Report from Sundance 2004: Religion in Independent Film

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol8/iss2/17
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Abstract
This is the report from the Sundance Film Festival 2004.

This sundance film festival review is available in Journal of Religion & Film: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol8/iss2/17
There has been plenty of snowfall in Utah this winter, making Park City, the home of the Sundance Film Festival, a winter wonderland. Almost 40,000 people show up in the mountains of Utah for this celebration of independent film. As usual, there are celebrities everywhere. There is a lot of buzz about the movies that everyone says you just have to see. And, of course, there is a lot of movie business to be done - the independents want to find someone to distribute their movies.

Amidst all of the hoopla, however, there are usually a significant number of very fine movies that are related to religion in some way, but that are not likely to become the kind of mega hit that our readers are apt to see in their local theaters. So, we attend the Sundance Film Festival, when conditions permit, in order to identify some excellent movies that our readers are not likely to become aware of otherwise.

The movies that we see are selected on the basis of the descriptions available in the Festival catalog prior to the beginning of the Festival. After selecting the movies to see, the next step is to arrange one's schedule so that you can see the movies you have selected. Given the vast number of movies available at the Festival (136 feature films and 93 shorts) we do not always get to see all of the movies selected. But, for various reasons, we also get to see some excellent movies that we did not select in advance.
I want to take this opportunity to thank Patrick Hubley and Tori Baker of the Sundance press office. From long before the Festival began, they were helping me make the various arrangements necessary for navigating the Festival and viewing the movies I wanted to see. I also want to thank volunteer, Wesley Salter, for his help in securing tickets for movies that I was not able to see at press screenings. The Sundance Press Office was not only efficient, but helpful in such a friendly manner that it made the entire Sundance experience remarkably enjoyable.

**Chryystal**

**(DRAMATIC)**

*Chryystal* stars Billy Bob Thornton, Lisa Blount, Ray McKinnon, and Harry Dean Stanton. Written and directed by Ray McKinnon, this movie is about redemption, a common theme at this year's festival.

Thornton's character, Joe, drives his car off the road while being chased by the law. His wife Chryystal suffers a spinal injury in the accident, an injury that causes her pain the rest of her life. Their young son, in an eerie twist, disappears from the scene of the accident, never to be found again.

Twenty years later Joe returns home from prison looking for something to fill the emptiness in his life. In prison he was always told what to do and so maintained an existence based on the schedule imposed upon him from
outside. Now that he is no longer in prison, Joe is lost. He has to set his own schedule and fulfill his own life. Not knowing how to behave with others, especially Chrystal, he finds his life empty and in need of meaning. He does not know why he has returned to his home after so long a time away - not knowing what he will find. But as the story unfolds, Joe realizes, with some help from Chrystal, that he is seeking redemption. Chrystal tells Joe at one point that he is not seeking forgiveness, but redemption.

To make money, Joe goes back to growing and selling marijuana, poaching on the territory of his old buddy, Snake. Played by writer/director McKinnon, Snake is the epitome of evil - bringing harm and especially humiliation to those around him. After several confrontations, Snake rats out Joe to the state police. The local sheriff cannot protect Joe, so Joe has to leave to avoid going back to prison. He takes to living in the woods, staying close enough to home to look after Chrystal.

But protecting Chrystal is not enough. (If you do not want to know the ending of the movie, skip the remainder of this paragraph.) After Joe returns to the scene of the accident where he sees the image of his young son, Joe kidnaps a baby and brings the baby to Chrystal. The baby is to replace the child she lost - she is not able to have children any more. Chrystal appreciates this gift, but it is clear that she does not intend to keep the child. By this time the police have come to the house to retrieve the baby and take Joe into custody. Realizing that Chrystal can never be
happy without Joe and that she is unable to let him go, Joe steps out onto the porch of the house. He then raises a revolver he knows to be empty and pulls the trigger. The sheriff recognizes in an instant what Joe is doing and cries out as the deputies shoot and kill Joe. Since Joe is dead, Chrystal is able to move forward with her life, which she does by taking up with the sheriff and his young daughter - something she could not bring herself to do as long as Joe was still around. Joe has found redemption.

