

IMPRIMIS

Because Ideas Have Consequences

HILLSDALE
COLLEGE



Hillsdale College, Hillsdale, Michigan 49242

December 1989 Volume 18, No. 12

‘Hollywood vs. Religion’

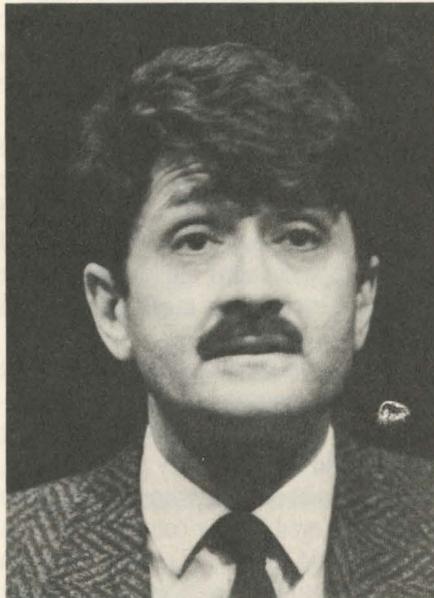
Michael Medved, co-host, Sneak Previews

Editor's Preview: In this edited transcript of his remarks at Hillsdale's Center for Constructive Alternatives' March 1989 program, "Popular Entertainment and Its Impact on Society," film critic Michael Medved discusses how and why Hollywood is overtly hostile to religion.

My job involves watching as many as six movies every week. This may strike strangers as an all but ideal occupation, but that is only because they forget that I have little choice as to which films I am required to review. As a critic, I'm compelled to sample almost every new product which Hollywood offers up to the waiting world. At times, I feel that I deserve hazardous duty pay.

Just recently, I had to endure an extraordinarily offensive film called *Parents*. It's been promoted as a light-hearted comedy about a typical middle class family in the 1950's, but it is actually a graphic, horrifyingly detailed, and very stylish film about suburban cannibalism. Mary Beth Hurt and Randy Quaid play a friendly neighborhood couple who steal bodies from a local morgue, grind them into meat loaf, and then force-feed this hamburger surprise to their terrified little boy. The meat grinder sequences alone would be enough to give nightmares to any sane viewer.

I have also recently suffered through Blake Edwards' latest offering, *Skin Deep*. This has become a controversial picture even before its release, and the producers have actually encouraged that controversy by promising potential moviegoers "The Most Outrageous Scene of the Decade." Now, just what is this scene? It's a ten minute sequence about two men fighting in a hotel room while wearing colorful,



phosphorescent, glow-in-the-dark condoms. I'm not kidding—this was the artistic highlight of a multi-million dollar major studio project. It's no wonder that my job sometimes gives rise to the feeling that I'm actually working as a glorified sewer inspector.

There are rare occasions, however, when a new movie comes along and, against all odds, offers a chance to address some serious issues. Like all other critics, I'm eternally grateful for these fleeting moments—even if the film that inspires them happens to be a pretentious and sadly muddled mess.

The Last Temptation of the Critics

This was the case with Martin Scorsese's overwrought epic, *The Last Temptation of Christ*—an

unbearably boring two-hour-and-forty-minute extravaganza that proved considerably less interesting than the controversy surrounding it.

From Hollywood, most of the noise in that debate involved smug and solemn pronouncements in defense of Mr. Scorsese's First Amendment rights—inconsistently coupled with condemnation of those who chose to exercise *their* First Amendment rights by protesting the film. For several weeks, on the airwaves and in private conversations, you couldn't escape the defenses and denunciations of this particular picture—provided, in most cases, by people who had never seen the movie.

Unfortunately, I *did* see the movie—in its nearly insufferable entirety—at an early, pre-release screening, and I can assure you that the experience is about as satisfying and uplifting as two hours and forty minutes in the dentist's chair. The prevailing tedium is relieved only by great bouts of gore that seem to splatter the screen at irregular intervals. The film opens with a sequence that shows Jesus himself engaged in crucifying someone else. As the victim's feet are nailed to the cross, blood spurts out and covers Jesus' face.

