

Biblical christian influence on american films



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One of the most interesting and probably the most important and influential books ever written in Western history is the Holy Bible. No other book has come close to having had such a profound influence on the religious, intellectual, philosophical, political, military and cultural life of society throughout the world where western civilization has penetrated. Some people believe its the best work of literature ever written; others believe that is the word of God written by Him alone through mortals chosen to carry His message. Some believe that the very thought of changing a single word of this book deserves severe punishment even death. Most western religions treat it as holy words from their creator and savior. Historians value it as a great encyclopedia of ancient cultures of the Near East. Artists continue to be inspired by and find material from this book for their paintings, novels, poems and other expressions of art. Architects have used information and actual plans found in the Bible as to how the ancients built their magnificent temples and cities as reference to build modern structures as well as replicating the old. The Bible has been used as a great source for scientists and researchers in identifying diseases and other maladies that plague modern societies. Doctors have found actual cures for some diseases that were passed on to them through the Bible. Politicians very often use words or passages from this book to rationalize their policies or actions. Moralists have set the doctrines expressed within its pages as the basic rules a good citizen should follow. Priests base sermons on their own interpretations of the holy words to inspire followers and to convert non-believers.

How powerful the book is! Bible translation led to the study and literary development of many languages. Luther's translation of the Bible in the 16th

century has been called the birth of modern Germany. The Authorized Version (English) of 1611 (King James Version) and the others that preceded it caught the English language at the blooming of its first maturity. Since the invention of the printing press (mid-15th century), the Bible has evolved to become more than a translation of an ancient Oriental text. It is not perceived as a foreign book. Certainly it has become the most available, familiar, and dependable source and arbiter of intellectual, moral, and spiritual ideals in the West. Its English translations form the shape of modern English and many writing styles. It has given birth to many masterpieces of art. Miltons Paradise Lost, Rubens Christ On The CrossIt has caused pain, suffering and conflict between various individuals and societies who interpret the book differently such as the Hebrew, the Moslem and the Christian. No one can deny the astronomical deaths heaped on western society through wars and other forms of murder perpetuated in the name of truth found in the pages of the Bible. It is the foundation of most western moral concepts and cultures. It is read daily by millions throughout the world

No one can ignore or deny the place the Bible has earned. Numerous academics have studied its influence on western culture and society. I dont wish to repeat or quote what has already been said more eloquently. What I want to emphasize here is I believe that it is quite impossible to discuss the Bible and its influence over the Western World without considering the influence of different religious interpretations.

What I hope to do here is to confine this discussion to the impact of the Christian interpretation of the bible on American Entertainment, specifically American film and the film industry.

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The Christian Bibles Effect on the American Film Industry

Most Chinese audiences have no doubt: America is a nation of complete artistic and personal freedom. How is it possible then that America is under the influence and even controlled by one book? Even I would have to admit it seems true for the present there seems to be unlimited freedom in U. S. entertainment. Violence, crime, pornography, politics, drugs, etc. all have been adapted into screen. It seems there are no rules for the film industry. Filmmakers can and seem to make whatever movies they like.

The truth is that until recently the film industry is subject to and has to follow, directly or indirectly, the rules set out in a kind of Production Code, which was originally written by a Catholic priest, Father Daniel Lord in the 1920s when complaints of moral abuses in Hollywood expressed through the new and powerful medium of film forced the industry to protect itself against local or national censorship and establish the Hayes Commission to investigate and make suggestions that would calm the fears of the moralists and organizations that were fearful of Hollywoods influence on their memberships. Later the Hayes Commission gave birth to what is today known as Motion Picture Association. This quasi-government organization is still headed by its first appointee and is supposed to help the motion picture industry set and follow a voluntary code of ethics by warning audiences of the content in each film through a rating system.

