, Part I: Hollywood's Jewish Identity," *The Occidental Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 37-72.

¹ Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 50-51.

² Medved, 51.

The films of Frank Capra, a Sicilian-born Catholic, or Walt Disney, a Kansas Congregationalist, clearly express the Christian values of their creators. In the words of film historian Robert Sklar, "They both knew the rural and small-town heartland of America. Their comic talents veered toward sentimentality and they were imbued with social purpose, a desire to revitalize the nation's old communal myths."³ From 1936 to 1941, Capra deliberately created five social-message films, inspired by a balding man who visited Capra when he was sick and rebuked him for not using his talents for more morally constructive purposes. These films—*Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, *Lost Horizon*, *You Can't Take It With You*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and *Meet John Doe*—were all films with clear Christian themes. Indeed, Sklar argues that in *Meet John Doe*, Capra transforms the hero John Willoughby into a "Christ-figure," thereby transforming "the myth of his American hero into a defense of Christian morality."⁴

It is mistaken, however, to suppose that the Golden Era was filled solely with pro-Christian films that satisfied all majority Americans. Many Christian groups felt that Hollywood was not Christian enough for their liking, and they tended to blame this on the Jewishness of Hollywood. Critics ranged from fire-and-brimstone evangelicals in the teens and early twenties who demanded the movies' liberation from "the hands of the devil and 500 un-Christian Jews"⁵ to Red-baiters in the forties for whom Judaism was really a variety of Communism and the movies their chief form of propaganda.

The sum of this anti-Semitic demonology was that the Jews, by design or sheer ignorance, had used the movies to undermine traditional American values. As one antagonist put it, "it is only because they [the Hollywood Jews] are outside the moral sphere of American culture that they blunder so badly that they require periodic campaigns such as that of the Legion of Decency [a Catholic reform group] to set them right."⁶ According to Hollywood historian Neal Gabler, "Ducking from these assaults, the Jews [of Hollywood] became the phantoms of the film history they had created, haunting it but never really able to inhabit it."⁷

³ Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 205.

⁴ Sklar, 205–12.

⁵ Quoted in Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1988), 2.

⁶ Quoted in Gabler, 2.

⁷ Gabler, 2.

THE RISE OF ANTI-CHRISTIAN FILMS

By the 1960s, however, films far less respectful of traditional Christianity began to appear. This trend must be understood in the context of an important transformation of American society as a whole after the Second World War: the establishment of Jewish cultural and political hegemony, in Kevin MacDonald's words, "a huge increase in Jewish power and influence, and a concomitant decrease in the political and cultural power of European-derived peoples—ethnic warfare by any other name."⁸ In the film industry, Jews and Jewish themes became much more prominent, along with critiques of gentiles and gentile society.⁹ Instead of catering to the convictions and values of the majority, the mainstream media became increasingly focused on criticizing and altering these beliefs and values, and one of the main targets was Christianity. As Medved writes:

In the ongoing war on traditional values, the assault on organized faith represents the front to which the entertainment industry has most clearly committed itself. On no other issue do the perspectives of the show business elites and those of the public at large differ more dramatically. Time and again, the producers have gone out of their way to affront the religious sensibilities of ordinary Americans.¹⁰

Citing a 1992 study which found that "89 percent of Americans claim affiliations with an organized faith," Medved described in detail how Hollywood has produced fare hostile to its audience's beliefs.¹¹

The most striking case is the controversy surrounding Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, when 25,000 people protested

⁸ Kevin MacDonald, in Foreword to Tomislav Sunic, *Homo americanus: Child of the Postmodern Age* (Charleston, S.C.: BookSurge Publishing, 2007), xxv.

⁹ Connelly, "Understanding Hollywood, Part I," 50–54.

¹⁰ Medved, 50. Singer Dolly Parton offered one small example: "Do you know why I can't produce a born-again Christian series? Because the Jews control Hollywood, and they don't want to project a Christian in a good light" (in Philip Weiss "Letting Go," *New York Magazine*, January 29, 1996, 33). The controversy surrounding Mel Gibson's 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ* highlighted this claim. Catholic League president William Donahue, speaking on the cable network MSNBC, said about the controversy surrounding Gibson's movie, "Hollywood is controlled by secular Jews who hate Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular. It's not a secret, OK? And I'm not afraid to say it. That's why they hate this movie."

¹¹ Medved, 80.

in front of the MCA/Universal offices to register their unhappiness with a film that profoundly insulted the dignity of the founder of one of the world's great religions. The National Council of Catholic Bishops, the National Catholic Conference, the Southern Baptist Convention, the Eastern Orthodox Church of America, the archbishop of Canterbury, and even Mother Teresa protested the film. But Hollywood executives ignored them.