The members of what you would have to call "the supporting cast" fare no better. In this picture, Mary Magdalene was covered from head to toe with tattoos—resembling no one so much as that character Groucho Marx used to sing about, Lydia the Tattooed Lady. And she wasn't the only one—you'd think that director Scorsese had discovered in his research about ancient Judea that there were tattoo parlors on every corner catering exclusively to females. In reality, however, it was

against Jewish and Biblical law to decorate yourself with even a single, small tattoo. Meanwhile, the actor who played Judas Iscariot, Harvey Keitel, provided us with what must rank as one of the most outrageously miscalculated performances of recent years—delivering all his lines with his Bronx accent firmly intact, and wearing an orange fright wig which made him look like a Biblical Bozo.

The Last Temptation of Christ was, by any honest and objective standards, an artistic disaster—a bitter embarrassment for a genuinely gifted director.

Yet many of my colleagues in what passes for “the critical community” hailed it as a masterpiece. One of America’s best known movie reviewers even anointed it “The Greatest Film of 1988.” The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences went so far as to nominate Mr. Scorsese for an Academy Award as best director of the year. To me, nothing so forcefully reveals the clouded lens through which Hollywood views the world as the utterly undeserved praise which this film received.

I would argue that the response to *The Last Temptation* represents the film industry’s “Circle the Wagons” mentality at its most hysterical and paranoid. Since religious figures across the country were attacking the picture, the members of the Hollywood community felt called upon to

About the Author

Michael Medved is well known to millions of Americans as the co-host of the weekly PBS television program, *Sneak Previews*. After graduating from Yale University in 1969, he worked for several years as a speechwriter and political consultant. In 1976 he co-authored *What Really Happened to the Class of '65?* which became a bestseller and the basis for a weekly series on NBC. His other works include *The Shadow Presidents* (New York Times Books, 1979), *Hospital: The Hidden Lives of a Medical Center Staff* (Simon & Schuster, 1983), and, with his brother Harry Medved, four volumes on the film industry, most notably *The Golden Turkey Awards* (G.P. Putnam, 1980) and *The Hollywood Hall of Shame* (Perigee Books, 1983). Mr. Medved has also been a frequent guest on *The Tonight Show*, *Oprah Winfrey*, *David Letterman*, *ABC Nightline*, *The Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, and many others. He lives in California, with his wife and daughters where he is an active volunteer for a wide variety of Jewish causes. He is president and co-founder of Pacific Jewish Center in Venice, which has won national attention for its successful efforts at attracting unaffiliated young Jews to a traditional Jewish lifestyle.

defend it. I remember a conversation with one of my colleagues who had prepared what I considered an unaccountably generous review. He explained himself with surprising candor. “If I was too rough on the film,” he said, “then people would associate me with Jerry Falwell”—and that was an association he could not accept.

The Gospel According to Hollywood

The movie industry’s resounding endorsement of *The Last Temptation of Christ* is only the latest and perhaps the most grotesque illustration of the overt and pervasive hostility to religion and religious values that has taken root in Hollywood.

To maintain a sense of perspective, it is important to remember that this is a relatively recent development in movie history. In the past, the major studios churned out biblical blockbusters like *The Ten Commandments*, *Samson and Delilah*, *The Robe* and *Ben Hur*, specifically designed to appeal to religious sensibilities. These sandstorm-and-sandals epics may not stand today as examples of deathless works of art, but they did earn millions at the box office and even won a measure of critical acclaim.

In years past, Hollywood also turned out popular and sympathetic portrayals of contemporary clergymen. Bing Crosby, Pat O’Brien and Spencer Tracy played earthy, compassionate priests who gave hope to underprivileged kids or comforted GI’s on the battlefield. Nearly all men of the cloth who appeared on screen would be kindly and concerned, if not downright heroic.

In the last ten to fifteen years mainstream moviemakers have swung to the other extreme. If someone turns up in a film today wearing a Roman collar or bearing the title “Reverend,” you can be fairly sure that he will be either crazy or corrupt—or probably both.