After the birth of the Hayes Commission, in April 1934 the Catholic Church formed its own investigating commission. A committee of bishops was formed to make suggestions and determinations as to what Catholics could

and could not view coming out of Hollywood. It was called The Legion of Decency. These Bishops make determinations as to the moral content of each film and how the Church wanted its priests to handle their parishioners. The priests would then pass on this information to the parishioners. Through sermons, booklets, letters, and media releases the Church let it be known what movies were acceptable for viewing and which were not. For more than three decades the Catholic Church, through its Legion of Decency enjoyed the power to control content in much of what Hollywood produced serving as a moral guardian for the American public. From 1934 until the early 1950s staunch lay Catholic, Joseph I. Breen, rigorously enforced the Hays Code at the Production Code Administration (PCA), often over the protests of studio executives, producers, directors, and screenwriters. The PCA, the industry's own censorship board worked hand in hand with the Legion of Decency to keep the movies from exploring social, political and economic issues that it believed were either immoral or a danger to the Catholic Church.

The PCA, represented only the first step in the process of purification that all Hollywood films underwent during the Legion's reign. After receiving a Production Code seal of approval, films were shipped to New York for duplication and distribution; but before that process could begin each film was submitted to the Catholic Legion of Decency for a final review. If they didn't like what they saw, word would be sent to the producing studio that negotiations were in order. A letter or a telephone conversation would detail the Legion's objections. The offending films would be either altered to suit Catholic tastes or waiting for condemnation. A Legion condemnation shook Hollywood to its core because Catholics, some twenty million strong, were

theoretically forbidden, under the penalty of mortal sin, to attend the condemned film. Any theater that exhibited a condemned film was targeted for boycott by Catholic organizations. Rather than risk a loss of income or challenge the Legion's authority to censor their product, producers bowed to the pressure and cut the offending material from all prints exhibited worldwide. In reality, then, the Legion's view of sex, politics and moral issues reached an international market. The history of the relationship between the Legion and Hollywood, of a religious organization's censorship of a mass medium entailed a cultural war between the Legion, which believed it spoke for the moral values of the American public, and the movie industry, which fought often rather meekly for freedom of the screen.

From the mid-1930s until Otto Preminger's release of *The Moon Is Blue* in 1953, no Hollywood studio seriously challenged the right of the priests to censor their films. From 1953 until the establishment of the current ratings system, only a handful of independent producers, foreign or domestic, refused to submit their films to Legion censors. The Catholics thought that strict control over the content of the movies would prevent the movies a new, popular and powerful recreation from changing the positive values of Anglo-Saxon ideals was adopted by progressive reformers.

What Daniel Lord drafted as a Catholic movie code emerged a fascinating combination of Catholic theology, conservative politics, and pop psychologyan amalgam that would control the content of Hollywood films for the next three decades. Lord and his colleagues shared a common objective with Protestant film reformers: they all wanted entertainment films to emphasize that the church, the government, and the family were the

cornerstones of an orderly society; that success and happiness resulted from respecting and working within this system. Entertainment films should reinforce religious teachings that deviant behavior, whether criminal or sexual, cost violators the love and comforts of home, the intimacy of family, the solace of religion, and the protection of law. Films should be twentieth-century morality plays that illustrated proper behavior to the masses.

Therefore, the basic premise behind the code was that no picture should lower the moral standards of those who see it. Recognizing that evil and sin were legitimately part of drama, the code stressed that no film should create a feeling of sympathy for the criminal, the adulterer, the immoralist, or the corrupter. No film should be so constructed as to leave the question of right or wrong in doubt. Films must uphold, not question or challenge, the basic values of society. The sanctity of the home and marriage must be upheld. The concept of basic law must not be belittled or ridiculed. Courts must be shown as just and fair, police as honest and efficient, and government as protective of all people. If corruption was a necessary part of any plot, it had to be restricted: a judge could be corrupt but not the court system; a policeman could be brutal, but not the police force. Interestingly, Lords code stated, crime need not always be punished, as long as the audience is made to know that it is wrong. What Lord wanted films to do was to illustrate clearly to audiences that evil is wrong and that good is right. Therefore *Going My Way* couldnt pass the censor: they thought priests in a bad light. In *Inherit the Wind* the whole premise of the film could not be accepted originally because it supposedly slammed Christianity and “ portrayed the minister as the villain in the movie (parish the thought no pun intended).”

Sunset Boulevard was rejected because Norma's crime of shooting Gillis went unpunished.

