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Religion and Violence in Popular Film

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Abstract

Contemporary viewers of popular film are likely to have their values, perceptions, and behavior with regard to violence shaped by the cumulative effect of film conventions and recurrent images. An analysis of the top grossing films during the 1990's reveals that when religion is portrayed in connection with violence, it is rarely taken seriously as a motivating force for rejecting violence. On the contrary, while religion can play a chaplaincy or sanctuary role on screen for victims of violence, it typically serves either as a force for justifying and legitimating violence or as a device for enhancing the entertainment value of violence. In either case, we as filmgoers are steadily habituated to violence as both "natural" and "right."

In her recent book, *Seeing and Believing*, Margaret Miles makes the case that a filmgoer's values and perceptions are more likely to be significantly and lastingly shaped by the cumulative effect of repeated film conventions and recurrent images rather than by the explicit messages conveyed by a film.

No one film has iconic power, but the recurrence of similar images across films weaves those images into the fabric of the common life of American society, influencing everything from clothing styles to accepted and expected behavior. Filmic conventions, of which most spectators are never consciously aware, cumulatively affect Americans' self-esteem, expectations, attitudes, and behavior in relationships. That is why it is important to examine and to question them, to ask of them the ancient question of the Holy Grail: Whom does it serve? (190)

Perhaps nowhere is this subtle and cumulative shaping of values, perceptions, and behavior more significant than in the case of on-screen violence. Considerable media attention is given when film violence is imitated in real life as in the case of high profile "copycat killings." More alarming, however, is the widespread social effect of portrayals of violence in popular film. In over a thousand studies over a thirty-year period we have been told again and again that "exposure to violent images is associated with anti-social and aggressive behavior" (183). As a society deeply shaped by visual culture, we are increasingly desensitized to violence and anesthetized against empathy with the pain of victims.

We are, in effect, "habituated" to violence not only by watching it on screen, but by the way such behavior is repeatedly depicted as both "natural" and "right" (27).

I propose that one of the ways popular film habituates us to violent behavior as both "natural" and "right" is by its linking of religious faith with violence. We can certainly point to a handful of individual films that explicitly challenge violence on the basis of religious faith (Gandhi, for example). If Miles is correct, however, it is not the explicit messages of these individual films that are likely to shape our perceptions of the relationship between religion and violence as much as it is the cumulative effect of popular film conventions and recurrent images employed to portray that relationship.

This study examines the relationship between religion and violence in contemporary popular film - specifically, the top twenty grossing films in America during each of the years from 1990-1998, a total of 180 films (See Appendix for a list of films).[1] Sixty-two of those 180 films (or roughly one-third) contained some representation of religion, even if it was nothing other than a minister performing a marriage or funeral. Forty-four of those 62, interestingly enough, featured religion in some direct relationship to violence.

Before turning to an analysis of the films themselves, let me briefly define what I mean by the terms, "religion" and "violence." As Robert McAfee Brown

says, "Few words in our common vocabulary have been subject to greater abuse and misuse" (1). Religion, for example, could be extended to include any representation of one's worldview or "ultimate concern" (Tillich). Then, too, there is the whole question of an American "civil religion" - an amalgam of patriotism, popular socio-economic values, and baseline moral codes of conduct. One could easily argue that film series such as "Star Trek," "Superman," or "Batman" owe their popularity to portrayals of redemptive violence in the service of American civil religion.

If we are attempting to show how popular film habituates us to violence by linking it with religious faith, however, it is important to train our attention to those activities and symbols that viewers clearly recognize as religious. Therefore, I will use a more narrow definition of religion for the purposes of this study, one that is limited to explicit, established, and publicly identifiable religious faith traditions, cults, and sects.

