

A History of the Church and Hollywood: Conflicts and Consensus

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Much like a blockbuster movie, the relationship between many churches and the film industry today has been years in the making and filled with drama. Starting with the earliest films, clergy members both encouraged and discouraged their followers in regard to film viewing, the latter of course being the more-expected (and more frequently given) response to this new form of mass communication (Jump 218). But once films like Edison's *The Kiss* titillated audiences and got them clamoring for more, it was apparent to many clergy members that churches must find some way of uniting and advising their members in regard to this new mass medium. Frank Walsh states that the "the intimacy of seeing it [the kiss between May Irwin and John C. Rice] on a screen shocked many viewers" (6) and even led police to confiscate some early films deemed too risqué for the general public to see.

Even though government control of the film industry seemed imminent, church leaders didn't plan to stand by and wait for state censorship boards to be formed (Pacatte 273) or for leaders, like those in Chicago, to begin refusing permits for 'immoral or obscene' films (Walsh 7). And yet, churches weren't sure how, or at what level, they should engage with motion pictures. The new medium was an experience unlike any other—and church leaders were often ill-prepared to advise members regarding appropriate and acceptable engagement. What has taken years for some industry critics to realize—or perhaps admit—is that audiences receive films differently than any other medium. As Grant Horner states, "When the work is polished, the screen is king, and it creates a world that seems as real—or realer—than the real world. The screen becomes the world, and as much as we may try to convince ourselves that we make the

world, it in fact, more often than not, makes us” (34). It was just that sort of impact that may have been the catalyst for some members of the clergy to favor banning films rather than learn how and when to properly engage them.

To explore the church’s influence on the film industry would take more time, resources, and words than are possible for this paper. Rather, it is the intent here to explore the church’s early and more recent reactions to the film industry—specifically in terms of its desire and attempts to, at times, censor filmmakers and their films. Later, it will then be possible to draw conclusions regarding options for engaging this influential medium in a modern film era.

While “the church” can be defined a number of ways, it is important to clarify here that in using this term, the intention is to reference the church body as a whole, meaning any of the Christian denominations that may include Catholics and/or Protestants in the same vein. There will be important instances where these two groups (though like-minded and similar in many ways) will need to be distinctly referenced, in which case the attribution for claims, critiques, or censorship will be clearly noted as either belonging to the Catholic or Protestant church, or in other cases, representatives of a particular church will be noted, rather than a specific statement by the church body as a whole. It is with intent that this paper avoids referencing film criticism as ‘Christian’ criticism, which, as Trammell points out, “is unable to accept Jesus as its personal savior (in the way Southern Baptists privilege), and it cannot live a “Christ-like” lifestyle (as mainline Presbyterians are wont to do), since reviews can neither accept anything nor live in any manner” (115).

Finally, Horner points out that “the power of cinema is that while you are watching a well-made movie, you forget that this is what you are doing” (32). Likewise, Godawa states that those viewing a film often engage in “amusement” with the medium, which means “without

thought” (18). Lyden validates this idea in a story about a former student who loved a film that he, personally, had found to be “graphic and horrifying”; the student, however, justified her opinion to her teacher, saying it was “just a movie” (11). While early audience members had little foundation on which to build an understanding of film or its influence on them, today’s audiences have little excuse for continuing to engage with the medium in this manner of ‘amusement’.

To begin this discussion, a brief exploration of the church’s response to film will highlight some of the more interesting and important details of this sometimes volatile relationship.

A brief history of the church’s relationship with the early film industry

Audiences’ early fascination with film may have stemmed, at least in part, from the novelty of the exciting new technology (Johnston 42). To see something that happened in another place at another time was enough to keep audience interest, even if the subject matter was as simple as the Lumiere Brothers’ *Arrival of a Train* or Edison’s *Sea Waves* (Sklar 30-31). In this early part of film history, the church and Hollywood “seemed to be mutually reinforcing each other’s needs and values” (Johnston 43), and thus, the relationship was amicable. It wasn’t long, however, before audiences were seeing more than they had bargained for. Frank Walsh points out that sex and crime brought the most concern for clergy members, and early critics noted the dangers of films like *The Kiss* (6). Walsh states that this “sex film”, which lasted less than a minute, upset some viewers who might have understood seeing a kiss on the theater stage, but found “the intimacy of seeing it on a screen” too shocking to accept (6).