Joe's redemption may not be the redemption of any particular religion, but it is redemption nevertheless. Joe's redemption requires that he make things right with the person he has harmed and it requires that he make a significant sacrifice. If the message of the movie is that any of us can find redemption by making a sacrifice and making things right - that no religion or god is necessary for redemption - this movie may be seen as anti-religion. Its idea of redemption is surely contrary to religious redemption. But, one also might claim that this is a spiritual account of redemption - that spiritual redemption is important to all of us, but that it does not require any particular religious beliefs.

Throughout the movie Joe has been creating a piece of sculpture by welding pieces of junk together. Snake calls it "white trash sculpture." At the end of the movie, the sheriff comes to visit Chrystal with his daughter. His daughter immediately recognizes the sculpture as a homage to a child. She climbs the
sculpture to the top where Joe's son's tricycle has been affixed. She climbs onto the tricycle and begins to ride it in the air. Another part of Joe's redemption?

This is what I would call a raw movie. Many scenes are likely to make viewers feel very uncomfortable. These scenes have a remarkable reality to them, but it is a reality that most people would rather not see. So, I do not expect this to be a blockbuster hit. But it is a movie so well done, so emotionally powerful that I recommend it to anyone with an interest in redemption.

*Edge of America*

(PRIEMERES)

*Edge of America* is the story of a Black teacher, Mr. William, who is hired at the last minute to fill a spot teaching high school English on the Three Nations Reservation. Mr. William struggles for acceptance in this different world until he agrees to coach the girls basketball team. The team is infamous for its long losing streak and Mr. William has to turn things around. In the end, he does turn the team into a winner, taking them all the way to the state championship game, but the road to success is not an easy one.

One might see this movie as a sports story where loveable losers end up winners. Or, one might see this movie as a coming of age movie in which the girls on the basketball team raise their level of maturity under the tutelage of the new
coach. But the movie is more than this. It is set on an Indian reservation and this is clearly identified as the "edge of America." The reservation is at the very fringe of America's interests and concerns. It is a place that has no place in American consciousness. It is in America, but it is as though the reservation does not exist.

Against this backdrop, the Black coach and teacher learns as much from the girls as the girls learn from him. And, what they learn about race and prejudice is made available to the audience in a new way because the coach and the girls are both outside the dominant culture. It is easy to see how hurtful the stereotypes are, without feeling accused of stereotyping. The effect is that the case against prejudice is made more clearly than it would be if the movie were made in mainstream America rather than on its edge.

I have used the terms, "Black" and "Indian," above because at one point Mr. William begins to address the assistant coach by saying: "You Native Americans." To which the assistant coach says: "Indian. I'm Indian." As she begins to leave the room, Mr. William says, without looking at her, "Black." This is a brief encounter, but it is one that indicates how much less important political correctness is than genuine respect for others.

Since religion plays such a regular role in the lives of the Indian community, we see Mr. William dismissing religion along with the rest of the culture. At one
point, an elder performs a healing ceremony for one of the players who has sprained her ankle. When the coach sends the other girls out to practice rather than letting them finish the ceremony he indicates that the religious ceremony is unimportant - practice is how you win games. By the end of the movie, Mr. William has learned how important it is to respect the culture, including the religious practices, of those who are different. Although the movie is not about religion, religion plays such an important role in Indian culture that the movie cannot avoid dealing with religious prejudice any more than it could avoid dealing with race.

This was a very charming movie. James McDaniel (formerly Lieutenant Fancy on NYPD Blues) is excellent and the actresses who play the girls on the basketball team are so natural that you would think they were the real basketball team of Three Nations High School. Highly recommended.

*Enquête sur le monde invisible*

*(Investigations into the Invisible World)*

*(WORLD CINEMA DOCUMENTARY)*

*Investigations into the Invisible World* is a movie about the belief many Icelanders have in a variety of "invisible beings." These beings include elves, gnomes, invisible friends, ghosts, extraterrestrials, sea monsters, and other nature spirits. Interacting with invisible beings is a common phenomenon in Iceland, although one wife finally persuaded her husband to stop talking to invisibles in
public where such behavior is not always accepted. It is a significant part of the
culture and these interactions seem to teach Icelanders important lessons about life.

Actually, many of these beings are seen by Icelanders, although they are invisible to others. The explanation is that if you are taught from youth to disbelieve in invisibles, then you do not develop the capacity for seeing and interacting with them. If you are taught to believe, then you will develop the capacity to connect with the invisible world.