However, as Medved points out, MCA's willingness to offend Christians was in stark contrast to their sensitivity to other groups. For example, animal rights activists demanded that Disney studios delete a scene they felt was "anti-wolf." Disney assented. In another case, the religious leader of a Hopi village declared that the script of an upcoming Robert Redford film was "sacrilegious." The script was promptly amended.¹²

Medved provides a long list of anti-Christian films, beginning with anti-Catholic fare:

The Runner Stumbles (1979). This notorious turkey . . . features . . . a small-town priest who falls in love with a sensitive young nun, and then stands trial for her murder.

Monsignor (1982). Christopher Reeves . . . played a prince of the Roman Catholic Church. This pernicious prelate engages in every imaginable sin, including the seduction of a glamorous, idealist nun and complicity in her death. His shady dealings with the Mafia to control the Vatican bank eventually bring him to the peak of power under the approving eye of a shriveled, anorexic Pope.

Agnes of God (1985). The movie opens with . . . disturbed young nun Meg Tilly giving birth in a convent, murdering her baby, and then flushing the tiny, bloody corpse down the toilet.

The Penitent (1988). Raul Julia plays a farmer in New Mexico who joins a primitive and brutal Catholic cult after his bored wife gets involved in an affair with his boyhood pal.

¹² Medved, 38–42. Medved also poignantly asks if Hollywood would be as insensitive to a film with a "revisionist view of Holocaust victim Anne Frank that portrayed her as an out-of-control teenage nymphomaniac who risked capture by the Nazis night after night to satisfy her raging hormones?"

Last Rites (1988). Tom Berenger is a moody priest who falls passionately in love with a mysterious Mexican "hot tamale." He abuses his position in the Church in his desperate efforts to protect her, and is ultimately entangled with murder and the mob.

We're No Angels (1989). Robert De Niro and Sean Penn play two lunk-headed petty crooks who escape from prison and pretend to be priests. . . . The movie is supposed to be a remake of a 1955 escaped-cons comedy with Humphrey Bogart, but the earlier film contained none of the anticlerical elements of ecclesiastical masquerade that are central to the plot of the more recent version.

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.¹³

Regarding this string of anti-Catholic movies, Medved writes, "The most important point to keep in mind about all these movies and their grim and skeptical view of the church of Rome is that their negativity is never answered by simultaneous releases that offer a sympathetic treatment of Catholicism."¹⁴ In the fifteen years prior to publishing *Hollywood vs. America*, Medved could think of precisely one film "that presented a sympathetic view of the Church" (*Romero*, 1989), and even then, it was one that originated outside the Hollywood mainstream.¹⁵ Moreover, the subject of the film, Archbishop Romero of El Salvador, probably received favorable treatment because of his leftist politics, not his Catholicism.

Medved then lists anti-Protestant films:

Crimes of Passion (1984). As a sweaty, Bible-toting Skid Row evangelist, Tony Perkins generates the same warmth and charm he brought to his famous role as Norman Bates in *Psycho*.

Poltergeist II (1986). This sorry sequel to the successful horror film of 1982 featured a hymn-singing preacher from beyond the

¹³ Medved, 52–54.

¹⁴ Medved, 55.

¹⁵ Medved, 55.

grave who leads a band of demonic Bible-belters in trying to drag a hip suburban family down to hell.

The Vision (1987). An impressive cast is utterly wasted on an insipid sci-fi fantasy about conspiring Christians who use hypnotic TV technology in a ruthless plot to take over the world.

Light of Day (1987). This somber stinker, written and directed by *Last Temptation* screenwriter Paul Schrader, portrays a prominent Midwestern minister as a pious, pompous fraud.

The Handmaid's Tale (1990). Some of the industry's most prestigious performers appeared in this pointedly political polemic about what life might be like if Christian fundamentalists came to power in America. As portrayed in the film, these religious zealots are considerably less lovable than the Nazis, who at least had stylish uniforms to recommend them.

The Rapture (1991). Mimi Rogers plays a buxom swinger, addicted to group sex with strangers, who sacrifices these satisfactions when she makes a sudden commitment to Christ. . . . Before the end of the film her "faith" causes her to take her six-year-old daughter out to the desert where . . . the heroine takes a revolver, holds it to her daughter's head, and, while mumbling invocations of the Almighty, blows the child's brains out.¹⁶

In *Misery* director Rob Reiner repeatedly focuses on a tiny gold cross worn by Kathy Bates, the sadistic villain. (In contrast, in the 1999 film *True Crime*, the tormented African American wife of a man unjustly sentenced to death and about to be executed wears a cross around her neck, which is highly visible as she pounds on the windows of the execution chamber. Paired with a non-white character, Christianity is shown as a positive force.)