While critics may disagree on what brought the churches into direct confrontation with the film industry—with some citing Cecil B. DeMille’s vulgar portrayals of biblical sin, and

others noting the behind the scenes antics of America's new stars, Sklar states that "the medium's qualities—and deficiencies—now became a focus for public debate. Social organizations concentrated on the moral issues, while for critics, exhibitors, and audiences, the concerns were more on the aesthetic side" (45). Whatever was happening in the new film industry required a different response from church officials.

To begin, clergy members and industry executives (both together and separately) worked to define what would be considered acceptable content for films (Black, "Hollywood Censored" 170-172). Johnston states that by the early 1920s,

...the industry already had a loosely rendered list of thirteen prohibitions that included proscriptions of such subjects as drunkenness, nudity, crime, gambling, and illicit love. But the vague and omnibus quality of these standards, plus the lack of any enforcement tool, made them ineffective. Faced with the growing threat of government censorship, the industry organized itself as the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America and anointed Will Hays to develop and supervise a censorship program. (45)

While putting a man of high moral character, such as Will Hays, at the helm of the industry seemed to be a fine plan at the time, it, too, had flaws. Walsh points out that Hays was more "master politician" than censor, and spent a good amount of time in the early part of his career with the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) engaged in various kinds of public relations tactics that were meant to quell the public outcry for censorship in Hollywood as well as to keep government intervention in the industry at bay (26-29). Without a firm and clearly defined set of consequences for not following the rules, however, Hays had little recourse for enforcing them (Walsh 63).

The MPPDA, with a heavy influence from Catholic clergy, drafted and adopted the Production Code (PAC) in 1930 (Walsh 54). The Code outlined moral standards including guidelines for depictions of sexuality, violence, crime, and other subjects (Thompson and

Bordwell 216). Thomas Doherty states that this list of rules was enforced to varying degrees until 1968 (41). He continues that “conceived in faith and invested with a sacred aura, the Code would be likened to another text, the Bible, and metaphors of print-based religiosity would waft around it like incense” (41). The teeth behind the Production Code came in the form of large fines for films that failed to bear the seal of approval, and more importantly, a lack of such approval meant a filmmaker would be hard-pressed to find a distributor or exhibitor for such a work at all, since all MPPDA theaters were banned from showing films that did not have the Code’s seal of approval (Thompson and Bordwell 217).

While the Hays Office was staffed with people from all faiths, there was a heavy influence from Catholic clergy and laypersons like Joseph Breen, Martin Quigley and Daniel Lord. These men not only helped draft the influential Production Code, in Breen’s case, he was involved in the daily operations of the MPPDA office and was encouraged to act with a heavy hand (Black, “Hollywood Censored” 184). Romanowski states that Protestants were disheartened with the direction of Hays Office censorship, as it seemed that the man at the helm of it all was “caught in financial scandals large and small [and], he became a symbol of corporate business and all the sleaze associated with it” (75). Protestants were also concerned that Hays and the PCA office were strongly influenced by members of the Catholic Church in regard to their criticism and handling of film censorship (Walsh 54).

Doherty states that it was this climate that led Catholics to form an organization to “beat back the plague. Its official name was the National Legion of Decency—morally upright Protestants and Jews might enlist as well—but the group was known as the Legion of Decency, or more ominously, simply “the Legion” (56). The Legion quickly began to influence the film industry. Black states that while “the Legion had a direct, overt effect on the content of

Hollywood films; it also had a ‘chilling’ effect on studio executives, producers, directors, and writers, who realized that certain subjects were either banned from the screen or could be presented only within a certain framework because of Catholic opposition” (5). Further, Pacatte states that the Legion encouraged church members to take an oath that agreed to condemn and boycott all ‘indecent’ motion pictures (275). With these dramatic moves, it appeared that the Catholic Church had finally solidified its control over the industry.