The 1982 film *Monsignor* offers an especially obnoxious case in point. That distinguished thespian Christopher Reeve plays a cardinal—after his success with *Superman* he apparently craved another role where he could wear a cape. This particular prince of the Church not only seduces an idealistic nun, but also invests Vatican money in a series of hideously corrupt business deals involving the mafia and the CIA.

As the world’s most visible religious institution, the Roman Catholic Church has become a particularly popular target for

contemporary filmmakers. *Agnes of God* offers us the elevating image of young nun Meg Tilly murdering her own baby and attempting to flush the tiny body down the toilet of her convent room. *The Runner Stumbles* presents Dick Van Dyke as yet another priest involved in an affair with a nun, while many more films, including *True Confessions*, *Mass Appeal* and *The Mission*, use some of the best actors in the business to play well-intentioned idealists who are overwhelmed by the pervasive cynicism and hypocrisy of the church hierarchy.

Protestant pastors suffer the same rough treatment at the hands of Hollywood as their Catholic brothers and sisters. In the last two years alone, independent feature films like *Pass the Ammo*, *Salvation* and *Riders of the Storm* have savagely satirized greedy and greasy evangelists lusting after sex and money.

Even when religion isn’t the primary focus of a film, religious figures frequently turn up as convenient heavies. In *Light of Day*, a 1987 stinker written and directed by *Last Temptation* screenwriter Paul Schrader, the family minister is a pious, pompous fraud who impregnates the hero’s teenaged sister and then takes no responsibility for the child. *Malone* gives us a chance to watch Burt Reynolds battling a Christian para-military cult in the Pacific Northwest. In *Crimes of Passion*, Tony Perkins is a crazed, sweating skid row preacher attempting to murder prostitute Kathleen Turner in the most sickening and sadistic manner imaginable. Even last summer’s horror remake *The Blob* offers some oblique commentary on organized religion, when the bespectacled small-town pastor (Del Close) turns out to be a secret drunk. The last scene in the movie shows his crazed sermon threatening the end of the world as he fiendishly contrives to bring the title monster back to earth.

Poltergeist II is an extreme example of the way that mainstream moviemakers have turned traditional thinking on its head. The villain of the piece is a hymn-singing preacher from beyond the grave who leads a band of demonic Bible-belters in attempting to drag a hip suburban family down to hell. The only force that can stop these crazed Christians is an heroic American Indian medicine man—who mobilizes the positive power of an ancient pagan religion.

In explaining the hostility to our Judeo-Christian heritage that characterizes so many of these films, industry insiders firmly deny any deep-seated anti-religious

bias. They insist that moviemakers are merely responding to the beliefs and prejudices of the film-going public. According to this argument, they are merely following the honorable capitalist practice of giving the customers what they want.

There is, however, one gigantic flaw in that line of reasoning: all of the movies I've mentioned above—*every single one of them*—flopped resoundingly at the box office. Taken together, these pictures lost hundreds of millions for the people who made them. Hunger for money can explain almost everything in Hollywood, but it can't explain why ambitious producers keep launching expensive projects that slam religion.

Their mysterious behavior becomes even more difficult to understand when one takes a brief look at the public reception for those exceedingly rare films of recent years that have taken a more sympathetic view of organized faith.

Consider, for example, *Chariots of Fire*, the 1981 Academy Award winner and worldwide box office smash. Its title is taken from a line in the beloved hymn "Jerusalem," and one of the film's two heroes is a Scottish missionary so devout that he refuses to run in the Olympics if it would force him to violate the sabbath.

Like *Chariots of Fire*, *Tender Mercies* confounded the experts with its strong audience appeal. Robert Duvall won an Oscar as a washed-up, alcoholic country-and-western singer whose life is transformed by religious faith. In one of the most artfully underplayed scenes in recent films, he is baptized on screen and most convincingly born again.

Horton Foote, the same great screenwriter who created *Tender Mercies*, also wrote *The Trip to Bountiful*, about a sweet and profoundly religious elderly lady who wants to revisit her tiny home town in Texas once more before she dies. *Places in the Heart* is also set in Texas—with an astonishing concluding scene that shows all the characters in the film, including several who died earlier in the story, taking communion together in a dusty country church.