On the other hand, a broader, more inclusive definition of violence will be used that goes beyond conventional definitions that emphasize explicit physical acts of destruction where "someone is roughed up, pushed around, hit, stabbed, shot, raped, or in some other way made the object of physical abuse" (Brown: 6). On this view, violence may be both personal and social, overt and covert, physical and psychological. When one individual "violates the personhood" of another or

when social institutions and structures are arranged in such a way as to violate a people's social or personal integrity, then I agree with Brown that "violence is an appropriate term to describe what has happened to them" (8). Unlike religion, it is not essential that violence be recognized as violence by the popular film-going audience in order for it to shape our values, attitudes, and behavior. Again, the thesis of this study is that popular film habituates us to violence whether we know it or not and that one of the ways it does this is by linking violence to explicit portrayals of religion or religious faith.

Having viewed all 180 top grossing films of the 1990's, I offer four primary classifications for interpreting the relationship of religion and violence: (1) religion portrayed as coming to the aid of victims of violence, (2) religion portrayed as supportive of or leading to violence, (3) religion portrayed as rejecting violence, and (4) religion juxtaposed to violence. These classifications are not watertight and many films offer images that fall into more than one classification.

I. Religion as a comfort and aid to victims of violence

In popular film, religion is often portrayed as neither supportive of nor opposed to violence, but as a source of comfort and aid to victims of violence. In these instances, religion typically plays the role either of chaplaincy or sanctuary. A common convention for establishing the chaplaincy role of religion is the

presence of a clergy at a funeral for a victim of violence as with *Mr. Holland's Opus* and *Lethal Weapon 3*. Similarly, in *Saving Private Ryan*, a chaplain is present on the beach at Normandy, assisting the wounded and performing Last Rites. In *Apollo 13*, a minister offers comfort to the wife of astronaut Jim Lovell wife during the uncertain atmospheric re-entry of the space capsule. Religion can also provide chaplaincy activities in the face of impending disaster as in the case of *Deep Impact*, *Armageddon*, and *Independence Day*. All three of these films feature the now-standard montage of religious communities around the world praying for salvation from apocalyptic doom, each in its own way. This device has become an especially popular way of giving the viewer a sense of the international gravity of a situation and of the global role of religion as chaplain.

Another disaster film, *Titanic*, significantly places a minister on deck during the final scenes to provide comfort to the victims huddled around him as he repeats the Hail Mary and quotes apocalyptic scripture from the book of Revelation. It is perhaps also worth noting that the small string ensemble aboard the Titanic chooses as its final on-deck performance, "Nearer My God to Thee" (despite the fact that the song is played, however unlikely, to the American rather than the British version of the tune). The selection has a stirring effect as it provides the background against which an elderly couple embraces in bed, a mother comforts her children, and terror-stricken passengers seek safety in the last dry vestiges of the sinking ship.

Prayer is the common denominator in most films where religion's chaplaincy role is being established in the face of violence or injury. Even basketball star, Charles Barkley, is reduced to prayer in *Space Jams* when aliens have stolen his basketball powers. In *Fried Green Tomatoes*, prayer is Ruth's only source of comfort and way of dealing with the violence inflicted by her husband, Frank. Reflecting upon her thankfulness to God for her son, Ruth says, "I remember I would have the same reaction after Frank would beat me... thanking the Lord for giving me the strength to take it." There are limits, however, to prayer's ability to provide an outlet for Ruth in the face of violence. As she says, "But... if that bastard ever tries to take my child, I won't pray, I will break his neck."

If chaplaincy is one image that serves to reinforce the role of religion as an aid and comfort to victims of violence, a second is sanctuary. Films such as *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *The Mask of Zorro*, or *Sister Act* feature the more traditional notion of sanctuary where a sacred space is established as a source of protection or hideout for victims of violence. In *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *Sleepers*, a member of the clergy actually lies on the witness stand in order to protect victims of violence from more violence. In *Eraser*, a member of the clergy comes to the aid of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Vanessa Williams by loaning them his car as they attempt to flee their stalkers. And in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and *Bodyguard,* a cross is portrayed as a symbol of protection from violence and injury

(consistent with a long line of films, especially vampire films, that have employed this device).

