

Religious turmoil in mississippi burning



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A Response to "Mississippi Burning"

To say that religion has affected nearly every aspect of life in the South is to state the obvious. The history of racial strife is no exception. Historically, racists have used Biblical scriptures to buttress their ideas of white supremacy and racial separation. In "Mississippi Burning," Frances McDormand even quotes Genesis 9: 27, which basically states that the descendants of one of Noah's sons would always be the slaves of the descendants of another. This scripture and others admonishing slaves to love and obey their masters were often used to justify slavery and, later on, segregation of the races.

During the times of slavery, slaves were reminded of these scriptures. Religion was a means of both oppression and encouragement: on one hand, the white power structure used scripture to deny the slaves' humanity, but on the other, slaves and their eventual descendants could find solace and power in a community of African American believers. Church and religion had been used for centuries to prove that people of color were ordained by God to be slaves and outcasts. These institutions also offered the hope of a kingdom to come, if the down-trodden could just keep working at their rightful social rank until the kingdom came. The churches became the center of black society, and the white power structure of the time began to see the threat these churches presented. Thus, as the movie shows repeatedly, the churches became public enemy number one. As these attacks grew more and more prevalent and vicious, the nation's watching of the events in the South became more and more intense. Mississippi Burning takes this one step further by showing the viewers that God himself is watching.

The movie does a great job of showing the religious turmoil of the time, and it incorporates a few obviously religious motifs. For example, after the barn burning and attempted hanging at the farm, viewers are forced to focus on the charred remains of several livestock. These livestock are reminiscent of the Biblical animal sacrifices familiar to all who grew up in the Bible Belt. The animals are shown crudely, with their mouths open and their tongues hanging out. These sacrifices have apparently not been accepted by the Most High, thus showing Divine disapproval of the goings-on. Also, the very title *Mississippi Burning* alludes to the Christian idea that the world will one day be consumed by fire, as read in the book of Revelation. The present-tense of the word *Burning* shows that Mississippi is already in the midst of that Divine destruction, while the rest of the country looks on with God.

This idea of observation and judgment is expressed in one of the final scenes when Gene Hackman says, "Anyone is guilty who watches this happen and does nothing." This coupled nicely with the final image of the film: a gravestone with a floral circular design which brings to mind images of the all-seeing eye of God. This leaves the viewer with the feeling held by both the slaves and the victims of segregated nation: the feeling that justice will eventually be served, either in this world or in the world to come.

Henry Bourgeois, in his article "Hollywood and the Civil Rights Movement: The Case of *Mississippi Burning*," expresses his opinion that the movie erroneously bereft of any black voices and that white people had to be the saviors of the black community. His argument is justified, but the film's creators did not make those choices consciously or in a racially-charged way. The truth of the time was that any non-white person had no voice; thus,

viewers do not hear their voices either. Furthermore, many might find it hard to name a well-known southern person of color from that time period who stood up and let his or her voice be heard, other than Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King, Jr. The film does show one young man who is more vocal than the rest, but he is one voice among many, just as Dr. King and Medgar Evers were. The black community in the film is in the grip of a terrorist regime, and, as Gene Hackman's character states at one point in the film, it is only when two white men go missing that the rest of the nation really gets involved. Is this a racist notion? Of course. But it is the truth of the time. The black community was not allowed to speak, and it took the death of the two young white men to draw federal attention. This fact degrades neither the struggles nor the strength of the black community, though. If anything, it further reveals the insurmountable odds that they faced and eventually overcame. Bourgeois's issues with the film are ill-founded. There could be no strong black lead in a movie depicting a period wherein a strong black person would be a prime target for the all-powerful Ku Klux Klan.