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Images of God in the Movies

Abstract

In the following essay I identify some of the images of God I have found in contemporary, popular movies. Some of these are visual images of God, while others are conceptions of what God expects from us or for us. I conclude that the God of the movies is both gentle and tough, merciful and stern, caring and just. Movies may emphasize the merciful, but the images of God include both mercy and justice and the emphasis mirrors the emphasis on mercy in our own culture. We are, on the whole, optimists, and the images of God in the movies support such optimism.

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For the past several years I have been teaching a course called "Sociology of Religion in Popular Culture." In this course I use recent movies to represent popular culture and use the images of god in these movies to represent religion(s).

I first ask my students to describe the images of God found in a variety of contemporary popular movies. My students find this difficult because they believe that the images of God which they already have are the correct images. The images of God in the movies, then, are often very different and even contrary to the images of God that my students have before taking the class. Showing that there are many different images of God, however, enables me to make the point that there is no literal or correct way to talk about God, that all God-talk is metaphorical, even the talk with which my students are already familiar.

I then ask my students to say something about what the images of God in the movies we see in the class tell us about religion and popular culture. I believe that images of God are symbols of what people believe about life and death and so they tell us something very important about popular culture and religion. Since the focus of the course is on images of God, and not on whether God exists, it is a proper focus for sociological study.

All That Jazz (1979)

In Bob Fosse's autobiographical fantasy, *All That Jazz*, the main character, Joe Gideon (played by Roy Scheider and representing Bob Fosse), spends most of his time driving himself and using other to complete his projects and win acclaim. Gideon is addicted to drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, and women, which he uses to keep himself going.

Such a life cannot last long (Fosse, himself, dies eight years after making the movie) and as Joe moves toward death he encounters Angelique, a vision in white played by Jessica Lange. Angelique is the image of God in this movie and an unusual image of God she, beginning with the fact that Angelique is a woman. Not only is Angelique a woman, but she is a sexually attractive woman and, as death nears, Angelique removes her hat and veil and lets her hair down, becoming even more sexually attractive. As though this were not enough, it is also obvious that Angelique finds Joe Gideon sexually desirable.

The Rapture (1991)

The Rapture is the story of a woman, Sharon, who uses drugs and casual sex to deal with boredom and fear, at least until she hears about the religious idea of a coming "Rapture," the end of time. After hearing about the Rapture and joining

a group of believers, Sharon marries, has a daughter, and lives a more stable and ordinary life, until her husband is killed by a disgruntled former employee.

After the death of her husband, Sharon anticipates the Rapture more seriously. Eventually she takes her daughter out into the desert to await the Rapture. But the Rapture does not come. Sharon kills her daughter, intending also to kill herself, in order that both might be with God and the child's father. But Sharon cannot kill herself. She is found and taken to jail. It is there that the Rapture occurs. Sharon has the opportunity to go to heaven, but cannot believe that God would accept her after killing her own child. Since she is no longer a believer, she is condemned to hell rather than welcomed into heaven.

The image of God in *The Rapture* is not a visual or loving one, but an intellectual and judging one. The God of *The Rapture* is a stern God, one who is willing to condemn a woman to hell because she cannot accept God's rules. But this God not only allows her to kill her child: this God still requires her complete belief in order to enter heaven. (See Carl B. Greiner's, *The Rapture: A Challenging Vision of Horror*," in JRF, vol. 1, no. 1.)

Oh, God! (1977)

George Burns as God? Yes, when God makes his appearance to Assistant Food Manager, Jerry Landers (John Denver), it is in the form of George Burns. But,

God tells Jerry, he could have appeared in any other form ("even a woman"). He chose this form because it is a form that Jerry can understand. (Indeed, God tells Jerry that the human mind would not be able to grasp God as God really is.)

In this movie, God is kind, gentle, fun-loving, funny, and encouraging. God even admits to having made some mistakes along the way, including tobacco, ostriches, avocados, and shame. God also tells Jerry that he has been selected, by accident, to spread God's concern about the way human beings are living. The world is not all planned. It was created, and from that point forward it was up to the human species to make it work. Wearing glasses, a golf hat and tennis shoes, God tells Jerry that people need to behave better, that they need to improve the world, and that it is still possible for things to work out well.

Jacob's Ladder (1990)

Jacob Singer (played by Tim Robbins) is a Vietnam soldier or veteran, depending upon how you interpret the story. The movie is the story of Jacob's struggle with the death of his son (prior to Jacob's tour of duty) and with a government conspiracy. The conspiracy concerns covering up the use of a drug (BZ, known as "the ladder") that increases human aggression. Jacob's unit is (was) the experimental group, but the drug causes the soldiers to become so aggressive that they kill each other instead of the enemy.

During these two struggles, Jacob is assisted by a chiropractor, Louie, played by Danny Aiello. Although Louie does not play a large role in the movie, he represents a God that heals and cares for Jacob. More importantly, Louie represents a God who advises Jacob that if he is afraid of dying, then the devils come after him, but if he has made his peace, then the devils are really angels freeing him from earth. Jacob Singer finally does make his peace and walks off into the light.

Truly, Madly, Deeply (1991)

Nina, played by Juliet Stevenson, finds it impossible to overcome the death of her musician lover, Jamie, played by Alan Rickman. She is unable to go on with her life until the ghost of Jamie arrives on the scene. At first Nina makes a new life for herself with the ghost of Jamie, but after a while she finds that living with a ghost is not very satisfying and she takes up with Mark, a young man (played by Michael Maloney) who cares for a group of retarded persons.

