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Christians in the Movies: A Century of Saints and Sinners

Abstract

This is a book review of Peter Dans' *Christians in the Movies: A Century of Saints and Sinners* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009).

Author Notes

Bryan Polk, Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at Penn State Abington, is a graduate of Susquehanna University (B.A., Religion, 1977), Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia (M.Div., 1981), and Beaver College, now Arcadia University, Glenside, PA (M.A., English, 1995). His interests, in addition to religion and film, are in the areas of Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Medieval Literature, and Biblical Studies. His publications include articles on "Jesus as a Trickster God" and "The Medieval Image of the Hero in the Harry Potter Novels," and he has written six--unpublished--novels. He lives in Abington, Pennsylvania.

Peter Dans has written an important book, *Christians in the Movies: A Century of Saints and Sinners* (2009) which brings to light a number of critical insights and presents a lucid exposition of how the Motion Picture Production Code and The Catholic Legion of Decency influenced Hollywood and American society for decades. He writes, “For Catholics, attendance at condemned films was forbidden under pain of sin, and they were asked to take a pledge annually (usually at the feast of the Immaculate Conception) to avoid morally objectionable films and places that showed them as a matter of policy” (6). In addition, Dans provides concise synopses of 186 films, a number of which I confess I have never seen (and, perhaps for some of them, at least, now I have no need to see). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Dans weighs in on what he sees as the demise of wholesome films in contemporary society and the frightening repercussions such a demise signals for our society. In the often thoroughly liberal world of academe, this is a point of view that not only deserves to be heard, but it is also a voice that needs to be heard, especially by those who—like myself—tend to lean to the left.

Yet Dans seems to be unaware of the subtle and intricate ways in which life imitates art and art imitates life. For Dans, a good film is one which portrays priests and nuns as saintly, and a bad film is one which portrays priests and nuns as human or flawed. He seems intent on preaching the message that life should imitate wholesome art, but he seems unaware that art also imitates sometimes unwholesome life. As should be abundantly clear to everyone now, there *are* flawed priests, bishops, and nuns in the Roman Catholic Church. And as much as Dans celebrates “wholesome” films, much of life both inside and outside the Roman Catholic Church is both flawed and not worthy of emulation. Writing in the Introduction to Chapter Nine (“Dogma: The 1990s”), Dans comments, “As this chapter’s title highlights, the movies of this decade were, on average, the most antagonistic to orthodox dogma and institutional religion,

especially Catholicism, and were a major impetus for the creation of this book” (251). And little wonder! The sexual abuse scandal that continues to plague the Roman Catholic Church *deservedly* calls “institutional religion” into question.

Dans seems to be only vaguely aware that Protestants and other non-Catholics exist, either in society or in film. He notes in Chapter One (“Portraying Christians in Film”), that “Mainstream Protestant groups, which were once prominent in the background and occasionally in the foreground of many movies, have virtually disappeared from films, except for wedding ceremonies. Catholics turn out to be the most prevalent group dealt with in film, both in their predominantly favorable presentation in early films and their subtle and sometimes blatant disparagement in post-Code movies, beginning in the 1970s and escalating in the late 1980s” (9). This is at best naïve and at worst just incorrect. A cursory examination of my personal DVD collection garnered a host of films portraying non-Roman Catholics that Dans failed to include in his book, including *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), *The Hallelujah Trail* (1965), *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972), *Oh God!* (1977), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Oh God! Book II* (1980), *Oh God! You Devil* (1984), *Footloose* (1984), *Grumpy Old Men* (1993), *Gettysburg* (1993), *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Grumpier Old Men* (1995), *40 Days and 40 Nights* (2002), and *Gangs of New York* (2002), not to mention “Catholic” films Dans failed to mention, including *Patton* (1970), *Rocky* (1976), *Moonstruck* (1987), and *Braveheart* (1995). In fact, Dans would have done better to title his book *Catholics in the Movies*, as this seems to be his predominant concern, culminating in the last page of the text of the book with a list of “The Top 10 Pro-Catholic Films” and “The Top 10 Anti-Catholic Films.” Surprisingly, Dans lists *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946) as the fifth most pro-Catholic film ever made. George Bailey (Jimmy Stewart) is never depicted as a Catholic, he is never seen in a church (his wedding takes place in

his mother's living room!) and is only seen praying once. Is it the presence of Angel Second Class Clarence (Henry Travers) that makes this film "Catholic"? Are angels the sole property of Roman Catholicism? There is nothing Catholic in this film whatsoever, pro- or otherwise, despite the fact that Dans writes that *It's a Wonderful Life* "is a profoundly Christian film" (91).