The remake of *Cape Fear* is also instructive. In the original 1962 version with Robert Mitchum, Mitchum's character played the menacing villain without reference to religious symbols, yet in the 1991 remake with Robert De Niro in the Mitchum role, the villain is a member of a Pentecostal church and carries a Bible under his arm in several scenes.¹⁷

¹⁶ Medved, 55–58.

¹⁷ Medved, 66–67. Medved offers a questionable explanation for the rarity of

Woody Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) took a swipe at Pope John Paul II, presaging the extensive attacks on the Church for pedophilia, real and alleged. Allen's character Mickey is the producer of a television show similar to *Saturday Night Live*. When a network censor complains about a sketch dealing with child abuse, he objects that it cannot be broadcast because it names an individual. Mickey claims this is not the case, because the sketch merely refers to the pope. Then Mickey's assistant, played by Julie Kavner, suggests substituting a presumably less offensive sketch used earlier: "the Cardinal Spellman-Ronald Reagan Homosexual Dance Number."¹⁸

Medved notes that television is equally anti-Christian. For example, in the miniseries *The Thorn Birds*, handsome Richard Chamberlain plays a tormented priest who has broken his vows of celibacy. William Shatner, in his post-Captain Kirk role of T. J. Hooker, tracks down a "ruthless, Scripture-spouting crook who leaves Bibles as calling cards at the scene of his crimes." ABC's *The Women of Brewster Place* shows a preacher luring a woman to his bed, while in one episode of *UNSUB* a certain "Bishop Grace" murders two teenage girls in his congregation. NBC's *In the Heat of the Night* aired an episode in which "Reverend Haskell" expires just after enjoying an affair with one of his parishioners. Two "Bible thumpin' hayseeds" appear as kidnappers on *Shannon's Deal*, paired up with "a devout Christian who murders his wife and then justifies the killing as 'an act of God . . . unstoppable as a flood.'"¹⁹

ANIMATION

To the extent that animated TV shows touch on serious issues at all, Christianity has fared rather poorly in recent decades as well. For

negative portrayals of Jews in film and television: "This has less to do with the high concentration of Jews in the movie industry than with the prevailing perception that Judaism is all but irrelevant as a religious system. . . . Judaism . . . seems so statistically insignificant that it threatens no one, and offers a much less attractive target" (p. 61).

¹⁸ David Desser and Lester D. Friedman, *American-Jewish Filmmakers: Traditions and Trends* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 75. For reports that Jews were directly involved in promoting the story of pedophile priests, see Thomas J. Herron, "The View from Tegucigalpa and the Texas Stampede," *Culture Wars*, December 2004, 6-17; E. Michael Jones, "Perfect Fear Drives out Love" and Herron, "The Priest Bomb Goes off in Philly," both in *Culture Wars*, November 2005, 6-10 and 10-13, respectively.

¹⁹ Medved, 81.

example, Fox Television Network's *The Simpsons* featured a scene in which the family gathered around the table to say grace, and Bart solemnly intones, "Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing." Far more offensive, however, is the *South Park* Christmas special called "Mr. Hankey, the Christmas Poo," a parody of the classic 1965 television special *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. In *South Park*'s Christmas special, the spirit of Christmas is personified by a piece of talking human feces named "Mr. Hankey," the obvious message being that "Christmas is shit."²⁰

At an elementary school in *South Park*, a white, small-town Rocky Mountain community, Mr. Garrison, a racist, anti-Semitic teacher (he wants to get rid of Mexicans and taunts Kyle, the Jewish boy) directs the Nativity play. Kyle's mother, as a Jew, objects to the mixing of church and state, to which Mr. Garrison replies, "Oh, God, you're not gonna lay that Hanukkah crap on me, are you?" To drive home the message that Christmas is a time that Jews suffer (and that Christians are insensitive to that suffering), one of the students says, "Kyle's mother is here to ruin Christmas."

Excluded from a trip to the local mall to ask for presents from Santa, Kyle yells to his departing friends, "Wait! I may not have Santa, but I do have Mr. Hankey the Christmas Poo. . . . He comes out of the toilet every year and gives presents to everybody who has a lot of fiber in their diet." To one of the other boys, Kyle yells, "You're gonna be sorry when you see me riding on Santa's sleigh with Mr. Hankey, Fat Ass!" Alleged Christian intolerance is reinforced by the boy's reply: "You're not gonna ride on Santa's sleigh 'cause you're a Jew, Kyle!" Later, the scene shifts to Kyle's home, decorated in Hanukkah style. While brushing his teeth, Kyle is visited by Mr. Hankey, a turd wearing a Santa hat. Jumping out of the toilet bowl, Mr. Hankey the Christmas Poo sings a song about Santa and Christmas. The starkest comment in the scene comes when this animated piece of feces writes "Noel" in excrement on the mirror.

