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Doubt

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Doubt

Abstract

This is a review of *Doubt* (2008).

This is an audience participation movie if ever there was one. But in what is the audience asked to participate? Why, doubt, of course. As I understand this film, the script is written exactly so that the audience cannot know whether Father Flynn is guilty or not. For every element in the film that might give us an answer, there are two equally possible interpretations, one that leads us to conclude that he is guilty and the other that leads us to conclude that he is innocent. And for every piece of evidence that makes Father Flynn look guilty, there is an equal explanation that leads us to conclude that he is perhaps innocent. For many parts of the film, we are simply left with ambiguity. But, this is just what we would expect from a film about doubt. If the movie gave us that one piece of evidence that would provide the truth (as happens in Robert Zemeckis' movie, *Contact*), then the movie would not be about doubt, but rather it would claim that we can always know the truth, we just have to have the right clues. If we could figure out the truth in *Doubt*, it would be just another clever mystery movie. John Patrick Shanley is to be congratulated for hanging tough and writing a script that leaves us in doubt.

There is a clue, however, about what to expect from the movie in one of Father Flynn's early sermons, the sermon on doubt. In that sermon, Father Flynn tells his parishioners that we can be bound together as closely by doubt as by certainty. He says that we can become a community based on doubt or uncertainty, just as much as we can be a community based on the certainty of particular truths.

And now, when the movie is over, we find ourselves in a community of doubters, an audience that cannot figure out whether Father Flynn is guilty or innocent. As an audience we experience exactly what Father Flynn has told us about doubt. At least this is what the movie expects of its audience and this makes the actual response of viewers particularly interesting. Those I spoke to after the movie were quite sure, maybe even certain, that Father Flynn was either guilty or innocent. One person saw in Father Flynn many of the characteristics found in pedophiles. Another person, a survivor of clergy sexual abuse herself, said that she could see the same pattern of behavior in Father Flynn. And, one other person was absolutely certain of Father Flynn's innocence because he identified Sister Aloysius, the school principal, with the now famous symbol of evil, Nurse Ratched, from the Milos Forman film, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Ahh, certainty!

Since the movie is about doubt and certainty and not about religion (the doubt and certainty have to do with Father Flynn's possible molestation of one of the children in the school) it is interesting to ask why the setting of the film is a religious one—a Catholic church and its school. One reason is probably that John Patrick Shanley is familiar with this setting and Shanley is the author of the play on which the film is based, as well as the screenwriter of the film (and director). After all, writers should write about what they know. But another reason might be that it is in the arena of religion that questions of doubt and certainty arise, hand in hand.

I cannot think of any other area of our experience where doubt and certainty play such an important role in our lives. Surely not in science. Maybe doubt and certainty play a significant role in politics, but then isn't it both religion and politics that we are not to discuss in polite company?

Isn't it in the arena of religion that we seek certainty, certain answers to the big questions of life? Questions of life and death, of meaning and meaninglessness, goodness and evil. And, doesn't religion offer certain answers? Maybe certainty is one of the most important things that religion offers us as human beings—certainty in an otherwise uncertain world. And, doesn't religion offer certainty without any evidence? Religion may even offer certainty in the face of evidence to the contrary. And, if religion is the purveyor of certainty, what does this tell us about religion? Why do human beings need certainty? What is it about us that make us so uncomfortable with doubt? And, is religion just the thing that makes certainty available? Is religion in the “certainty business?” Certainty and doubt may play some role in our lives apart from religion, but in the arena of religion certainty and doubt become the center of attention. Doubt encourages us to not only raise questions about doubt itself, but also to raise questions about our very nature and the role that religion plays in our lives. You may leave the theater not knowing if Father Flynn is guilty or innocent. Or you may leave the theater certain that Father Flynn is guilty or that Sister Aloysius is evil. But once you've seen *Doubt*, you will

not be able to ignore the various questions about doubt/certainty/religion that the movie encourages its audience to ask.