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The (Un)Christian Road Warrior: The Crisis of Religious Representation in *The Book of Eli* (2010)

Abstract

In a recent review of *The Book of Eli* (JRF 14:1), Adam Porter has claimed that the movie is an “affirm[ation] of God and an exploration of “the way religion can be used, both positively and negatively”. In our article, we will argue instead that the role of religion in the movie is much more ambiguous than this and that the movie not only fails to resolve the differences between putative ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ uses of religion, but, indeed, is also based on a highly problematic understanding of the role of religion and particularly religious texts within society.

Introduction

The genre of science fiction is often dismissed as mere spectacular effects-driven entertainment with little or no narrative or philosophical depth (Schatz, 1993). Taken as a whole, however, science fiction is arguably one of the most valuable genres for exploring contemporary fears and anxieties in cinematic narratives. Indeed, science fiction is able to “[have] it both ways” (King, 2000:8) in that such explorations can often co-exist alongside spectacular imagery, thereby providing a narrative that is both entertaining and socially aware (Sontag, 1967). In particular, films that deal with apocalyptic ‘end of the world’ scenarios have, from the 1950s onwards, offered commentary on a variety of contemporary concerns, such as the threat of nuclear destruction, environmental disaster, and geopolitical disorder to name but a few. This has become particularly so over the last decade, where such movies have in a number of cases explored through their narratives and imagery the post 9/11 socio-political terrain. The apocalypse movie has not only provided entertaining spectacle in movies such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (Emmerich, 2004), *I Am Legend* (Lawrence, 2007) and *Cloverfield* (Reeves, 2008), but these same movies have articulated fears and anxieties circulating in society around the environment, pandemic diseases, and war / terrorism. Indeed, as we have argued elsewhere, in contrast to the wave of highly optimistic apocalypse movies released in the 1990s (Ostwalt 1998, 2000, 2003; Walliss, 2009) that the post-9/11 cycle of films are characterized by a spirit of explicit pessimism where the

contemporary social order is critiqued and ridiculed, humanity is often not saved, and where the question is raised of whether humanity deserves to be saved at all (see also Bendle, 2005). More recent movies, however, have begun to shift back toward more optimistic and affirmative apocalyptic narratives, often exploring the trope of renewal or humanity starting over again (2012 [Emmerich, 2009], *Knowing* [Proyas, 2009]).

In this article we will examine one example of this shift, *The Book of Eli* (Hughes Brothers, 2010). In doing so we will respond to a recent review of the movie by Adam Porter (2010:1), in which he argued that the movie was an “affirm[ation] of God and an exploration of “the way religion can be used, both positively and negatively”. We will argue instead that the role of religion in the movie is much more ambiguous than Porter has suggested and that, moreover, it may be read instead as a meditation on the role that religion should play within society – particularly American society. In doing so, we will also show how the movie does not resolve the differences between putative ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ uses of religion, but, indeed, is based on a highly problematic understanding of the role of religion and particularly religious texts within society.

The Book of Eli

The Book of Eli is set thirty years after an apparent religious war has turned North America into a post-apocalyptic wasteland. The exact cause of the destruction is only hinted at within the movie's diegesis (the idea of 'The Flash' suggesting a nuclear conflagration). What is made clear, however, is that in its aftermath all remaining copies of holy books were destroyed. Wandering this wasteland is Eli (played by Denzel Washington), a man who believes himself charged by God to take the only remaining copy of the Bible westwards. On his journey he crosses the path of Carnegie (played by Gary Oldman), a despotic ruler of a small town, who is desperately searching for a copy of the Bible in order to rebuild society to his own ends. In the confrontation between these two characters, Eli represents, as Porter suggests, the positive force of religion in providing hope and direction in such a forlorn, post-apocalyptic world. Carnegie simply wants the power of the Bible to subjugate people to his own rule of law. Although Carnegie ultimately comes to possess the Bible, it is useless to him as it is written in brail. Eli, in contrast, is a blind man who can 'see' the text. The movie ends with Eli fulfilling his quest by arriving at Alcatraz and transcribing the Bible he has memorized to the leader of the commune. The end scene is of the placing of the Bible alongside the Torah and the Qur'an suggesting that although civilisation will need to start over after the apocalyptic catastrophe of the 'Flash' it will still retain

a connection, one that is clearly marked as positive due to the character of Eli, with the past in terms of continuing the practice and affirmative power of religion.