But not everyone was happy with the Catholics’ work. Discouraged by the lack of Protestant influence in Hollywood, Will Hays’ growing public (and private) sins as well as the Catholic influence both in the Hays Office and through the Legion of Decency, Protestants called for further changes in Hollywood censorship, and eventually formed their own Protestant Film Commission in 1946 (Romanowski 75). According to Romanowski, “The [Protestant] commission had two broad purposes: to centralize and coordinate film production and distribution among denominational agencies and to represent Protestant churches to the film industry” (75). While Catholic and Protestant film critics agreed the industry had problems, it appeared that their differing approaches for handling them were enough to keep the groups from banding together.

Unfortunately for the Protestant Film Commission, however, its power paled in comparison to that of the Legion’s. Black points out that “after receiving a Production Code seal of approval, films were shipped to New York for duplication and distribution; but before that process could begin, each film was submitted to the Catholic Legion of Decency for a final review” (Black, *Catholic Crusade* 5). But this wasn’t the end of the process. The Legion maintained the power, Black states, to condemn films it deemed ‘immoral,’ with the ultimate consequence being control over writers, directors, and ultimately Hollywood (6). If the Legion

considered a film to be ‘immoral’, it was then boycotted by the church and its members, which at the time, made up about twenty percent of the American population (Black, “Hollywood Censored” 173).

But direct influence of the church in Hollywood was short-lived. While the Legion hung on and endured other iterations in later years, even they understood it wouldn’t be long before new tactics for church influence would be necessary. With the downfall of vertical integration in 1948 as well as the ending of the Production Code Administration’s influence in the late 1960s (Bordwell and Thompson 335) and the end of the Catholic Legion of Decency in the late 1970s, church-goers who wanted guidance for interacting with the movies had little recourse. The MPPDA was now the Motion Pictures Association of America (MPAA) and had transitioned from the Hays/Breen oversight of film content to Jack Valenti’s rating system—a plan that gave audiences, rather than Hollywood or the church, the power to choose the films they wanted to see (Sklar 388). The goal of this system was to give viewers information regarding a film’s content, with ratings tied to age groups. While this system officially took effect in the late 1960s and remains in place today, its effectiveness and usefulness continue to be subjects of debate.

Since the 1970s, the church has had to find new ways to engage with and influence the film industry. In a nod toward the Catholic Legion of Decency, the modern church-going audience has alternately boycotted films and conducted bible studies on them, the pendulum of Christian engagement with Hollywood swinging often between what Brian Godawa calls “cultural gluttons” and “cultural anorexics” (13-14). Despite an ongoing desire to engage the film industry, the church has continued to struggle with an appropriate and effective response to this medium.

In the next section of the paper, the modern Christian response to the film industry will be explored.

A new Christian response to film

When films went from being censored by the industry-sanctioned MPPDA to being protected under the First Amendment in the 1950s, the ability of the church to influence the content in the medium, or even the reception of motion pictures, was stifled (Dixon and Foster 171). And as Romanowski and Vander Heide point out, “Censorships and boycotts were now seen by many as violations of constitutional rights” which led to the film industry abandoning the Production Code and adopting the movie rating system in 1968 (40). Today, the group most comparable to the Catholic Legion of Decency is perhaps Ted Baehr’s “Movie Guide,” or the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Office for Film and Broadcast, neither of which hold little, if any, significant influence over the film industry (church members) despite maintaining websites that share film reviews (Walsh 330; Pacatte 263). Other organizations like *Christianity Today* or Focus on the Family’s “pluggedinonline” website do make efforts to evaluate modern movies from a Christian or faith-based perspective, though again, the audience for such work is already decidedly Christian in nature. Today, Hollywood productions are completed without the oversight of a governing body—save for the Ratings Board—or the influence of the church, although there are instances of church protests or passionate support of specific films, since the ratings system took effect in the late 1960s.