Also in the Introduction to his book, Dans gives an indication of his aims: "I also hope [this book] will encourage orthodox Christian believers who have stopped going to movies to get more involved in helping to reshape this important industry, *which all agree has badly lost its way*" (xvii, emphasis added). From my vantage point, there is not a single issue in contemporary life that can claim to have the agreement of everyone. When it comes to films, I would challenge Thomas Doherty's notion that "[t]he inconvenient truth is that Hollywood's most vivid and compelling motion pictures were produced under the most severe and narrow-minded censorship'" (qtd. in Dans 8). Contemporary and more recent films *are* edgier, perhaps more violent, certainly more nuanced and ambiguous, *as life is*. Certainly the film *Boys Town* (1938) was a "feel-good overtly Christian" (57) one and it attempts to depict an America that is "a far cry from today" (57). In this second sentiment, Dans is correct. Today's world *is* a far cry from the world of the 1930s, but this is not necessarily a bad thing. In today's world, there are at least attempts to expose problems—such as the abuse of women, pedophilia, and racism—that had plagued and undermined what on the surface appeared to be a congenial and wholesome society, much like termites undermine a structure that from the outside looks sound and stable. Even more problematic is Dans' treatment of the film *Amen* (2002). In his commentary on the film, Dans writes, "This hateful anti-Catholic movie about the complicity of Pope Pius XII in the Holocaust has about as much validity as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* about Jews...[T]his canard has been kept alive by James Carroll, author of 'Hitler's Pope,' and others because it

sells” (308). The main problem with this passage is that James Carroll did not write *Hitler’s Pope: The Secret History of Pius XII* (1999); John Cornwell did. Interestingly, Dans does not include the book in his “Selected Bibliography” under either author’s name although he does include one book written by each of them. Cornwell, a devout Roman Catholic, began *Hitler’s Pope* in an attempt to put to rest once and for all the various allegations which have been leveled against Pius XII. But what he found in the Vatican’s restricted archives—made available to Cornwell *because* he wanted to write a pro-Pius book—disabused him of this idea. He concludes his exhaustive—and heartbreaking—book with, “I am convinced that the cumulative verdict of history shows [Pius XII/Pacelli] to be not a saintly exemplar for future generations, but a deeply flawed human being from whom Catholics...can best profit by expressing our sincere regret” (384). In a private email to me recently, John Cornwell put it somewhat differently. “I chose the title *Hitler’s Pope* because I argue that he was the ideal, albeit unwitting, churchman (as Cardinal Pacelli during the 1930s) and as Pope during the war for Hitler’s purposes and plans” (used by permission).

It is when we read Dans’ thoughts about *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) that we get the key that unlocks *Christians in the Movies*. In his consideration of *Temptation*, Dans opines, “One gets the feeling that the novel and the film represent the reflection of the struggles of Kazantsakis, and ex-seminarian Martin Scorsese, with their own personal demons....Their point is that if Christ was truly human, he must have experienced all the temptations that beset them and everyone....However, they seem to have forgotten that he was also God” (239-240). Similarly, his commentary on *Passion* includes a paean celebrating “Gibson’s attempt to show the enormity of Christ’s sacrifice for us” (317). Earlier in his commentary, Dans mentions Christ’s “unspeakable suffering” (315) and the caveat

that *Passion* “is barely watchable at times because of the brutality” (316). Then, with a not very subtle hint of condescending sanctimony, he favorably compares the brutality of *Passion* with “the gratuitous portrayals of violence as in *Pulp Fiction*, *Kill Bill*, and *The Matrix*” (316).

Dans also asserts, “The film (*The Passion of the Christ*) faithfully tells the New Testament biblical story according to Matthew (and for the most part, in Aramaic in which it was first written)” (314). Regrettably, Dans is wrong on both points. Gibson included a scene where Veronica wipes the sweaty and bloody face of Jesus, an incident that appears nowhere in the Christian canon. In fact, the name Veronica never appears in the Bible. The scene where Jesus turns over responsibility for his mother to his disciple John appears only in John’s gospel; in Matthew’s account, the Virgin Mary is not a witness to the crucifixion.