The Book of Eli is based around a binary opposition between two characters, Eli and Carnegie, who engage in a violent struggle over the ownership of the last remaining copy of the Bible. According to Porter (2010), both characters represent the different ways in which religion can be used with Eli representing the ‘positive/good’ approach versus Carnegie’s ‘negative/evil’ stance. The dominant theme in the movie over the correct use of religion was also reinforced by the producer of the movie, Broderick Johnson, who commented on “how the book for one person can mean good, but the book for another could be used for evil, and it’s the struggle over how this book will be used that is the centerpiece of the movie”.¹ However, to interpret *The Book of Eli* as simply a binary struggle between good and evil (Eli versus Carnegie) is, we would argue, not only reductive, but does not account for the complexity of religious belief and how it is practiced. This is made clear when we examine the characters of Eli and Carnegie in more depth.

There are many instances throughout the movie of how Eli exemplifies the positive use and practice of religion and of the Bible. Central among these positive characteristics is Eli’s embodiment of model Christian values and gestures. There are many examples in the film, such as his praying before every meal, quoting scripture, especially before he engages in acts of violence, his reading of the Bible

every day, his kissing of the cross and the way he interacts with people. The latter is most apparent with the character of Solara (Mila Kunis) who is initially connected to Carnegie but becomes Eli's disciple due to the humane and egalitarian way he treats her and her family and the positive way he practices the bible ("it's not just a book") and introduces her to the notion of faith ("I walk by faith, not by sight"). The character of Solara is instructive in terms of Eli's positive impact on the people he meets in the movie as she initially replicates Eli's actions toward her mother, in particular the reciting of the Lord's Prayer before mealtime and at the movie's conclusion literally takes on the form of a disciple as she leaves the Alcatraz commune to go back out into the wastelands of America to continue Eli's mission of Christianising the people.

The environment of *The Book of Eli* is a barren, ravaged landscape that features numerous threats in the form of scavengers, thieves and hired guns. Therefore, due to the brutal nature of the movie's habitat and the venal, thuggish disposition of Carnegie and his henchmen there are many instances when Eli finds himself in a predicament where violence is the only viable solution. However, in these scenes Eli does not initiate the violence and only does so reluctantly as a final measure and usually as a form of self-defense. An early example has him ignore a group of scavengers who are attempting to rape a woman with the justification that he has to stay true to the path and must not deviate from it. He only intercedes when

the group directly confronts him and directs an act of violence toward him. After he effortlessly kills the attackers he drops to one knee and offers a prayer of forgiveness. In this respect, Eli's use of violence has a redemptive and regenerative effect that taps into mythical constructions of the American male found primarily in Westerns (Cawelti, 1971; Slotkin, 1998). In these Western portrayals, the 'good' character only uses violence when provoked and when all other options have been exhausted and its use is typically for the benefit of society that is under threat.

While Eli's use of violence clearly underlines his positive character and embodiment of the good Christian warrior, it is further ossified by a supernatural ability in combat, which is aligned with an almost divine form of protection. For example, there are numerous scenes in the movie where Eli seems impervious to bullets, prompting one of Carnegie's gang to comment that he is "protected somehow. Like no one can touch him." Although Carnegie replies that "he's just a man. Put a bullet in him and he'll go down," Eli survives Carnegie doing just that and rises up to continue his mission Westwards. The combination of a moral certitude, strong faith and obedient practice of religion with his righteous use of violence and supernatural ability to avoid injury situates Eli as a messianic figure of Biblical stature. Indeed, *The Book of Eli's* author, Gary Whitta reinforced this position by claiming that "part of the influence, inspiration for the character was looking at the old biblical stories of characters who get chosen by God; characters

like Job who get plucked from obscurity and given these incredible hardships to test their faith”.² Early on in the movie, Eli describes how he is driven by a voice, firstly to where to take the Bible so that it would be safe and secondly that he would be protected from anything in his path. Also, like Moses, he dies before he reaches the Promised Land or in the specific case of *The Book of Eli* the new civilization that will start over and rebuild a new social order.