To finish the *Charlie Brown Christmas* special analogy, in which everyone chimes out "Merry Christmas, Charlie Brown!" only after Charlie has realized the true meaning of Christmas – which has Christ

²⁰ For more on Hollywood's war against Christmas, see my two-part series in *The Occidental Observer*: <http://www.theoccidentalobserver.net/authors/Connelly-ChristmasI.html> and <http://www.theoccidentalobserver.net/authors/Connelly-ChristmasII.html>.

at its center—the *South Park* characters wish Kyle a Merry Christmas only after he has taught everyone, with the help of Mr. Hankey, that Christmas and Christianity are shit. To be sure, this show takes mild swipes at individual Jews, but it never attacks Judaism as a religion. Coming as it does during one of the most important Christian holidays, its anti-Christian animus is manifest.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

In Hollywood's collective imagination, the name "Christian" can be almost as threatening as an actual crucifix. In *Marathon Man* (1976), for example, Dustin Hoffman plays Thomas Levy, a Jewish graduate student tortured by an escaped Nazi dentist. Here, the fictional Nazi dentist's name is instructive: Dr. *Christian* Szell.²¹

An even more egregious association of Christianity with brutal violence is featured in a 1998 Nicolas Cage thriller called *8mm*, directed by Joel Schumacher. Cage plays private detective Tom Welles, who is summoned by a wealthy WASP family to clear up an uncomfortable discovery. The patriarch of the family has passed away. Among his important documents, his widow found an 8mm film depicting the sexual abuse of a nearly naked teenage girl, ending with a bloody scene of the girl being hacked to death with a large knife. The suspense in the film revolves around the question: does this represent a real slaying? As a modern psychological thriller goes, such a premise is not unusual. For the purposes of this essay, however, the choice of a family name for this household is telling: they are the "Christians."

In an attempt to verify the authenticity of this "snuff" film, investigator Welles delves into the underworld of pornographic movie making and finds nightmarish characters, the worst perhaps being "Machine," a giant of a man who wears a black leather mask as he sadistically tortures or kills his victims. Welles tracks him down to a lower-class neighborhood of single-family homes, where Machine still lives with his mother, a God-fearing, church-going woman. As Welles listens in, Machine's mother tells him, "I really wish you were going to church tonight." She then goes outside to the waiting church bus, which has the inscription "Faithful Christian Fellowship" inscribed on its side. This explicit identification of him as a Christian, paired with Welles's confirmation that the snuff film is indeed real and was commissioned

²¹ For a fuller discussion of *Marathon Man*, see Connelly, "Understanding Hollywood, Part I," 64–67.

by the late Mr. Christian—that “Mr. Christian” was directly responsible for the sex slaying of a teenage girl—strongly suggests that this later depiction of the “Faithful Christian Fellowship” is meant as a “booster shot” that reinforces the critique of Christianity and Christian culture.

* * *

There is a clear trend in Hollywood and the mainstream media in general toward an ever-intensifying deconstruction of Christianity and Christian civilization. This trend cannot be explained by market demand, since the vast majority of Americans are Christians to one degree or another. The explanation is that the mainstream media are controlled by what might be called an “anti-Christian coalition.” As I argued in the first installment of this series, the senior partners and directors of this coalition are Jews,²² but the coalition also contains non-Jews who are alienated from and hostile to Christianity for any number of reasons. The coalition wishes to use its power to alter, rather than cater to, the religious convictions of the majority. To borrow an apt description of the motives of Jewish radicals from Stanley Rothman and S. Robert Lichter, members of the coalition wish “to estrange the Christian from society, as he [the coalition member] feels estranged from it.”²³

What is the ultimate goal of the coalition? What fate has been scripted for Christianity and Christian civilization? The dénouement of *8mm* is most instructive. After determining that the late “Mr. Christian” had indeed commissioned a snuff film in which a young girl was tortured and murdered for sexual gratification, the detective, played by Nicholas Cage, informs the widow, “Mrs. Christian,” that her husband was a hypocrite, a pervert, and a murderer. Overcome by shame, Mrs. Christian commits suicide. The note she leaves the detective reads simply: “Try to forget us.”

*Edmund Connelly is an academic film and television scholar and a frequent contributor to **The Occidental Quarterly** and **The Occidental Observer** (www.theoccidentalobserver.net).*

²² Connelly, “Understanding Hollywood, Part I.”

²³ Stanley Rothman and S. Robert Lichter, *Roots of Radicalism: Jews, Christians, and the New Left* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 125.