Jamie's ghost provides the image of God. As God or as God's representative, Jamie's ghost cares for and nurtures Nina. Finally, Jamie's ghost encourages Nina to go on living - to take up with mark and make a life for herself without the ghost. This is very difficult for the ghost to do because, like a mother's love for a maturing child, he loves Nina and wants to be with her. But in the end, the ghost is happy for

Nina, even though she is with someone else. God displays a bit of jealousy here, but overcomes it for the sake of Nina's happiness.

Babette's Feast (1987)

Babette's Feast is the story of two sisters, Martina and Philippa, whose father is the founder of a religious community in a Danish coastal town. Having chosen against their chances at romance and fame, the sisters have embraced this religion of their father and the community. All of this changes when they take in a boarder/cook, Babette, a political refugee from the French Revolution.

Babette is the representative of God in this film. Played by Stephane Audran, Babette is the refugee and, quite obviously, the salvation of the two sisters. She provides them with better food at less expense. After winning a French lottery, she insists on cooking and serving a banquet for the sisters and the religious community in honor of the anniversary of their father's death. The banquet is a kind of reenactment of the Last supper, and it provides all of the participants an opportunity not only to indulge their appetites but also to forgive each other and to live more joyously together. (See Wendy Wright's *Babette's Feast*, in JRF, vol.1, no. 2.)

Flatliners (1990)

Flatliners is the story of a group of medical students who want to discover experientially whether or not there is something beyond death. To accomplish this, each one in turn is caused to die - creating a "flatline" on the heart monitor - and then is resuscitated by his or her fellow students. What the students discover is that after death they encounter some "sin" from their past, a sin that returns with them when they come back from being dead. The only way to rid themselves of the haunting sin is to seek forgiveness.

Although they have heard talk of bright lights and tunnels, what they actually discover is not a visual image of God, but an understanding of what God wants our lives to be like. And what God wants is for us to ask forgiveness of those whom we have harmed in some way or other. Or, in one case, the young woman's father asks for her forgiveness. God is an emphasis upon forgiveness, and only through forgiveness can we live well, live without feat.

Always (1989)

In this movie, Richard Dreyfuss plays a fire-fighting pilot (Pete Sandich) who dies after saving the life of his best friend, Al Yackey (played by John Goodman). His girlfriend, Dorinda (Holly Hunter) continues to mourn for Pete, in a way that is very similar to Nina's mourning for Jamie in "Truly, madly, Deeply."

Pete returns to earth as an invisible angel, instructed by an angel in white, played by Audrey Hepburn.

Even though he is dead, Pete wants Dorinda to "be his girl," but he learns that he must let her go if he is to free himself of his pain, a pain which he continues to experience even though he is in heaven. This, too, is a movie about what God wants for our lives. God wants us to be free, but in order to be free we must let others be free as well. God does not want the memory of love to make us unhappy for the rest of our lives - whether on earth or elsewhere. And God wants us to help others, again whether we are on earth or elsewhere. Angels are always helping other angels who in turn help still others.

Mr. Destiny (1990)

Mr. Destiny is a bartender, Mike (played by Michael Caine). Mike gives Larry Burrows (James Belushi) a potion that enables Larry to experience his life as it might have been if he had hit a home run in the state championship, instead of striking out. At first Larry is amazed at his new life - it is everything he dreamed of before taking the potion. He is now president of the company, married to the owner's daughter, rich, and powerful. Soon he discovers that his new life comes with its own set of problems and pains, and that his new life precludes his enjoyment of the things that were so special in his previous life. Having learned his

lesson, Larry drinks another potion and returns to this "real" life and appreciates it more than before.

God's message, taught by Mr. Destiny, is that we ought to appreciate our lives fully, instead of spending so much time wishing that things could be different. The greatest satisfaction and joy will come from living one's life as it is - "everything will work out." It is a mistake to think that some other life would be better for you, as Larry learns when given the change change his life.

Summary

What judgment can we make about God in the movies? - if we dare to make any judgments about God at all! Is She gentle enough, loving enough, affectionate enough, tender enough, forgiving enough? There doesn't seem to be any doubt about those questions: Certainly She is. But is She too soft, too forgiving, too tolerant, too indulgent of our freedoms? Might it be better if the God of movies showed some outrage, some sense of justice?

It is pure nonsense that there's a difference between the God of the Jewish scriptures and that of the Christian scriptures. God is love in the Jewish scriptures, too. But must we really accept the notion that the God of the movies is not tough? In the most gentle and charming manifestations - as portrayed by Jessica Lange and Audrey Hepburn - She seems plenty tough. Affectionate, yes - but putting up with

no nonsense, no self-deception, no evasion, no silly excuses. Compassion and strength are not incompatible. Neither are love and justice. But as such Catholic theologians as Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Baltassar have said: God's mercy is stronger than his justice. So too it would seem with the God of the movies, much like an orthodox God after all.

Movies also tell us that American religion is firmly committed to the notion of a gracious rather than a punitive God, perhaps because America is a nation dedicated to freedom and a nation that never suffered too much (not since the Civil War, anyway) and Americans are incorrigible optimists. God in the movies is someone who supports and sustains American optimism.