Because society has changed dramatically since the early part of the film industry’s development, and the audience’s ability to discern deeper meanings in films has grown, the response to films and content that may have seemed—even a short time ago—offensive to viewers has changed as well. As Ken Myers points out,

... The loss of normative guidance from family and community created a vacuum that popular culture was more than willing to fill. In time, especially for the young, standards of dress, of manners, of conversation, of friendship and love, and even of belief came to be shaped by popular culture more than by family, church, or community. (69)

Thus, it is understood that there was also a dramatic decrease in the desire for a church's input on film-viewing or -reception after the period already considered. By the 1970s and 1980s, film audiences were likely to separate their film-going experience from their church-going one, if such an experience was still relevant to them at all (Johnston 50).

And yet, as Johnston recognizes, the lack of church influence in Hollywood doesn't mean the situation should be (or has been) abandoned. He states, "The church is now recognizing that theology is often being done outside its doors. Thus, a spate of books on film have appeared since 1990 whose primary intention is to bring movies into the church's life and witness" (51), which, in some ways, brings the conversation back to the early years of the industry, when clergy encouraged their flocks to attend films (Jump 225; Johnston 42). Johnston continues, stating, "Supporting and encouraging the church's rapid adoption of film as a resource for its life and witness is the escalating number of Christian websites that review movies and/or provide resources on movies for Christian study and reflection" (52). Such purposeful engagement by the church to modern mainstream films is exactly how people of faith have responded in more recent years. But Lindolf notes that the church's engagement with the film industry may not have occurred in the 1970s and 1980s as frequently as it had in the past, because "Network television and pornography were considered far more serious threats to the nation's moral fiber" (82). But the film industry wasn't ignored during this time, and several films drew the church's attention.

The Last Temptation of Christ is one such example. The response to this film by the church, its clergy, and devoted followers was so intense that Lindolf states no film since has

“aroused the passions of a wider spectrum of the public, involved the country’s religious, political, and media communities to a greater degree, or resulted in more worldwide actions against distributors, theaters, and theater owners” (9). Audiences protested so passionately to the film’s production that Paramount called it off, though the project was eventually taken over by Universal (Lindolf 80). It is worth noting that without the influence of the church *and* the support of the film industry in those endeavors—as had been the case during the Production Code era—audiences had an uphill battle of organizing letter writing, protests, and banning together all for the sake of stopping one film from being made. Still, and despite the obstacles, Riley notes that Christians “were unable to force Universal to withdraw the film from release, [but] religious conservatives were quite successful in pressuring a number of theaters and chains not to show the movie” (25). And yet, Lindolf argues, “By the third weekend, the story line that dominated the summer’s headlines—the titanic struggle between a Hollywood studio and a bloc of angry religious leaders—had played out, and other events, especially the fall presidential election contest, were filling the void” (263). In other words, the dramatic story of the fight between the modern church and Hollywood had played out and everyone had moved on to another, perhaps more interesting, tale.

But the connection to the church’s past influence over films—and the debate between Protestant and Catholic critics—was evident. What was also clear was that some of the same ideas for solving the problems between the church and Hollywood were still being offered as viable solutions. One such idea was that films that showcased high moral ideals would win out at the box office over those with characters engaged in sexual and social misconduct (Romanowski 204). In more modern times this has been attempted, with the new spin of aiming the films directly at a ‘Christian audience.’ Films like *Left Behind*, *A Walk to Remember*, *Fireproof*,

Courageous, and dozens more have been made and successfully marketed to a faith-based audience, though most suffer from a lack of quality and heavy-handed gospel preaching (Fraser and Neal 26).

Although it is likely the trend will continue with “Christian” filmmakers making “Christian” movies for “Christian” audiences, Romanowski takes aim at this increasingly popular idea when he states, “...What researchers discovered was that movies directly targeting the “Christian” audience were tricky to market; a safer bet was ‘sanding the edges off dialogue that might offend churchgoers’ in a general release” (208). While this might seem a viable solution, it’s likely some members of the Christian audience would agree; it’s not enough to “preach to the choir” with a message as important as the gospel, or that such films would find success with a Christian or secular audience. Trammell concurs, saying, “Producing a religious-themed movie does not necessarily result in a blockbuster, no matter how large the Christian audience” (“Why Does” 21).