One of the things that I found most interesting about the invisibles is the range of beings that are seen by Icelanders. All of these seem quite commonly accepted, even by those who see one kind of being but do not see others. If you ask the question about what's real, it seems to me that it would be much easier to say that the beings are real if everyone saw the same beings, for example, elves. If everyone sees the same things, the more people who see them, the more evidence for their reality. But, if you have different people seeing different kinds of beings, then the evidence is seriously diminished. The reality question, however, does not seem to be of great importance to Icelanders. They see the beings - you can take it or leave it.

Some of the explanation for the existence of these beings in Iceland is that the country is located at the conjunction of two great tectonic plates. Something
about the break in the crust of the earth allows something to emerge in Iceland that
does not emerge elsewhere. Another explanation for the experiences of the
Icelanders is that the universe is made up of different frequencies and that we
sometimes are able to tap into a different frequency. Such explanations, however,
do not seem to go very far for those interested in scientific explanation, but at the
same time explanation does not seem as important to Icelanders as the lessons
learned from interactions with the invisibles.

This French movie raises two particularly interesting questions. One is
about religion or spirituality. The other is about the nature of documentary film. Are
the invisibles real? The Icelanders believe that they are and that they are simply
outside the realm of scientific proof, even outside the realm of experience for many
people. Can it be that there are real things that we are not able to deal with in
scientific terms? Is there a realm of the spiritual? The movie suggests that the
invisibles are indeed real - real, rather than metaphorical - but not subject to the
tests of science. It might be, however, that the invisibles are real in another sense
of the term. This is the sense in which the invisibles are real to those who see them
and because of this reality, Icelanders live their lives in ways that they would not
otherwise. The messages of the invisibles are as important to the Icelanders as
would be some kind of scientific reality. The movie suggests the former. The latter,
however, seems like a way of talking about the world that is helpful to the
Icelanders and this seems not at all unlike many religious stories. Does one way count as religion and the other not?

The second question concerns the nature of documentary film. What do we expect from a documentary film? Is it similar to investigative reporting? Should the movie take up arguments for and against the reality of the invisibles? Or, does the documentary film maker simply tell the story of the people—in this case the Icelanders? This movie, which the director identified several times before the showing as a documentary, is clearly in the latter category. The movie documents the claims of the Icelanders regarding the existence of invisible beings. But, the music and visuals (some of which are spectacular) all suggest the truth of the existence of the invisibles. Can we make documentaries without taking a point of view on the subject? Or, do all documentaries take a point of view? It seems to me that these questions must be considered whenever we encounter documentary films.

**The Land Has Eyes/Our Nationhood**

*(Pear ta ma 'on maf/Our Nationhood)*

*(NATIVE FORUM)*

I try to see a couple of movies from the Native Forum each year that I attend Sundance because these are movies that make us aware of cultures very different from our own. Frequently, religion plays a more substantial role in such cultures
than it does in Western culture and the result is that in examining culture one also examines religion.

The first movie from the Native Forum that I saw was *The Land Has Eyes*. This movie is set on the island of Rotuma, an island deep in the South Pacific near Fiji. While most of the islanders are Christians, as a result of colonialism, there is also a powerful myth about a woman warrior from whom the islanders are descended. Women have a special power and a special responsibility in this culture. There is also a connection to the land that is important for the islanders. The connection with the land is nicely demonstrated by the remarkable scenery shown in the film. The land is important because it has eyes and teeth, and the land knows the truth. These are the myths that serve as the background for the story. At one point someone asks the young heroine of the story why she believes in the land more than Jesus. The question indicates how important the myths are to the islanders even if they also have adopted a more formal religion.

The father of a young girl, Viki, is accused of stealing coconuts from his neighbor's property. During the trial, the man who translates for the English speaking judge lies about the answer given by Viki's father--the translator is a friend of the neighbor who has accused Viki's father of stealing the coconuts. Viki's father is found guilty because of this lie. He is given a heavy fine, one that he is unable to pay. But Viki has overheard the lie and knows that her father, whom she loves very
much, is innocent of the crime. She believes that since the land has eyes and teeth and knows the truth that her father will be vindicated. But, she also realizes that as a woman she must play a role in bringing about justice. Viki works hard making fans that she sells. With the money she makes she pays her father's fine, even though her father is now deceased, thereby redeeming his good name. When she goes before the judge that found her father guilty to be considered for a scholarship, she exposes the truth about her father and the lie of the translator. The land may have eyes and know the truth, but it takes a courageous woman to bring about the justice that the truth requires.