In 1968 the censorship system was replaced by the rating system. In this system the movie will not be changed only given a letter to represent the content of the movie. One can't help but wonder what movies would have come without the Hays committee. And the truth is that though the influence of this Production Code is fading nowadays, Catholics can see all the movies they like, most of the producers see the code as at best a general guideline for movie morality. In 1995, the Pontifical Council for Social Communication identified forty-five films produced in the United States, Europe, and Asia that, it said, possessed special artistic or religious merit. The list was prepared as part of the Vatican's contribution to the hundredth anniversary of the cinema. For the average moviegoer there were many recognizable films: The Vatican council cited, among others, Fred Zinnemann's A Man for All Seasons, William Wyler's Ben Hur, Gabriel Axel's Babettes Feast, Frank Capra's It's a Wonderful Life, Louis Malle's Au Revoir les Enfants, Victor Fleming's The Wizard of Oz, and Steven Spielberg's Schindler's List. They are all great works representing Christian morality and values. Christian moral rate is still an important standard for audience to judge a film. It still plays a central role in filmmaking.

Though the Catholic censorship system has been replaced by the rating system, its shadow is still hover over the films. It may not be so obvious but subtle. Even though they try to expose the dark side of Catholic Church or priests, they'll simply pick up a role that did something wrong then confessed and changed himself into a good man again later. They will be only shown as

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the smallest minority among the larger Christian family and cannot represent Christians as a whole. Even this kind of subject is very difficult to find in the film library. Christian society also has its own film companies, TV programs and own many radio and TV stations. What they express in the films, videos, DVDs, etc all focuses on converting secular citizens and reinforcing followers belief. Whereas what they produce are not only simple teaching materials, but are entertaining. The movies they have shot are good examples, which mix Christian doctrines with exciting secular plots. For example, Apocalypse, Revelation and Left behind, these three movies are among a series film that contain the message of Revelation. I dont want to describe scenes from these films but rather discuss here the Christian impact on commercial films, the films that are not made by Christian producers. According to their different style of expression, I separate the films into three groups for the conveniences sake: one is viewed from their stories to discover the secret of using or adapting Christian stories in a film; one is sensed from their themes to probe how Christian ideas and values dominate the American society through the media of film, the most attractive, powerful entertainment; the other is analyzed through films structure to see their connection with the Bible. This separation may not be accurate and thoroughly considered. But I hope it to be a guideline to understand this cultural phenomenon.

Commercial movies also put biblical stories on screen. However unlike pure Christian films, they dont quite follow what has been written in the Scriptures. They will adapt the scenes or create a plot according to the need of a smooth story. This kind of films always reveal Christian doctrines and teachings openly and are very persuasive.

Among the AFIs one hundred greatest films of all time for the celebration of the birth of film, Ben-Hur, Jesus, and The Ten Commandments are this kind of movies. Ben-Hur was released in 1959. Based on the famous novel, it tells the story of Judah Ben-Hur, a wealthy Jewish prince living during the time of Christ who is wrongly accused of murdering the Roman governor. The governor, however, is not killed during the incident of the falling tiles. He recovers. This is important because it means Judah is sentenced to die in the galleys not only for an accident, but for an accident which does not even result in permanent injury. Judah, his mother and daughter are imprisoned for the crime by Judah's childhood friend, the Roman Masala. Judah is sentenced to be a galley slave and swears revenge on Masala. As Judah works to exact his revenge, a young carpenter begins his ministry. The film's story dovetails into a climactic confrontation between Judah and Masala, until finally Judah learns that love triumphs over hate, becoming a follower of Jesus, the crucified carpenter. Jesus is not the central role in this film. However the main plot develops around him and around what he did according to the Bible. His sermon on the mount, his performing miracles, the great plague of leprosy, his crucifixion, death and resurrection, etc. are all depicted in the film. At the end of the film, all the lepers were cured, all the blasted grasses were awakened, the dry rivers regained flowing water: everything was being refreshed and gained its second life, people threw away their hatred and followed their Messiah. The whole movie presents a great biblical epic and punctuates the message of peace and love through salvation in Christ, which is the core of the New Testament and the most important value that the Christians believe. Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy

neighbour as thyself: I am the Lord. Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you. for love is of God not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Jesus (1979) is one of the most accurate Bible dramas ever produced with a script taken entirely from the book of Luke. The story begins with the angels announcement to the virgin Mary of the impending birth of Jesus, visually depicts the main events of Jesus life and ministry, portrays a painfully realistic crucifixion, and then ends with His ascension through the clouds. As of July 1, 1997, this film has been translated into over 406 languages and is used as and evangelism tool throughout the world.