Because of the changing situation in Hollywood and American society after the fall of the PCA and the implementation of the ratings system, Christian engagement with and influence over the film industry has understandably, and out of necessity, changed as well. In 2004, one film in particular, *The Passion of the Christ*, had loftier goals, and for a time at least, put people of faith in the position they’d traditionally opposed, defending a film and freedom of expression. Winchell states:

The object of this tirade of abuse is perhaps the most genuinely religious movie [*The Passion of the Christ*] ever produced in Hollywood. For that reason, it drew an odd coalition on both sides of the debate. *The Passion* was embraced by conservative Christians, who had previously decried the graphic violence in motion pictures and would never have even thought of attending an R-rated film. At the same time, liberals, who ordinarily pride themselves on tolerating just about anything on First Amendment grounds, reviled this depiction of the final hours of Christ’s life on earth. (216)

The *Passion*'s marketing, according to Trammell, was also handled with care, which likely increased its success with a larger market. He states:

...What is most interesting is what the campaign did *not* do to attract Christians: it did not take the broad population of all American Christians for granted as a guaranteed audience. The marketing campaign seems tailored to a particular subculture of Christian believers—that is, conservative evangelicals—rather than to the general population of American Christians. (“Why Does” 27)

Despite the careful planning with this film's marketing, it was controversial from the beginning and had similar issues to *Last Temptation* even before filming was complete (Winchell 217).

Accusations of anti-Semitism and a graphic portrayal of violence, coupled with questions regarding Gibson's biblical interpretations, might have worked to undermine the success of the film (Perlgut 119-120). Instead, *Passion* went on to become one of the most successful films of all time (Perlgut 118). It is likely that Gibson's marketing approach influenced this outcome.

Brown et al. state that Gibson aimed the marketing of the film at the Christian community, even visiting leaders like the Pope, James Dobson and Billy Graham, discussing faith and showing them rough cuts of the film (91). This tactic of embracing the Christian culture may have saved the film from a fate similar to *Last Temptation*.

The modern approach of the church to the film industry has evolved of necessity. Without support from within the industry (as with the PCA) or a concerted, organized effort by the churches for bridging the gap between the industry and the public (i.e. a Legion of Decency), people of faith have had to work hard to make their voices heard in Hollywood. While these efforts have had a united intention of sparing audiences from the moral pitfalls found in film narratives as well as behind the scenes, they have also fallen short of reaching their lofty goals.

The effectiveness of church engagement with the film industry

The church has had a vested interest in Hollywood and the film industry since its creation in the late 1800s (Johnston 42-43). Understandably, the church's level of interest in the industry has ebbed and flowed in the years that followed, with varying degrees of effectiveness. While some may argue that the PCA did little to influence the industry—with filmmakers pushing back against this system (Thompson and Bordwell 216)—at least one critic studied the issue and resolved that in terms of portraying violence without glorification, the PCA staff was effective in meeting its intended goals (Timmer 36). Joel Timmer points out that

...on the whole, the drafters of the Code were largely and surprisingly effective in devising restrictions that prohibited or restricted the types of violent portrayals that research decades later would show carried the greatest risks of negative effects for viewers. In this regard, the Code's drafters were, by and large, successful in crafting restrictions to achieve their objective. (36)

And yet, the PCA wasn't without flaws. It is clear that the Code and its administrators had a place in film history that cannot be duplicated with a similar level of effectiveness in today's market. The changing audience, style of filmmaking, and even the ability of the church to influence film-goers would not mesh with this style of censorship.

Without an organization like the PCA heading off problems before a movie is even made, or the Legion of Decency to handle upset after a film has been produced, today's audience has had to be creative. In the aforementioned *mêlée* from the *Last Temptation*, there was (deliberately) little discussion of the protestors' effectiveness. That the film was made should be enough to satisfy the curiosity; however, it is also true that the production of the film was not easy to come by, and obstacles set in place by many Christians had to be overcome. Riley states that word spread through the Christian community that the film was in production, and once again conservatives mobilized in force. Letters were sent by the thousands to MCA, Universal's

parent corporation, who hired Tim Penland of Christian Marketing to act as a liaison between the studio and Christian community. (14) In hiring Penland, the production team behind *Last Temptation* was attempting to head off any significant problems among conservative Christians. But the job proved too big for one man; Lindolf states that “although Penland had some early success in restraining the Christian Right’s activists, there wasn’t much he could do about rumors percolating up from the grassroots. The strangest, and most troubling, was the rumor of a pornographic film about Jesus Christ” (142). As the rumors grew in scope and number, Penland realized he was hard-pressed to squelch them.