This is a very interesting movie about the contrast between Western values and those of the islanders, and between the myths of a culture and the formal religion that the culture has adopted.

The second movie from the Native Forum was *Our Nationhood*. This movie is a documentary about the standoff between the Listuguj Mi'gmag people and the Quebec government. This standoff was over access to logging on the ancestral lands of the Mi'gmag. (Twenty two years earlier, director, Alanis Obomsawin documented another standoff between the Mi'gmag and the Quebec government--this one over fishing rights). In the logging dispute, the Quebec government divides the Mi'gmag by officially sanctioning a governing system for the Native peoples that is not their traditional hereditary government. The disdain shown by
government officials toward the hereditary government is difficult to watch. It is clearly a case of "if you are not like us, you can't be as valuable as we are." This is an ongoing struggle for Native peoples all over the world. It is an attitude that is, of course, entirely unnecessary.

There turned out to be little specifically about religion in this movie. If you are interested particularly in religion and film, this may not be a film you want to see. But, if you are interested in any way in the structure of Native communities and the struggles that they endure in relation to Western style governments this is a movie that you will not want to miss.

*Latter Days*

In addition to the Sundance films, I was invited to a private screening of *Latter Days* at the Queer Lounge. *Latter Days* is the story of two young men who fall in love, one of whom is a Mormon missionary. The story revolves around Chris (Christian), a fun loving, promiscuous waiter in L.A., who makes a bet with his fellow employees that he can "convert" one of the Mormon missionaries who have moved into the apartment across the way before the missionaries can convert him to Mormonism. The missionary Chris selects is named Aaron. As Chris and Aaron begin to interact, Aaron begins to realize that he is gay. This is frequently a struggle for young men and women, but it is more so for Aaron because of the Mormon
stance on homosexuality and the fact that Aaron's father is a member of the church hierarchy.

As Aaron comes to terms with his sexual identity (as he is converted by Chris), he also converts Chris to a life of true love and commitment. Aaron does not convert Chris to Mormonism - he is himself excommunicated from the church - but he does help Chris to change his life dramatically. Chris becomes connected to another human being through love and wants to become the kind of person of whom Aaron can be proud. In a way - not the way we might expect - you can say that both Chris and Aaron find salvation--one from a life of superficial relationships and the other from a life of repressed sexuality.

But the journey is fraught with difficulties. Aaron is excommunicated from the church and alienated from his family. He is sent to an institution that uses shock therapy to change his sexual orientation. Prophetically, Chris tells Aaron: My dad said he would rather die than have a little Nelly boy and I thought that I'd rather die than be one." Aaron makes a similar statement when he attempts suicide. But, many of the difficulties these two men have in developing a loving relationship are pretty much the same difficulties that men and women have in developing relationships. There is a kind of universality to the difficulties they face and this universality makes the movie of equal interest to the straight community.
In one of the interesting moments of the film, Aaron, as a Mormon missionary, tells Lila, who has just lost her significant other, that sometimes the world seems like a bunch of dots. And while we cannot see the connections or the big picture the dots create, God sees the big picture. In the big picture we are all connected and the world is beautiful, funny, and good. At the end of the movie, Aaron, no longer a Mormon, makes the same claim, that we are all connected and that the world is beautiful, funny, and good.

*Latter Days* is sometimes riotously funny. I frequently found myself laughing out loud. But it is also powerfully sad. The sadness comes from watching people inflict so much pain on others. Yet there is a joy that accompanies the sadness as we watch Chris and Aaron navigate the treacherous shoals of relationships and find love together.

*Latter Days* ran into a bit of controversy during the Festival.* It was to open in New York, Los Angeles, and Salt Lake City on January 30. But the theater company that was to show the film cancelled the film's Salt Lake City run. A company spokesperson said: "We thought it lacked artistic merit." A spokesperson for the Salt Lake Film Society, which operates other venues at which the movie might have been shown in Salt Lake called the movie "awful" and "embarrassing" and said that the Society had no plans to book the movie. Oddly enough, the theater company was only canceling the movie's run in Salt Lake City. Could that be
because *Latter Days* does not present a flattering picture of the Church of Latter Day Saints?