Additionally, and perhaps most strangely, Dans writes that just before Jesus dies, “The Romans break Christ’s bones and put a spear in his side; out runs water mixed with blood....Christ is taken down from the Cross into the arms of His mother” (314). None of this is in Matthew’s gospel but, once again, it is found in John’s, a gospel which emphasizes the divinity of Jesus over his humanity much more so than the Synoptic Gospels do. Furthermore, even in John, none of Jesus’s bones are broken. The soldiers do indeed break the legs of the two criminals crucified on either side of Jesus in order to hasten their deaths, but when they come to Jesus, they discover he is already dead and see no need to repeat the procedure on Jesus. John even explicitly notes that this was to fulfill a prophecy that “Not a bone of his shall be broken” (Psalm 34.20). Even Mel Gibson was aware of that fact, and, in this scene in the film, Jesus’s legs are not broken.

Finally, far from being a faithful presentation of the Biblical account of Jesus’ crucifixion, Gibson’s inclusion of a snake in the Garden of Gethsemane which Jesus stomps on

with his heel, the oddly progeria-afflicted Satan, and the single rain (tear?) drop which falls to the ground from high above Golgotha are at best artistic liberties and at worst add nothing more than bizarre distractions and distracting confusions. None of this appears anywhere other than perhaps in the imagination of Mel Gibson.

Dans is incorrect when it comes to the original language of Matthew's gospel, as well. As Frederick C. Grant (died 1974), former Professor of Biblical Theology at Union Theological Seminary wrote, the suggestion "that Matthew was first written in Hebrew (or Aramaic, as some writers who hold this view maintain), and then translated into Greek...is impossible" (IDB III—1962 ed.304).

There are other problems and errors in Dans' book that cannot be discussed in the limited format of this review. Dans gets authors' names wrong, he misquotes dialogue in a few places, and he gets confused about which way Christians in the West and in the East cross themselves (335). But again and again Dans returns to his plea for more wholesome movies. Writing about *Come to the Stable* (1949), Dans asserts, "If one is looking for a single film to show how times have changed, look no farther than this illustration of a time when filmmakers didn't shrink from making wholesome films" (100). Oh, and how *have* times changed. As a faculty member at a Penn State Commonwealth Campus, my colleagues and I continue to struggle under the burden of the Jerry Sandusky sexual abuse scandal that has wrought havoc on long-cherished icons, especially Joe Paterno, former legendary head coach of the Nittany Lions football team. In my weaker moments, I long for the days when "Joe Pa" was revered and virtually elevated to sainthood. Alas, those times are gone forever, and the entire Penn State community must move on to a more mature—and balanced—view of our university, our culture, and our world. As General Robert E. Lee (Martin Sheen) says to General J. E. B. Stuart (Joseph Fuqua) in

Gettysburg (1993), after Stuart had failed to fulfill his mission and endangered the entire Confederate army, “You must take what I have told you and learn from it, as a man does.”

Peter Dans’ *Christians in the Movies* does contribute to the study of the ongoing, complex relationship between religion, culture, and film. It endeavors, with mixed success, to defend and celebrate the values and beliefs of one segment of Christendom, pre-Vatican II Roman Catholicism, but the privileging of Roman Catholicism over other Christian expressions, Dans’ unfamiliarity with some of the intricacies of Christian theology, and his inattention to details makes me cautious about some of his conclusions, especially about films I have never seen. The author’s vitriol unleashed on any film that has the audacity to look askance at anything Catholic is hard to take in places, and his anachronistic attitudes would be a hard sell to contemporary undergraduates. Discussing the film and television series, *M*A*S*H* (1970 and 1972-1983, respectively), he is aghast at the film’s “anti-institutionalism” and the film’s and series’ ridicule of “the nobility of war and the military, but especially with [the film’s] famous ‘Last Supper’ scene, [which] skewers Christian doctrine as well” (197). The novel on which the film was based, the film itself, and, to a lesser extent, perhaps, the television series were anti-Vietnam War vehicles. They were set in Korea, partly because that was where the author (Richard Hooker, a *nom de plume* for H. Richard Hornberger, with sportswriter Bill Heinz) was stationed as a doctor in the early 1950s, but also as a means by which the tensions of the Vietnam era could be diffused (much as Nathaniel Hawthorne, desiring to comment on religious bigotry, set *The Scarlet Letter* in the 17th century rather than his own 19th century). But “nobility of warfare”? Maybe from the comfort of one’s civilian home, but for the soldiers and perhaps especially the doctors in front-line, “meatball surgery” hospitals, there is nothing noble about warfare; it is just brutal, dehumanizing carnage.

In the final analysis, a film is not good because it is “wholesome”; it is good because it provides an insight into the *reality* of life that was previously unrealized. This is what artists do. For instance, someone who paints a picture which does not provide an insight into the reality of life is not an artist but rather just someone who draws pictures. Sometimes these insights are inconvenient or uncomfortable truths, but they are truths nonetheless.