In all of the above, religion is portrayed as a neutral or positive feature of human existence, though not necessarily opposed to or supportive of violence. One might imagine cases where religion would be portrayed as offering too much consolation and aid, thereby overly pacifying a victim and serving a destructive role. In this case, as Marx suspected, religion's role as chaplain or sanctuary would be that of a distraction or drug. This image, however, never surfaces in the 180 films reviewed.[2]

II. Religion as supportive of violence

Though religion can often serve as an aid to victims of violence in popular film, it is regularly portrayed as supportive of or leading to violence. This does not mean that religion is always portrayed in a negative light in such instances, however. Though religion can lead to immoral or unrighteous violence, it is often depicted as supportive of redemptive and righteous violence. One may certainly ask whether violence can ever be righteous or redemptive,[3] but in popular film, it most assuredly is.

(a) Religion as supportive of righteous or redemptive violence

When religion is portrayed as supportive of righteous or redemptive violence, one of three recurrent images is typically used: the crusader, the spiritual warrior, or divine violence. The crusader is, of course, intent on defeating the enemy of God, often characterized as an infidel or heretic. So, for example, in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, a religious motivation drives Van Helsing and his squad of vampire slayers to hunt down and destroy Dracula and his minions. Though a religious dimension has always been present in the historic genre of vampire films, in the hands of Francis Ford Coppola, the religious motivation is heightened and even plays a central role at the beginning of the film in the story of Vlad the Impaler's conversion from Christian crusader to Dracula.

Mel Gibson's *Braveheart* offers yet another spin on the crusader image with the standard convention of having a priest bless the warriors on screen before they engage in battle. This is a visual clue that the cause of the warrior is just and the opponent is evil. So, too, Friar Tuck in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* blesses the band of Merry Men as they sack, pillage, and rob. Indeed, on occasion he himself engages in combat, most especially against a hypocritical priest who is a lackey of the Sheriff of Nottingham. By the end of the film, the viewer's righteous indignation against the priest is finally satisfied when Friar Tuck kills him by pushing him out of a high castle window. Walt Disney's *Mulan*, who heads into battle out of a sense of filial piety, may also be taken as an example of a crusader. Mulan prays to her

ancestors for help and they respond by guiding and protecting her in training and in battle, albeit through a diminutive dragon-spirit voiced by Eddie Murphy.

In some instances, the crusader may be established as a godsend despite his or her own lack of religious faith. In *Tombstone*, for example, a priest quotes from the book of Revelation to a group of bandits, thereby prophesying a coming judgment that will lead to their demise. So it is that Kurt Russell's appearance later in the film as legendary sheriff, Wyatt Earp, is provided a crusader context with an explicitly religious foundation. One can find this similar convention in the earlier *Pale Rider* (1985), starring Clint Eastwood.

In *The Lion King*, the baboon, Rafiki, is the equivalent of a holy man, medicine man, or witch doctor in the animal kingdom and this righteous aura accompanies him when he beats up on the wicked hyenas. In fact, the whole circle of life in *The Lion King* is endowed with a holiness that sustains violence as a way of life, an effective way of mythologizing and sacralizing the notion that violence is built into the system and is the way "things are."

Similar to the image of the crusader is the image of the spiritual warrior who may engage in violence out of a religious motivation, to be sure, but even more importantly out of a proper spiritual discipline or power. One thinks, for example, of the Jedi knights in the *Star Wars* trilogy, re-released in the late 1990's. Luke

Skywalker is trained by his spiritual masters, Obi-wan Kenobi and Yoda, in the proper use of the mystical "force" in battle. Even though Obi-wan teaches that "there are alternatives to fighting" and Yoda holds that "The Jedi uses the force for knowledge and defense, never for attack," this does not prevent violence from being scripted into each climactic scene as the primary vehicle for redemption. The ultimate victory of good over evil always boils down to firing laser blasters, detonating bombs, or slicing through one's enemies with a light saber.