*Let the Church Say Amen*

*(AMERICAN SPECTRUM)*

This documentary follows the lives of several members of the World Missions for Christ Church International, a Washington, D.C. church existing in the shadows of the Capitol Building. This storefront church reaches out to the people of its community, a community that suffers from poverty and injustice. The outreach program of the church, sometimes practiced with aggressive evangelism, is part of the congregation's effort to give back to the community what the church has given to its own members.

There are four members of the church whose lives are followed as they participate in the church. The first is Pastor Bobby Perkins. Bobby Perkins took over the church after overcoming his own addiction to drugs. He took it over from his sister, Dr. JoAnn Perkins, who founded the church 26 years earlier and now manages the extensive outreach program of the church. Much of Bobby's preaching recounts his own experiences with drug addiction, giving his sermons a credibility they would not have coming from someone without Bobby's background.
Brother C (Ceodtis Fulmore) is trying to record a gospel CD that can be used by the people of the street when he learns that his son, Cion, has been stabbed to death in a gang-related incident. The movie follows the church's efforts to help Brother C deal with his grief, with his fear of retaliation from the gang, and with the frustration he feels as the police fail to arrest the killer. Being part of the church community gives Brother C the support that he needs to survive the kinds of experiences that are not uncommon in the neighborhood.

David Surles is a homeless man who has been battling drug addiction for many years. He lives in a shelter, where he also works as a counselor and night supervisor. David's dream is to move into a home with a yard and a tree where he can reunite with his three children. This is a simple dream for David, but given his situation we realize what a struggle it will be to make the dream come true. I was very moved by the fact that this was my own father's dream - to move his family out of the city and into a neighborhood with yards and trees. And, I know something of my own father's struggle to make the dream come true, so it was easy for me to understand both the dream and the struggle for David Surles, who had so much more to overcome in reaching his dream. David's dream is not one that can come true with just the house, yard, and tree. It only comes true when David becomes a different person than the one he has been for most of his adult life. This is a dream
that no government agency can make come true - it requires the kind of emotional
and spiritual support provided by the congregation of World Missions Church.

The fourth member of the Church followed by the filmmakers, is Darlene
Duncan, a 44-year-old single mother of eight children. Darlene's goal is to get a job
that will enable her to get off the welfare program she depends upon. In order to do
this she must go back to school to train for the position of nursing assistant. Here
we see the fear of returning to school as an adult and the difficulty of doing
homework in a household with numerous children, each one needing something
from his or her mother. But we also see the determination in Darlene and we share
with her the successful completion of her degree - she actually graduates with
honors. Although the educational program Darlene follows is government funded,
it is clear that Darlene needs much more in order to be successful and what she
needs - the help and the encouragement of her congregation - can only be provided
by the spiritual community in which she exists.

Although this is a documentary film designed to tell the story of this
particular church, it seemed to me to be more of an inspirational story showing the
possibilities for achievement and human dignity available to those in the worst of
situations. These possibilities are made possible through a combination of spiritual
commitment and a church community dedicated to giving something back to the
larger community of which it is a part. And, while the movie shows how much more
we (through our government) should be doing to help those in need, it also shows how much more than government programs is needed to help individual human beings face their own particular demons.

Maria, llena eres de gracia

(Maria Full of Grace)

(DRAMATIC)

On the surface, this would not seem to be a movie about grace. It is the story of a young woman who becomes a drug mule, swallowing more than fifty packages of drugs and smuggling them into the United States in her stomach. As a story of drug smuggling, this is a very interesting and intense movie. It explains how a young woman might get into the drug smuggling business - why so many do. It describes how the process works at every level, and we follow Maria through the process of swallowing the packages, traveling to the States, getting through customs, and running afoul of those for whom she works. All of this is riveting and outstanding movie making.

But, the question is: How is this movie connected with religion? The answer is that it is not a movie about formal religion, but a movie about a religious concept, grace. What makes the movie more than a riveting story about drug smuggling, is that Maria is a remarkable example of grace. The story begins with her working in a hazardous job, stripping thorns from roses. She is being exploited, as are all of
her fellow employees. When she quits her job the audience is delighted by her courage. But, she must help support her family, so by chance she encounters someone who offers her an opportunity to make a lot of money without having to be a slave. It is easy to imagine an young girl from Bogota finding this offer very attractive and not fully understanding what the job will entail. As the dangers of the job unfold, Maria continues to complete her tasks - now acting the criminal - but doing so in a way that is not criminal in its intent.