While Carnegie also recognizes the power of religion, his view of it is much more cynical than that of Eli. Echoing the traditional Marxist critique of religion (see, for example, Marx & Engels, 1985:11-20), he sees it largely as a means of exploiting and having power over others. As he tells his henchmen;

It's [the Bible] not a book. It's a weapon. A weapon aimed right at the hearts and minds of the weak and the desperate. It will give us control of them. If we wanna rule more than one small fucking town, we have to have it. People will come from all over. They'll do exactly what I tell them if the words are from the book. It's happened before and it'll happen again. All we need is that book.

Nevertheless, we would argue that not only does the movie not resolve the tensions between these two approaches to the role of religion within society, but ultimately raises a number of problematic issues. While, on one level, as Porter observes, the movie does indeed reject Carnegie's approach to religion, showing him at the end of the movie powerless and dying – rotting from the inside out from a gangrenous bullet wound inflicted by Eli – with his empire collapsing all around

him and those closest to him leaving, he and Eli are not as different as the movie would have us believe. Rather, both men arguably differ in their approach to religion more by degree, rather than by being completely binary opposed. Both men, for example, are not against using violence in order to pursue their own ends, a fact highlighted by one Christian reviewer of the film who bemoaned the way in which Eli, who he described as a ‘violent Christian’, “defend[ed] himself (and the Bible) so coldly?” (Breimeier, 2010). Equally, both men also see others as secondary – or at worst distractions – to their immediate missions. Eli, as noted above, does not intervene when he sees a woman being raped, telling himself to “stay on the path” and that “it’s not your concern”, only killing the men later when they attack him in Carnegie’s saloon. He also doublecrosses Solara, locking her in a well when she tries to leave Carnegie and travel westward with him. More fundamentally, both men may be seen to value the text for instrumental reasons, in that both characters see it as an essential and singular source for rebuilding society. The utilitarian nature of their application of the Bible renders people as marginal in as much as their deaths are justified as a means to an end in creating a new, post-apocalyptic civilisation.

However, perhaps the most problematic issue raised by the movie is its view of religious texts as, at worst, morally neutral texts that are somehow open to appropriation and misuse by tyrants and cynical preachers. Although this notion

has become an increasingly prevalent element of public discourse about religion, particularly in the years after 9/11, it is not without its critics. As a number of commentators have argued, religious texts themselves cannot be completely absolved of the violence that has, and continues to be done, in their names. As Juergensmeyer (2001) and Austin et al. (2003) observe, religious texts are riddled with violent imagery and language as well as often-lurid descriptions of violence. Indeed, for Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer (2005), the fundamental factor binding Christianity, Islam and Judaism into cycles of violence is that they all share the same dysfunctional textual parent: what he terms the violent God of the Old Testament. As he puts his central thesis:

...religiously justified violence is first and foremost a problem of sacred texts and not a problem of misinterpretation of the texts. The problem, in other words, is not primarily that people take passages out of context and twist them in order to justify violence. The problem is actual violence at the heart of these texts that can be reasonably cited by people to justify their own recourse to violence (ibid., xiv-xv)

In this way, the main villain of *The Book of Eli* is arguably less Carnegie, and more the Biblical text itself; a text that has already, the film shows, led humanity to destroy itself. Indeed, despite the movie's optimistic ending, there is nothing to suggest that the rebuilt society will not fall back into the cycles of the violence, persecution and intolerance that have permeated religious history.

Conclusion

On the surface, *The Book of Eli* seems to present a simple Manichean struggle between good and evil with the forces of good winning out. However, a deeper reading of the film reveals a certain uncertainty and ambiguity over the representations of good and evil within the characters of Eli and Carnegie, which ultimately has them existing on the same plane rather than being diametrically opposed to other. As such, the crisis of representation in *The Book of Eli* undermines Porter's (2010) assertion that although evil is recognized in this post-apocalyptic world, the force of good and the affirmative power of the Bible ultimately prevails. As discussed above, the positive power of the Bible is only partially restored in the film leaving problematic issues about its use and practice in America's new civilization unanswered. Although the major trope of the film is that of renewal and starting over, by connecting pre-and post-apocalyptic worlds with a problematic conception of the interpretation and application of religion, the movie does not provide a neat resolution and, as we have suggested, raises more questions than it effectively answers.

¹ Quoted in 'Behind the Story' extra on *The Book of Eli* DVD (2010).

² Ibid.

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