Variations on the spiritual warrior image can be found elsewhere in top-grossing films during the 1990's. Both *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and its sequel employ this convention to justify their heroes' violence learned from their spiritual master, a large sewer rat named Splinter. So also, in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, Morgan Freeman is a faithful Muslim who has joined himself to Robin Hood out of fulfillment of a religious vow and whose violence flows from his religious commitment and disciplined spirituality. Another more recent variation can be found in *Saving Private Ryan*, where Private Jackson is a sharpshooter who quotes from the Hebrew Psalter prior to each of the carefully calculated shots that invariably strike their targets. These quotations are not ordinary prayers offered up by a frightened soldier. Private Jackson quotes scripture as a way of lining up his rifle, and each shot is offered up as a prayer.

Finally, violence can be portrayed in contemporary film as justified or righteous when it is carried out by a divine being. A rather obvious example of this divine violence is in *The Prince of Egypt* where, true to the biblical narrative, God sends plagues and drowns the Egyptian enemies of the Israelites. The divine character of Zeus in Disney's popular *Hercules* is a second example. Not only does Zeus like to throw thunderbolts around, most of the divine beings can be aroused to joining in battle when need arises and Hercules himself, who is clearly understood to be a god in the film, is the most adept at exercising righteous violence. A third rather odd example is to be found in *Forrest Gump* where God shows up in the form of a massive storm that destroys all but Forrest's shrimp boat. In fact, Forrest is almost always shielded from violence while virtually all the characters around him suffer enormously.

(b) Religion as supportive of immoral or corrupt violence

Almost as prevalent as portrayals of religion supporting righteous or redemptive violence are portrayals of religion as the fountain of immoral and corrupt violence. It is not always clear, however, whether religion in such instances is to be taken as inherently leading to such violence or whether such violence is really an abuse or distortion of religion. Much is left to the subjectivity of the viewer. The three favorite Hollywood images for expressing this relationship of religion to violence can be described as the hypocrite, the fanatic, and the sorcerer.

The hypocrite is a character who presents a socially prominent, religious façade to the public, but whose religiosity is actually a thin veil covering his or her immorality which leads ultimately to violent or injurious behavior. The usual convention for depicting this image is a character who normally has a status of respect in society and is not merely misled, but corrupt. The harm that he or she inflicts on others is made all the worse because of the perversion of its religious origins. As already mentioned, the priest in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* is a pawn in the hands of the rich and powerful. His own greed and hypocrisy leads him to lie, mislead, and allow others to be injured. Likewise, in *Braveheart*, when William Wallace is tied to the rack and put to death, it is with clear religious overtones that his judge refers to his torture as his "purification."

When considering violent films, *Philadelphia*, starring Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington, may not come immediately to mind. There are no teenage mutant ninja turtles working over their opponents for ninety minutes straight or explosive devices killing and maiming dozens of people. But certainly the injury that is caused to Andrew Beckett, fired because he has AIDS, may be construed as an act of violence. And the film clearly associates this act with a religious motivation when the head of the law partnership is asked by Beckett's attorney the question of who makes the rules by which he plays. Wheeler responds, "Read the

Bible... Old and New Testaments... there's some pretty good rules in there." Here we find a hypocritical use of religion used to justify the injury of others.

One final example worth noting is, again, *Titanic*. Though it is an iceberg that sinks the ship, the film makes clear that the more insidious form of violence is a class system that keeps the wealthy insulated and isolated from the poor and that even bars the latter, those traveling in "steerage," from reaching the lifeboats until well after first-class passengers have been accommodated. This deadly class system, while based on socioeconomic realities, is reinforced by religion. In *Titanic*, we see the wealthy at worship together, dressed in their finest and prohibiting steerage passengers from joining them -another example of a hypocritical religiosity with violent consequences.

