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Fall to Grace

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Fall to Grace

Abstract

This is a film review of *Fall to Grace* (2013) directed by Alexandra Pelosi.

Keywords

Homosexuality, Politics, Rehabilitation, Addiction, Episcopal Church, Roman Catholicism, Jim McGreevey, HBO, Alexandra Pelosi

Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion and Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: NYU Press, 2003), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (Routledge, 2009). He is currently editing (along with Eric Mazur) the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.

Fall to Grace

Directed by Alexandra Pelosi

(Documentary Shorts Program)



New Jersey governor Jim

McGreevey resigned his office in 2004 when it came to light that he had had an extramarital affair with a man. He came out as a gay American, and admitted

his dishonesty and his mistakes. This short documentary examines how his current work forms part of his own journey towards redemption.

In my interviews with them at the festival, both McGreevey and Pelosi framed the narrative as one from politics, to religion, to redemption. Pelosi, who has dealt with both politics and religion in her previous documentaries, found McGreevey's story intriguing because of the unique way in which he dealt with the loss of his public image, his marriage, and his career. This was not just another story of a disgraced politician with a secret life; rather, as McGreevey publicly embraced his identity as a gay man, he believes that he was able for the first time to be honest with himself as well as others. "I had straight-jacketed my emotions," he says, as he was "addicted to the love of strangers" from whom he

sought affirmation. This caused him to create a false identity that was not true to himself, and as he came to realize this, he knew he had to recover from his addiction to fame, and his dishonesty to himself and others. He also had to deal with the damage he had done to himself



Journal of Religion & Film Editor John Lyden (left) with Jim McGreevey

and to others. “Coming out was a great gift,” he now says; “I could accept who I was.”

McGreevey’s journey of recovery caused him to leave behind his Roman Catholic upbringing, as he associates it with a legacy of shame and a message of rejection about his sexual identity. “The Roman Catholic Church has no redemption for gays,” he believes. But his rejection of Roman Catholicism led him to the Episcopal Church, which now allows the ordination of openly gay non-celibate priests in committed relationships. (McGreevey’s partner since 2004 has been Mark O’Donnell, who is not the man with whom McGreevey had an extramarital affair.) McGreevey told me that after his resignation, he wanted to go back to Catholic Mass, but he simply could not; then, an Episcopal priest introduced him to the Book of Common Prayer, and he found a faith community that is “celebratory,” full of a rich tradition of theology and sacrament, and he

knew he wanted to become a priest. He then studied at General Theological Seminary in New York City and obtained a Master's of Divinity degree. He has still not been accepted by the Episcopal Church for candidacy to the priesthood, but he spoke to me with tremendous enthusiasm about his theological education, dropping excited references to Thomas Aquinas, Dorothy Day, Paul Tillich, and John McQuarrie. He is drawn to Virtue Ethics and Liberation Theology, and seeks to find a way to live that is "authentic, transparent, and ennobling."

This vocation has led him to his current work, ministering to women in prison who have often been drug addicts that were led by their habit to a life of crime. He brings them a message of love and acceptance, and tells them that they can change. As Governor, he says, he was trying to "save the world," but now his work is more like "throwing back starfish, one at a time." Rather than working globally, he finds his mission in helping individuals. "I am those women," he claims, seeing his own addiction as akin to theirs; he tells them that his story is their story, and they know he accepts them and believes they are good, and that they can change. "They're good people in search of a new beginning...its gives me purpose," he says. "We're on this journey together." McGreevey states that he helps them "work through that guilt and shame," teaching them that "they have value" as human beings. For the women's part, they say that "he believes in

salvation, and second chances.” From him, they have learned that “anyone can fall; it’s what you do after that matters.”

Pelosi admitted that this is her most “religious” film to date, and that she has come to see the importance of “believing in something.” Her own Roman Catholic faith is an important part of her identity, but in particular, she says she “believes in public service.” This film is about public service, in offering a portrait of a man who is making a difference. “He took something bad, and turned it into something good,” Pelosi remarked; “He used his infamy to help those women in jail.” The film premieres on HBO on March 28.

— John Lyden