So, what does it mean to live a life of grace? Does it require one to forego criminal activity? Obviously not in this movie. Does it require living according to the wishes of your family? Again, not in this movie. It does require, however, that you care for others, that you act to help others in their time of need - even at some risk to oneself - and, that you act from your heart and your soul, not from mere calculation of personal advantage. Watching Maria as she encounters the difficulties of her life gives us a remarkable example of someone who live her life full of grace.

Never Die Alone

(PREMIERES)

Never Die Alone, starring rapper DMX, is another story of redemption. This one, however, is set in the world of gang bangers and has the quality of a hard boiled detective story. The main character, King David, clearly identifies the theme
of the movie. He says of redemption that it requires owning up to your responsibilities and making amends. King David also refers to karma - what you do in this life determines what you will do in the next life. Since King David has done much harm to others in this life, it does not bode well for the next life, unless he can find redemption - something that gives this life new meaning. Since all of this is said rather directly by the main character, what is interesting about the film is exactly how King David finds redemption. Or, does he find redemption?

King David returns to the old neighborhood from prison, only to find that things are not the same. Someone else has taken over his territory. How will the struggle for supremacy work out? Will King David or his adversaries gain revenge? Does any of this matter if the most important goal is redemption?

It does not take long for the audience to witness the death of King David. But before King David dies, he leaves his car to the man who has tried to help him, a man who is at the scene by accident. It turns out that the man is a writer looking for a story and in the car he has been left, he finds a collection of tapes made by King David, tapes that tell the story of King David. This story is now told in flashbacks as the writer listens to the tapes. He is now writing King David's story, but at the same time he becomes hunted by the enemies of King David because they think he is now substituting for King David because he is driving King David's car. The twists and turns in the stories, both the story of King David and of the
writer, make for the pulp fiction quality of the movie. But this is also the setting in which redemption is to be found. How does King David own up to his responsibilities? How does King David make amends? How does King David give his life new meaning, so that he will not be worse off in his next life. The ideas of redemption and karma in this movie are not very sophisticated. But, how King David achieves redemption is the interesting question, made even more interesting by the way in which his story unfolds.

**Proteus**

**(SPECIAL SCREENINGS)**

*Proteus* is the story of Ernst Haeckel (1834 - 1919). Haeckel, a biologist and painter, was one of the most influential minds of the nineteenth century. What makes the life of Ernst Haeckel interesting for those concerned with religion is his understanding of the world. The world is, for Haeckel, a series of dichotomies - science and art, religion and materialism, rationality and passion--that seem irreconcilable. But, Haeckel wants to see the world as a unified whole in which all of the irreconcilable differences can be explained as part of the whole. He concludes that the universe is the infinite unfolding of God in nature. Dichotomous nature is merely an unfolding of one God. What appears dichotomous in nature is all one in God. God is the unifying principle of the universe.
Haeckel comes to this conclusion about the universe after discovering the radiolarian, that was discovered at the bottom of the sea during the laying of the transatlantic telegraph cable. The radiolarian is a tiny one-celled creature that is thought to be one of the earliest forms of life. What Haeckel found so interesting about the radiolarian is that it comes in an almost infinite variety, yet it is a single species. Not unlike the ancient Greek quest to understand the one and the many, the radiolarian is one thing that comes in many forms. From his study of the radiolarian, Haeckel came to see the many things of the universe as coming from one thing, namely, God.

Proteus is the Greek god of the sea - thus the name of the movie. But the movie itself is like the theory proposed by Haeckel. It is composed not of moving pictures, but of still pictures - nineteenth-century paintings, graphic art, photographs, and scientific illustrations. In the hands of David Lebrun, all of these individual still pictures come to life. Given the music and narration by Marian Seldes, the many seemingly disconnected parts come together in a unique whole, offering us an example of Haeckel's vision that individual parts of the universe are the unfolding of a single whole, God.
Redemption

(PREMIERES)

Redemption is the story of Stan "Tookie" Williams, a founder of the Crips, the Los Angeles street gang that eventually spread across the nation and continues to wreak havoc on the lives of America's inner city youth. Williams is presently on death row for murder, but since entering prison Williams has transformed his life in significant ways, leading to his redemption. This is the message of the movie, at least.