Witness became one of the top grossing movies of 1985, with Harrison Ford as a fugitive Philadelphia cop who is sheltered in a secluded Amish community in rural Pennsylvania. The portrayal of the Amish and their stubbornly traditional faith is not merely sympathetic—it is idealized.

Most recently, *A Cry in the Dark* won yet another Oscar nomination for Meryl Streep with its dramatization of a famous

murder case in Australia. Streep plays the wife of a Seventh Day Adventist minister who is falsely accused of murdering her own baby. The unshakable faith of husband and wife, and warm support from their close-knit church community, enables them to survive this nightmare ordeal, which, the film makes clear, was caused at least in part by the anti-religious bigotry of many of their accusers.

These six distinguished films stand apart as proud exceptions to the movie industry's pervasive hostility to religious values and practices. Yet even these sympathetic portrayals fail to show organized faith as relevant in any way to the lives of ordinary urban Americans. Each of the films places religion in an exotic context far removed from the daily lives of most moviegoers. *Chariots of Fire* presents England of the 1920s. *Tender Mercies*, *The Trip to Bountiful* and *Places in the Heart* all focus on tiny, old-fashioned Texas towns. *Witness* portrays a quaint sect in a pastoral and isolated enclave, while *A Cry in the Dark* concerns itself with another small, misunderstood sect in a lonely corner of Australia.

In addition to their remote settings, these films share another important point in common: they all won surprisingly large audiences, especially when compared with the disastrous commercial performance of so many of the most tendentious anti-religious films.

Hollywood's Motives

Why hasn't Hollywood gotten the message? The one thing this industry is supposed to be able to do is to read the bottom line. Why, then, do savvy producers continue to authorize scores of projects that portray religious leaders as crazed, conspiratorial charlatans, when similar films have failed so conspicuously and consistently in the past?

It is hard to escape the conclusion that there is a perverse sort of idealism at work here. For many of the most powerful people in the entertainment business, hostility to traditional religion goes so deep and burns so intensely that they insist on expressing that hostility, even at the risk of commercial disaster.

Despite an unprecedented firestorm of free publicity, *The Last Temptation of Christ* performed dismally at the box office. Nevertheless, one of the most prestigious production companies in Hollywood has already announced plans for a new project entitled *Christ The Man*—to be directed by

Paul Verhoeven of *Robocop* fame—that is rumored to be even more offensive to traditional believers.

Moviemakers can't stay away from religious themes because of their deep-seated desire to be taken seriously; religion offers one subject which everyone acknowledges as fundamentally serious. If writers and directors take a swipe at religion in one of their films, no matter how clumsy or contrived that attack may be, they can feel as if they've made some sort of important and courageous statement. Hence the makers of *The Blob* can insist that they've created something more than a slick monster movie about a huge strawberry jello that devours a town. By portraying a demented and hypocritical minister as a key character in that town, they've also delivered a "significant" message against religious fanaticism.

Such messages win applause in Hollywood, even when they're hopelessly simplistic and one-sided. By sneering at zealots and deriding conventional religious beliefs, a filmmaker can win the respect of his peers, even if his work is rejected by the larger public.

In this context, I will never forget an astonishing private conversation concerning the motivations behind the notorious 1985 fiasco, *King David*. This Godzilla-sized turkey cost \$28,000,000 and attracted less than \$3,000,000 in ticket sales. It featured Richard Gere in the title role—a bizarre casting choice that led industry wags to refer to it as *An Israelite and A Gentleman*. Most peculiar of all, the film advanced the radical—and totally unsupported—notion that the biblical king freed himself from his religious "delusions" at the end of his life. The concluding sequence shows a suddenly enlightened David violently rejecting God as he smashes the scale model of the temple he had previously intended to build.