Not all religious motivation for unholy violence is portrayed through such respectable images, however. Hollywood frequently chooses to employ the fanatic, or redneck, to show the bending of religion to violent ends. One of the most frequent conventions for delivering this image is, of course, the Ku Klux Klan as, for example, in *A Time to Kill*, where it is clearly a religious motivation that drives their violence. As the leader of the Klan says to his new recruit (played by Kiefer Sutherland), "The Klan has always been right there, under the surface, just waiting for the opportunity to deliver God's justice." As the new recruits are sworn in, the

Klan leader states, "I am proud to invite you in the war to protect our Christian homes and families."

Kiefer Sutherland apparently portrays this image effectively, for just four years earlier he played a similar role in the successful film, *A Few Good Men*. There, Sutherland plays a redneck Lieutenant who recognizes only two proper authorities in his life, his commanding Colonel and "the Lord our God." Sutherland is convincing as the narrow-minded military officer who serves God and country and who sees in the death by hazing of a weaker Marine the fact that the man died because "he had no code" and "God was watching." In *Waterboy*, starring Adam Sandier and set in the rural backwoods of the Louisiana bayou, we find a very different model of fanatic, or redneck religion in service of psychological abuse. Waterboy's mother, played by Kathy Bates, keeps him in check all his life, stunting his social growth and basically turning him into an idiot by constant appeal to religious images and themes. Everything outside her narrow world is "of the devil," including girls, astronomy, and football.

Two additional films that illustrate the fanatic image of relating religion and violence can be found in *Contact* and *Seven*. *Seven* refers to the seven deadly sins, each of which becomes the pretext for and method of a murder committed by a deeply disturbed, but religious man who is trying to send a message on behalf of God to the world about the depths of its depravity. The film itself is disquieting,

graphic, and heavy in its blend of religious themes fed by Dante, Chaucer, and Milton, on the one hand, and horror and violence, on the other. *Contact*, starring Jodie Foster, features several religious portraits, not the least of which is a cult member who, apparently out of a religious motivation, blows up the launch pad where a space transport is being sent to other parts of the universe.

A final image of religious faith as a motivation for unrighteous violence is the sorcerer, epitomized in the character of Darth Vader from *Star Wars*. Vader is deeply religious and has perfected his own openness to and harmony with the mystical force at the heart of the universe - that is, in its "dark side." When told by an imperial henchman that his devotion to "that ancient religion" has not helped the imperial cause, Vader begins to choke the man telekinetically with the words, "I find your lack of faith disturbing." Though Vader offers a contrast to the spiritual warrior exemplified in Luke Skywalker, they both direct their spiritual power toward violent ends.

III. Religion as supporting the rejection of violence

In only three of the 180 most popular films of the 1990's is religious faith portrayed as even remotely leading to the rejection of violence: *Pocahontas*, *Dances With Wolves*, and *Pulp Fiction*. Interestingly enough, the first two of these films have a Native American context, but one that retains some ambiguity when it

comes to violence. Kicking Bird, the holy man in *Dances With Wolves*, is portrayed as the voice of reason and nonviolence when others of the tribe would like to go off and kill Lt. John Dunbar (Kevin Costner). Still, when it comes time for the Sioux tribe to go off to war against the Pawnee, there is no hint that Kicking Bird's faith leads him to oppose all violence. He simply joins the others in the armed struggle against their enemies. Pocahontas is less ambiguous in its rejection of violence out of what may reasonably be called a religious faith. Certainly, the other members of her tribe see no disparity between their own faith and engaging in warfare - indeed, they celebrate their warriors as heroes. But Pocahontas is depicted as one who is more in touch with the authentic spirituality of their tradition - she listens to the voices of the wind, animals, and trees, and she is recognized by her father, the chief, as having a wisdom beyond her years. This deep spirituality leads Pocahontas to advocate nonviolence toward the dangerous Europeans who have landed on their soil.