Different from above two concerned the story of Jesus Christ, The Ten Commandments (1956) projects the panorama of Moses life: his mother putting him into the bulrushes to be found by Pharaohs family, the early Egyptian career and exile to Midian; the call from the Burning Bush; the plagues and the Red Sea; the giving of the Law. Unavoidable, there are many details added which are not found in the Scriptures and some events are altered or merged.

These three films are all Hollywoods productions under the domination of Legion of Decency. They cannot be named perfect from a strict point of view of Christians (some violence and revision of the Scripture), They are still the most impressive interpretations of biblical stories that ever seen in the Hollywood film industry. In recent years, we could hardly find this kind of films on the screen until 1998 DreamWorks SKG did a film with brilliant

animation also about the story of Moses The Prince of Egypt. The film's introduction states it is true to the essence, values and integrity of the story. There are still divergencies against the book of Exodus: Moses is not reunited with his mother as an infant, he speaks flawlessly and therefore does not need Aaron's eloquence, he kills the Egyptian by accident rather than murdering him, Aaron is reluctant to support Moses and discourages him from speaking to Pharaoh. Even so, despite the many textual inconsistencies, the film's central theme is clear. In the words of Dream Works principal Jeffrey Katzenberg, A man has an experience with his God which forever changes his life, his perceptions and his people's history. They vividly show the burning bush of God's image stating I Am that I Am, and the plagues on Egypt and the parting of the water of Red Sea are also very graphically impressive with the wonderful combination of the songs I Will Get There and If You Believe.

You may not find biblical stories or themes in most of the films. However since the Christian ideas and values have sunk into the deep part of the American culture. Almost every film will come down to moral issues or reveal directly or indirectly something from the Holy Bible. They have woven the preset values secretly into the films.

Pay It Forward, a newly released film is a good example. An eleven years old boy Trevor McKinney, a seventh grader challenged by Social Studies teacher Eugene Simonet in an extra credit assignment to change the world, he comes up with a plan to impact the lives of three people. If they accept, it is their duty to continue the idea of paying it forward by impacting the lives of three others. Instead of each one reach one it is each one reach three.

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Eventually the results can change the world. It doesn't work out so successfully, but he did try. His effort was not in vain. More and more people get to know it, more and more people stretch their hands out to help. Trevor helps his mother out of alcohol and helps Eugene regain his faith in love. He is knifed by two rascals who are bullying a kid after his deed has been screened on TV. Many people come to mourn on his death and Pay It Forward is being spread out all over the country. Though this boy doesn't have a Christian background, the screenwriter provides him the most shining characteristics of a Christian. In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets. For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF. Trevor is put in the position of solving all the problems in Las Vegas, including but not limited to heroin addiction, alcohol abuse, strip bars, child abuse and homelessness. And he is transformed into a Messiah figure at the end.

Seven (1995) as another example is completely different from Pay It Forward. The title refers to the seven deadly sins, which a serial killer is using to brutally murder seven people in seven days. A fat man is punished for his gluttony, a lawyer for his greed, a model for her pride, and so on. The murders are apparently intended as a series of medieval sermons, a wake-up call to a civilization that doesn't know it's become utterly corrupt. The murderer finally receives his punishment. The Seven Deadly Sins never occur as a formal list in the Bible, but summarized from the Bible against the Seven Heavenly Virtues. The seven sins are pride, envy, anger, sloth, covetousness, gluttony and lust. Each of the Sins was associated with a

specific punishment in Hell: like pride, broken on the wheel; envy, put in freezing water; anger, dismembered alive, and so on. The film exposes the Seven Deadly Sins through the clue the detective follows to find the killer. And the Bible becomes the key to the answer: the evil will finally get punished.