A few weeks before the film's release,

Audio & Video Tapes of this presentation are available

Audio: \$5.00 Video: \$25.00
(Shipping Included)

Call 517-439-1524, ext. 318
or write:

CCA Shavano Office
Hillsdale College
Hillsdale, Michigan 49242

one of the people who created it spoke to me proudly of its fearless integrity. "We could have gone the easy way and played to the Bible belt," he said, "but we wanted to make a tough, honest film. We don't see David as a gung-ho, Praise-the-Lord kind of guy. We wanted to make him a richer, deeper character."

In his mind, in other words, secure religious faith is incompatible with depth of character.

An Industry Out of Touch With America

It's easy for most moviemakers to assume a patronizing attitude toward religiously committed people because they know so few of them personally. If most big screen images of religious leaders tend to resemble Swaggart or Bakker it's because evangelists on television are the only believers who are readily visible to the members of the film colony.

In 1982, a fascinating survey by researchers from the University of Maryland analyzed the attitudes and practices of key decision makers and creative personnel in the movie business. Only three percent responded that they regularly attended church or synagogue. In the country at large, by contrast, the same study indicated that just under fifty percent flock to services on a regular basis.

America is, by every measure, the most openly and actively religious society in the

West. But those who function within the smug, self-enclosed hothouse atmosphere of Hollywood seem genuinely unaware of that fact. To them, the national religious revival observed by so many social commentators is a distant phenomenon—a malign and threatening form of mass delusion. Our mighty engines of popular culture are hopelessly out of touch with America.

This means, of course, that the movie business is also out of touch with a huge portion of its potential audience. Statistics prove the point. In the 1940s, over 90 million Americans—close to two-thirds of the country—went to the movies every week. Today, the number of filmgoers is less than 20 million per week and, more importantly, surveys show that close to 40 percent of the American people don't even go out to a single movie in the course of a year. There is surely a significant overlap between that half of our population that attends church or synagogue every weekend, and that substantial portion of potential filmgoers who avoid all current films.

Make no mistake: it is not just the high ticket prices or the gum on the seats or the easy availability of television that keeps patrons away from the theatres. Tens of millions of Americans have given up on contemporary movies because they see their own deepest values so rarely reflected—or even respected—on screen.

Attempts are now in the works to change all that, though the initiative, not

surprisingly, is coming from outside the Hollywood community. A number of Christian organizations across the country are preparing to enter the business of feature film production. They have raised millions of dollars and secured the services of experienced filmmakers in order to create an alternative source of movie entertainment—providing motion pictures that reenforce family and spiritual values.

I am not personally connected with any of these efforts, but I am greatly encouraged by them. It surely is a welcome development that instead of merely condemning the level of Hollywood's current offerings, some religious leaders are now determined to create better movies of their own. In the process, they may win back part of the mass audience for films that the movie industry has recently lost. If they do, and their projects succeed at the box office, then they have a chance of shaking up the entire movie business and undermining its most cynical assumptions.

I wish these people well, and hope that others—both inside and outside the current Hollywood establishment—will come forward to offer new directions in feature films, particularly in the way that today's movies present religious and spiritual issues. My interest in this struggle is, I will confess, at least partially selfish. If current efforts succeed, then in years to come I may be spared the experience of more feature films about suburban cannibalism and condoms that glow in the dark.

IMPRIMIS (im-'pri-mes), taking its name from the Latin term for "in the first place," is the publication of Hillsdale College. Editor, Joseph S. McNamara, Managing Editor, Lissa Roche, Assistant, Patricia A. DuBois. The opinions expressed in IMPRIMIS may be, but are not necessarily, the views of Hillsdale College and its External Affairs division. Copyright © 1989. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided a version of the following credit line is used: "Reprinted by permission from IMPRIMIS, the monthly journal of Hillsdale College, featuring presentations at Hillsdale's Center for Constructive Alternatives and at its Shavano Institute for National Leadership." ISSN 0277-8432. Circulation 300,000 worldwide, established 1972. Complimentary subscriptions available.

IMPRIMIS

VOLUME 18 • NUMBER 12

FORWARDING AND RETURN POSTAGE GUARANTEED

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to IMPRIMIS,
Hillsdale College
Hillsdale, Michigan 49242

BULK RATE
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT NO. 159
Lancaster, OH 43130