In *Pulp Fiction*, two gangsters, Jules and Vincent, are on a routine hit for their boss, Marcellus. They enter an apartment, begin a conversation with two young men who have double crossed Marcellus and then execute the two men. Unbeknownst to Jules and Vincent, however, a third man has been hiding in the bathroom. He emerges into the room unloading a fusillade of bullets at close range. None of the bullets hits either Vincent or Jules and they, of course, proceed to blow

him away. The dialogue then turns to a debate between the two gangsters as to whether this event was in fact divine intervention or just luck. Jules (played by Samuel L. Jackson), who likes to quote a passage from Ezekiel just before he kills people, experiences the event as a miracle and decides to give up his life of violence and crime. Jules has had a "moment of clarity" and believes that "God got involved." This is nothing less than a religious conversion and it leads Jules to a rejection of violence. How ironic it is that *Pulp Fiction*, which is generally perceived as one the most violent films of the 1990's, should be one of the only films in our study that features an explicit rejection of violence out of a clearly religious motivation!

IV. Religion as juxtaposed to violence

A final classification for analyzing the relationship of religion to violence in popular film is the juxtaposition or contraposition of religion to violence. In this broad classification of film images, religion is not portrayed as necessarily supportive of or opposed to violence; it is portrayed as a set of counter-images against which violence is to be read. A classic example is the *Godfather* trilogy, directed by Francis Ford Coppola, the final installment of which was released in 1990. Just as in the original *Godfather* where scenes of Michael Corleone at an infant baptism are intercut with a killing spree he has ordered, so in *Godfather, Part III* the killings are set against the backdrop of the Cavalieria Rusticaha, an opera

featuring murder and betrayal in the context of an Easter mass and the religious procession associated with it. So it is that murder after murder is intercut with depictions of the Madonna and the crucified, buried, and resurrected Christ.

In *Pulp Fiction*, the quotation of Ezekiel by Jules just prior to executing his victims can be taken as another illustration of this contraposition of religion with violence. Jules' use of scripture is different than that of Private Jackson in *Saving Private Ryan*. Private Jackson's religious faith is more closely integrated into his shooting whereas, for Jules, the use of the Ezekiel passage is a favorite device used by director Quentin Tarantino to create a dissonance in the viewer by offering unrestrained crosscurrents of dialogue and action.

Other examples of religion juxtaposed to violence are *Sister Act*, *Tombstone*, *Mask of Zorro*, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, and *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*,[4] where the violent is made to appear all the more violent by its intrusion into sacred space. A fascinating example of this convention is John Woo's *Face/Off,* starring Nicholas Cage and John Travolta. The beginning of the film shows Nicholas Cage shooting at John Travolta and, having missed him, killing his son. We next see Nicholas Cage disguised as a priest dancing through the Los Angeles Convention Center as a choir sings the "Hallelujah Chorus" from Handel's Messiah. This juxtaposition foreshadows the switching of identities when Travolta and Cage will exchange faces and the evil will be disguised as good while the good is

disguised as evil. The conclusion of the film heightens the contrast between good and evil by featuring a brutal shoot-out within a small church intercut with depictions of crucifixes, the Madonna, religious flowers, votive candles, and flying doves. Much of the scene is filmed in slow motion so that we see bullets floating through the air, fire lurching out of pistols, and victims falling to the ground ail against the backdrop of the interior of a small Spanish mission-style church.

The increasingly common device of juxtaposing religious space and religious symbols to brutality and violence points neither to a religious support for or opposition to violence, but rather represents the use of religion as itself a filmic device for drawing attention to the violent.