When the Crips were formed, Williams explains, the purpose was to survive and provide protection to those in your neighborhood. In order to survive and protect others you had to be tougher, less afraid, and more cruel than your enemy. If you showed any weakness, your rivals would kill you and take what you had for their own. Given that East L.A. is the equivalent of Thomas Hobbes' state of nature, being the strongest makes sense if you want to survive. But being a survivor, being the strongest, brings changes to a person and the fittest become the "baddest." of the bad. And, Williams was the baddest of the bad. Even in prison, simply continues his ruthless control over the world around him in order to survive the prison experience.

After years in prison, however, Williams discovers the word "redemption" in a dictionary left to him by an elderly prisoner, now deceased. Redemption: to
extricate, to make good, to pay one's debt. Williams' fascination with redemption leads him to give an interview to Professor Barbara Becnel, a journalism professor who writes historical texts. Given her own son's interest in gang life, Professor Becnel decides to write a book on the history of the Crips. But, Williams persuades her to write his books instead, books directed at young people who might consider gang life and designed to persuade those same young people to take a different path in life.

The success of Williams' books is phenomenal and they earn him two Nobel Prize nominations. At one point Williams is visited by Winnie Mandela, who expresses her appreciation for the work that he has done to discourage young people from taking up a life of gangs and the violence that goes with it. Williams has transformed himself from a man who led a violent criminal gang into a man who effectively discourages young people from following the very path he followed as a young man. This transformation is, at least in part, the result of the relationship that develops between the journalist and the killer.

What the movie wants the audience to understand is that Williams has fashioned his own redemption. He has extricated himself from the world of violence - even the prison's world of violence. He has paid his debt and made good his bad deeds. All of this is accomplished by the transformation of Williams' life from gang leader to anti-gang leader.
But, it seems to me that whether or not Williams has found redemption remains an open question. The movie never sugar coats the life that Williams led and this suggests that no matter how badly one behaves, redemption is always possible. But, it was not clear to me from the movie (although the intention of the movie was clear) that Williams was working to do good or doing good to avoid death and it was not clear that all of the good Williams books have accomplished could ever be enough to match the evil he committed in his younger days. After the movie, a message appears on the screen indicating that Williams is still appealing his sentence and proclaiming his innocence in the murders of which he was convicted. When I saw that message I thought that maybe there had been no redemption at all, just another effort to survive.

_Saved_

_(Premieres)_

This movie was an obvious audience favorite. Over the top and politically incorrect, the movie brought howls of laughter from the audience. The main characters brought cheers from the audience every time they tweaked the hypocrisy of their ultra-Christian classmates at the American Eagle Christian High School. In the end, the main character, Mary, is saved, but not from sin. Rather, she is saved from a particular form of Christianity I call "performance Christianity," where putting on a good Christian show is more important than any actual belief or
faith. In this version of Christianity being identified as a Christian is more important than being one. In watching this movie I was reminded of the bumper sticker that says: Lord save me from your followers.

The students at this ultra-Christian high school include Mary, who when she discovers that her boyfriend is gay has a vision that it is her responsibility to save him by sleeping with him. The irony in this is that Mary's devotion to God is the very cause of her getting pregnant and having her classmates turn against her for her sin. Mary is rejected by her classmates and "friends" until the end, when the leader of the Christian Jews, Hillary Faye, is exposed as the person writing graffiti all over the school and planting the evidence on her enemies. Hillary Faye is the essence of performance Christianity and she is played exceptionally well by Mandy Moore. Other students include a Jewish girl who has been kicked out of every other high school she has attended and so ends up at American Eagle High. She becomes the object of Hillary Faye's efforts to win another soul for Jesus, to great hilarity.

Hillary Faye's brother, played by Macaulay Culkin, is also a thorn in the side of Hillary Faye. She has to treat him nicely because he is in a wheel chair, but his contrary behavior is exasperating to Hillary Faye. The principal of the high school does not want his son to date Mary, because Mary is not the most committed Christian. But soon we discover that the principal is having an affair with Mary's
mother. These and many more cases of hypocrisy make up the context in which the action of the story takes place.

After the screening, the director, Brian Dannelly, and one of the actors both claimed that the movie was not designed to "make fun of" this particular kind of Christianity. They claimed that the movie was designed simply to get people to be more thoughtful regarding their own religion. I do not believe these claims. I think that the movie is a delicious spoof on a kind of dishonest person. It may not be making fun of Christianity, but it surely makes fun of those who use Christianity for their own purposes.