There is also another group of films having relationship with the Bible. They borrow the stories from the Bible to construct their own. This kind of movie always offends the Christian community, like Bless the Child and Warlock. Most of these movies are concerned with Apocalypse which means revelation, unbiding. It reveals the true meaning of events or their outcome, or the heavenly reality behind or beyond earthly appearances. It opens the imagination to strange worlds and dreamlike visions. Now the LORD is about to lay waste the earth and make it desolate, and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants. The earth shall be utterly laid waste for the LORD has spoken his word. There are two areas of cosmic imagery in the visions of apocalypse in the Bible. One is cosmic catastrophes: the sun darkened and the moon turned to blood in Joel 2: 31; the sky rolled up and the stars fell in Isaiah 34; earthquakes and floods in Isaiah 24: 18, 19. There is also social disintegration and conflict: deception, betrayal, murder in Daniel 11: 32, 33 and 2 Peter 2, etc. The other is pictures of cosmic renewal: a new heaven and a new earth in Isaiah 65: 17 and 2 Peter 3: 13; the rapture when God's glory replaces the lights of Heaven in Isaiah 60: 19, etc.

In Bless the Child (2000), an unusual little girl is a symbol of returned Christ. And she has tremendous power to retrieve the dead to life. In order to take charge of the whole world before the coming millennium, a Satan captures

her and attempts to turn her away from her faith on right and wrong and thus away from her commitment to God and worship him instead of God. He takes her to the top of a skyscraper and asks her to throw herself down from there saying, Throw yourself down from here, for it is written, He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you. The girl replied exactly what Jesus answered to Satan, Do not put the Lord your God to the test. Later he tries to scare her by burning a poor homeless man in front of her. He fails and has to kill her. But the evil is not the rival of this little Messiah. She saves the world from being controlled by the evil. The screenwriter engrafts the story of Jesus on the little girl.

God and Satan warring against each other and Gods ultimate victory are also adapted and woven into Warlock: the Armageddon. Satans only son the Warlock is born through a woman without pregnancy. His mission is to free his father from the fiery chains that imprison him and unleash Satans wrath upon the world. The prophets of Christianity foresee the coming war and get ready to train two young warriors who are the only ones can prevent complete world destruction. They alone possess the supernatural powers to challenge the Warlock and stop the inevitable Armageddon. Finally they outsmart and defeat the Warlock before the prophesied eclipse, sending Satan and his son back to Hell.

These two mentioned above remain the frame of biblical revelation and are easily identified. Others like Star Wars series, The Matrix (1998), Twelve Monkeys (1995), Independent Day (1996), etc. throw away the meaning of the Revelation, but focus on the eschatological part of apocalyptic texts mingling with science fictions and not on the revelation of Gods sovereignty.

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In these films humans are able to change their future, and are not simply spectators to the divine unfolding.

Actually Biblical or Christian shadow is not only cast over these three aspects. Some titles of films are from the Bible; many of them contain Bible-related dialogues or direct quotations from the Scripture and biblical figures, images or actions. Here I will not discuss the others in detail.

The Bible is one of the two main sources of Western civilization; the other is the culture of Greece and Rome, or classical civilization. Of the two, the Bible is several centuries older. Its contents affected Western values and the way westerners act and think. As a production of industry and technology and combination of various kinds of Arts and an instant mirror of the society, films cannot escape the influence of the Bible and Christianity. Western societys symbols and values affected by the Bible shape the films, which on the contrary attest to the Bibles role in shaping the ways in which westerners tell their stories, mold their heroes, understand their experience, imagine their future, and explain themselves to themselves, no matter how the filmmakers do a film, to copy a biblical story or to borrow a biblical structure or embed Christian values into a film.

United States is the best stage to show this story. First, the Bible has exercised a profound influence on the history and values of the United States. The early history of America is a history of the Pilgrims and other early European settlers seeking their new Israel that Gods promised to his newly chosen people. And the values the Americans cherish mostly originate from the Bible, such as the idea of equality, freedom. Second, though two

French brothers first invented film, the blooming of this new form of arts and industry is achieved in America. It represents a new popular culture. And its an influential educational tool ever since it was born. In 1930s American society was experiencing the gloomy Depression. Not only economy but also moral standard decayed. The episode of Legion of Decency in American film industry is actually a self-defensive action of a biblical culture preoccupied society towards non-protestant values since they have noticed the power this popular cultural tool has to influence its audience. Through pulling film industry back to its right track, Christianity also consolidates its role in the American society. This is the point that we should pay attention to.

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