Lindolf continues that as the letters poured in, some executives wondered if pushing ahead with the project was wise (201). He states that after the James Dobson radio show, where the host not only commented on the film, but appeared to be personally offended at the management’s mishandling of the early screening for members of the clergy (165), “the floodgates opened and a massive tide of letters, cards, packages, and petitions poured in unabated for the next five weeks” (201).

While it appears the modern churchgoing audience had little recourse but to respond to the *Last Temptation* controversy, one might question the methods that were used to do so. The letters that had been delivered, along with packages, as well as angry phone calls, didn’t appear to dissuade Universal executives from making the film. Despite hiring Penland and making efforts to reach out to the audience with early screenings for pastors, among other efforts, much of the Christian-affiliated audience, who hadn’t even seen the film, probably wouldn’t see it anyway due to the R rating (Winchell 170) and were unlikely to trust any positive press the film may or may not have otherwise garnered. Further still, in many cases, this group’s indignation

with the film only served to make them appear close-minded and incapable of relevant discussion. Lindolf states that

call screeners and mail handlers noticed an extremist element among the thousands of phone calls and letters—an element that some at the studio labeled ‘lunatics,’ ‘nut cases,’ ‘religious fanatics,’ coming ‘out of the woodwork.’ Amounting to far less than one percent of the total, the messages nonetheless suggested that certain people might decide to act on their emotions and attempt to penetrate the studio and disrupt its operations, harass the executives, or, most disturbing of all, cause bodily harm. (202)

And it was due to this even relatively small number of ‘nut cases’ that Universal spent over a million dollars on security costs (Lindolf 231).

The Da Vinci Code has probably caused the greatest upset since *Last Temptation*, especially with Catholic members of the audience, who were indignant to a story that insinuated Jesus had married and fathered a child with Mary Magdalene (Sullivan). While there were protests and calls by some groups to boycott the film, which one archbishop said presented “fiction as fact” (Sullivan), many churchgoers took a different route. Terry Lindvall states that the “great worth of *The Da Vinci Code*, however, is that it shocks true historians into a conversation with such an influential medium as film”—which means, he continues, that the film could initiate discussion with people who might not have engaged with such information or ideas before (128). And another church spokesperson, Jack Valero, an Opus Dei representative, said that the group’s officials were “advising their members not to see the film but had not called for a general boycott or public protests” (Sullivan). Valero continued that he believed the film’s promoters wanted the publicity generated by “angry Christians carrying banners,” but that Christians shouldn’t “play into their hands” (Sullivan). Instead, Valero encouraged Christians who were upset by the film to “just smile” so as to get an award for being “the most friendly people on earth” (Sullivan).

In the current culture of twenty-four hours news, and the barrage of information gleaned each day from social media as well as more traditional forms like radio and television, the challenges between the church and media have become even more dynamic, but that does not mean it isn't worth the fight—or that the answers to the media problem are so different from what some pioneer film critics discovered in the early part of the industry. As Horner states,

The believer should approach this enjoyment and study like all the rest of life: you must learn to seek God's wisdom and will in the choices you make, great and small. The key to a wise and godly life is to fill your heart and mind with Scripture and then make your decisions based upon the broad principles and direct precepts found in the Word. I contend that Scripture does not call us to evacuate ourselves entirely from the pagan culture that surrounds you, but to use our wise and prudent interaction with that culture to help us grow in our appreciation of God's grace toward us, to see that what God says about fallen mankind is in fact absolutely accurate, and to better equip us for interaction with the many human beings who do not yet follow him. (26)

As film has brought questions, frustrations, entertainment, education, and so many other feelings, benefits, and frustrations, perhaps this is the starting point for the conversation on how and at what level the church should engage with this medium of communication.