Conclusion

With rare exceptions (no more than three out of 180 films), religion is not portrayed in popular film as a force in personal, family, or social life moving us away from violence and toward nonviolence. In fact, what we see is just the opposite. Religion may at times be depicted as opposing what is perceived as "unrighteous" violence, but even then religious faith endorses and leads to what is being offered as "redemptive" violence. In either case, violence is compatible with religious faith and thus viewers are habituated to violence as "natural" and "right." Either American religion as a whole has failed to challenge our culture to shun

violence or else popular film is unable, unwilling, or uninterested in portraying that challenge. With a few exceptions, popular film does not depict the complexity and depth of religious experience and religious faith with regard to violence. Does religious faith never lead human beings to opt for more nonviolent paths in our society? Is religious faith only a chaplain in the face of violence? a court priest throwing holy water on the troops as they head out to war? a crusader or fanatic incited by religious fervor? Part of the difficulty here is that popular film in order to be popular film is fairly enslaved to standard film conventions that truncate depth and abbreviate complexity in the service of entertainment.

Margaret Miles argues that on-screen violence can never be associated with anything other than entertainment.

> For media-literate Americans, violence is entertainment; a film cannot use violent images to Communicate a different message. Neither can such images provoke social action. Violent images will rarely inform, sensitize, or instill social responsibility in people who are accustomed to assuming a spectatorial distance that yields voyeuristic pleasure without requiring, or permitting, active engagement. In short, a film that employs an adventure film's scenes of sex and violence cannot communicate anything but voyeuristic exploitation of suffering people. The pain of the oppressed is ultimately used for the entertainment of comfortable spectators. (66).

If Miles is right, perhaps it is for this reason that religion itself, when linked with violence in popular film, becomes little more than a means for enhancing the entertainment value of violence.

Religion, religious faith, religious space, and religious symbols have become in the hands of popular film, little more than useful filmic conventions in the service of violence as entertainment. With rare exceptions, religion has become a device to emphasize and draw attention to the violent - to make the violent more violent by juxtaposing it to the sacred. In postmodern film, where violence is not portrayed as "out there" - as something that happens to others - but as instead intrusive, showing up at my doorstep, threatening my own annihilation, the filmic convention of portraying violence within sacred space is especially effective. It tells us that there is no place to hide.

In effect, then, religion is trivialized and marginalized in popular film, it is reduced to a cliché. Indeed, in one film, *The Silence of the Lambs* (it must be put it in a category all to itself), religion is violence as Dr. Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) is tortured by being forced to watch televangelists all day long. There may be those rare films that feature a glimmer of the power of religious faith to transform human life and challenge both personal and structural violence. But those films tend to minimize or even shun Hollywood film conventions and thereby risk their own popularity. Violence is increasingly embedded in our lives as we are exposed to image after image of violence on screen. Religion, rather than challenging this violence typically serves either as a force for justifying and legitimating violence or as a device for enhancing the entertainment value of

violence. In either case, we as filmgoers are steadily habituated to violence as "the way things are" and "the way things must be."