Conclusions

Film has been a controversial, and yet very important, topic of discussion since its creation in the late 1800s. Some of the reason for this is that, as Johnston states, "Movies are life stories that both interpret us and are being interpreted by us" (33). This type of intense audience engagement is unlike any other. But it is also because of this deep engagement that churches can and should be open to discussing films and stop the unsuccessful campaigns against them. As Jump states,

And now we come to the point: the objections which you and the others thus make against the religious use of motion pictures can all of them be urged with equal force against the use of the most convincing parable which the Christ ever uttered. The films that have value for religious education today are those which portray truth as the Good Samaritan portrays it—in a dramatic story, of contemporary

experience. (217)

Jump's point does not diminish the need that Christians have to be *careful* and even cautious when approaching the film medium. He does, however, offer a sincere and relevant plea that churches don't attempt to stop believers from viewing films. Rather, he acknowledges the need to find ways to use this influential and valuable medium to teach important lessons, understand other cultures, and grow in our own faith.

Despite Jump's encouragement to incorporate film viewing into church services, or to find a place for it in our lives, church members should be cautious of embracing film without any thought regarding its impact. In today's culture, with decreasing church membership or even attendance by members of the younger generations, the ability of the church to influence film audiences is increasingly difficult. As Leonard notes, since the late 1960s, organized religions have seen a significant decline in the participation of teenagers and young adults for a variety of reasons. At the same time, these groups, perhaps because they have more disposable income than previous generations, increased their attendance at the cinema (40). With increasing attendance at the movies, but decreasing attendance at church, one might wonder if the church is capable of influencing film audiences in regard to viewing habits at all. Or, conversely, one might ask whether most church members are even concerned about the ability of film to influence the behaviors and worldview of its audience with so many other problems plaguing the culture.

With the understanding that the PCA and the Catholic Legion of Decency once held important places in the film industry—and within the influential circles of church as well—one might note that this sort of influence and impact are long gone or at least would be difficult to duplicate in today's culture. Likewise, the kind of venomous attacks by the church on films like *Last Temptation* or even the more recent *The Da Vinci Code* were, while in some ways effective

in getting their message across, more likely to speak to those who already were in favor of censoring the films.

Church-going people need a more effective plan for engaging with film in today's culture. While, as Medved, argues, "America's long-running romance with Hollywood is over. As a nation, we no longer believe that popular culture enriches our lives. Few of us view the show business capital as a magical source of uplifting entertainment, romantic inspiration, or even harmless fun" (3); there are, however, still people within the church who might disagree with such sentiments. It is better for us as people of any number of faiths who are concerned with the direction of this incredibly influential medium, to instead find a way to make better choices about what we see, and then once we have viewed a film, have the ability to delve into deeper understanding of the meaning behind the film. Myers agrees, stating, my answer to the question about Christian involvement with popular culture is essentially the same. You can enjoy popular culture without compromising Biblical principles as long as you are not dominated by the sensibility of popular culture, as long as you are not captivated by its idols (180). Being people who are willing to engage with films at all is the first step to having the ability to have an impact in the film industry as well as with film audiences.

Another thing that is important to remember is that, as Godawa states, "... Not all accounts of sex and violence are intrinsically immoral. It is the *context* through which these misbehaviors are communicated that dictates their destructive or redemptive nature" (33). Even as far back as the creation of films in the late 1800s, some critics have failed to recognize this point. Christian audience members who fear films enough to stay away from them altogether—or perhaps only watch the ones endorsed by their pastors in church sermons—should heed this point, remembering, as Godawa notes, "Most movies are not wholly evil or wholly good. Most

movies are a mixed bag of values and ideas, some good, some bad, most worth engaging and discussing” (26). Perhaps instead of taking a stand against the film industry, the Christian audience should make efforts toward more education about films, their history, their impact, and storytelling methods. By knowing what films are, what they do and how they do it, audiences will make better decisions regarding what films to view, and after having viewed a film, the audience would also be better suited to have intelligent and fruitful discussions regarding the viewing experience and the film industry.

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