Appendix

1990	1991	1992
Home Alone	*Terminator 2: Judgment Day*	*Aladdin*
Ghost	*Robin Hood: Prince of*	*Home Alone 2: Lost in New*
Dances With Wolves Pretty	*Thieves*	*York*
Woman	*Beauty and the Beast*	*Batman Returns*
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles	*The Silence of the Lambs*	*Lethal Weapon 3*
The Hunt for Red October	*City Slickers*	*A Few Good Men*
Total Recall	*Hook*	*Sister Act*
Die Hard 2	*The Addams Family*	*The Bodyguard*
Dick Tracy	*Sleeping with the Enemy*	*Wayne's World*
Kindergarten Cop	*Father of the Bride*	*Basic Instinct*
Back to the Future Part III	*Naked Gun 2½*	*A League of Their Own*
Presumed Innocent	*Fried Green Tomatoes*	*Unforgiven*
Days of Thunder	*Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*	*The Hand That Rocks the*
Another 48 Hours	*II*	*Cradle*
3 Men and a Little Lady	*Backdraft*	*Under Siege*
Bird on a Wire	*Cape Fear*	*Patriot Games*
Godfather, Part III	*Star Trek VI*	*Bram Stoker's Dracula*
Flatliners	*Prince of Tides*	*White Men Can't Jump*
Misery	*JFK*	*The Last of the Mohicans*
Edward Scissorhands	*Hot Shots!*	*Boomerang*
	What About Bob?	*Scent of a Woman*
	101 Dalmatians	*The Crying Game*
1993	**1994**	**1995**
Jurassic Park	*Forrest Gump*	*Toy Story*
Mrs. Doubtfire	*The Lion King*	*Batman Forever*
The Fugitive	*True Lies*	*Apollo 13*
The Firm	*The Santa Clause*	*Pocahontas*
Sleepless in Seattle	*The Flintstones*	*Ace Ventura: When Nature*
Indecent Proposal	*Dumb and Dumber*	*Calls*
In the Line of Fire	*Clear and Present Danger*	*Golden Eye*
The Pelican Brief	*Speed*	*Jumanji*
Schindler's List	*The Mask*	*Casper*
Cliffhanger	*Pulp Fiction*	*Seven*
Free Willy	*Interview With the Vampire*	*Die Hard: With a Vengeance*
Philadelphia	*Maverick*	*Crimson Tide*
Groundhog Day	*The Client*	*Waterworld*
Grumpy Old Men	*Disclosure*	*Dangerous Minds*
Cool Runnings	*Star Trek: Generations*	*While You Were Sleeping*
Dave	*Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*	*Congo*
Rising Sun	*Stargate*	*Father of the Bride Part II*
Demolition Man	*Legends of the Fall*	*Braveheart*
Sister Act 2	*Wolf*	*Get Shorty*
Tombstone	*The Specialist*	*The Bridges of Madison*
		County
		Grumpier Old Men

1996	1997	1998
Independence Day	*Titanic*	*Armageddon*
Twister	*Men in Black*	*Saving Private Ryan*
Mission: Impossible	*The Lost World: Jurassic*	*There's Something About*
Jerry Maguire	*Park*	*Mary*
Ransom	*Liar Liar*	*The Waterboy*
101 Dalmatians	*Air Force One*	*A Bug's Life*
The Rock	*As Good As It Gets*	*Dr. Dolittle*
The Nutty Professor	*Good Will Hunting*	*Rush Hour*
The Birdcage	*Star Wars S.E.*	*Deep Impact*
A Time to Kill	*My Best Friend's Wedding*	*Godzilla*
The First Wives Club	*Tomorrow Never Dies*	*Lethal Weapon 4*
Phenomenon	*Face/Off*	*Patch Adams*
Scream	*Batman and Robin*	*The Truman Show*
Eraser	*George of the Jungle*	*Mulan*
The Hunchback of Notre	*Scream 2*	*You've Got Mail*
Dame	*ConAir*	*Enemy of the State*
Michael	*Contact*	*The Rugrats Movie*
Star Trek: First Contact	*Hercules*	*The Prince of Egypt*
Space Jam	*Flubber*	*Mask of Zorro*
Mr. Holland's Opus	*Conspiracy Theory*	*Antz*
The English Patient	*I Know What You Did Last*	*Stepmom*
	Summer	

[1] Special thanks to Greg Hastings, who assisted in viewing and analyzing the films as well as offering valuable insights on the relationship between religion and violence in the films.

[2] Though religious faith might appear to provide a pacifying role in Ruth's case in Fried Green Tomatoes, the role of religion in this film is complex, and it is not at all clear that religion pacifies Ruth. In fact, it may be better seen as energizing her.

[3] See, for example, Walter Wink, *The Powers that be: Theology for a New Millennium*. New York: Doubleday, 1998.

[4] See also *The Peacemaker* (1997), which, though not in the top 180 films, features the intrusion of violence into sacred space.

Works Cited

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