

Secularism in U.S. Media: Hollywood, Beowulf & Middle America

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Introduction

Film Studies lecturer Catherine O'Brien remarks that "Film can function as a myth, which explains the status quo, or as an allegory that subverts it and attempts to rethink the religious tradition."¹ Most media commentators today would tend to suggest that Hollywood plays the latter function.² But, as American historian Henry Steel Commager once noted "change does not necessarily assure progress." In today's Information Age, American media spectacles "demonstrate who has power and who is powerless, who is allowed to exercise force and violence, and who is not."³ The mass media in the United States tends to dramatize and legitimize the power of secularizing and liberalizing forces in Hollywood while relegating to the spectator stands the political right and the grand majority of conservative and religious "Middle America." This essay will demonstrate that in the current U.S. cultural milieu, it is the secular and liberal trend in Hollywood that is not reflective of a largely traditional and devout America –a particularly social, cultural and religious phenomenon that is unique to the United States among the highly industrialized and modern nations of the world.

Is America More or Less Secular Today?

While other industrialized nations of the world are becoming increasingly secular, the United States remains highly religious. This fact was recently underscored by the findings of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life's *2007 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*.⁴

According to the survey, 71% of Americans are absolutely certain that there is a God; 56% stated that religion is very important in their lives; and, although only 24% of Americans attend religious services weekly, 58% prayed daily.⁵ Pew Forum Director Luis Lugo and Senior Fellow John Green pointed out in a recent interview that secularization is one Global North trend the U.S. is not following. They term it "American Exceptionalism" –"The fact that the United States is a very modern industrial country that is also highly religious, is just one of the features that makes the United States different."⁶ Green and Lugo propose three theories as to why Americans are still religious today: history, separation of church and state, and a "free market" in religion. They would also add the uniquely American sociological phenomenon of evangelicalism.

History shows that the United States was founded as a country –at least from the point of view of European immigrants– of people who cared very much about religion. Even today, according to Green, "many people still come to the United States because it is a place where religion is respected, where people have the freedom to pursue their particular faith."⁷ Ironically, the formal separation of church and state in the United States has actually bolstered American religion, as said by Green and Lugo, since the separation is limited only to the relationship between religious and state organizations;⁸ although this interpretation of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution has been hotly debated for most of its history.⁹

The Founding Fathers' model of separation of church and state has created a "free market" in religion –the third theory proposed by Green and Lugo: "[Since] there was no state monopoly on religion... we have strong incentives for entrepreneurial religious activity that produces this very strong, vibrant set of private religious institutions... the only way that religious services and institutions can be provided, with just a few modest exceptions, is by private action, voluntary action."¹⁰ And thus, Green and Lugo conclude, the U.S. has not only a marketplace set up by law, a free market, but it also has many producers and consumers within the market. It may very well be that this diversity itself has generated more diversity throughout the history of the United States: "So having lots of faiths may not produce a secular society, it may in fact produce a pluralistic society, and there's a huge difference between pluralism and secularism."¹¹ Interestingly, this is a point that some scholars are beginning to apply back to Europe.¹² Some scholars theorize that "with the diversification of some European societies, particularly the immigration of Muslims, European societies are beginning to rediscover their Christian roots."¹³ In fact, Green and Lugo call attention to, that much of the secularization that occurred in Europe took place in countries that were fairly homogeneous in religious terms.¹⁴

Green and Lugo would also add a sociological phenomenon that is truly unique to the United States –evangelicalism: "It's hard to overestimate the degree to which the revivalist tradition in evangelicalism," states Green, "in the context of a free market in religion, has basically challenged everybody else really to step up their game."¹⁵ If there has been a market leader in religion in the U.S. in terms of being very aggressive and recruiting new members and meeting the needs of the faithful, it has been evangelicalism. 26.3% of U.S. adults belong to one of the Evangelical Protestant Churches.¹⁶ These churches grew from 5 percent of the population in 1990 to 8.5 percent

in 2001 to 11.8 percent in 2008.¹⁷ "They often stick out as being particularly devout," Green noted, "and they do connect faith to politics."¹⁸

To sum up, Tom McFeely reported on the National Catholic Register's website, NCRegister.com, that: "A new survey of religion in America has found the nation's Christian faith to be quite resilient in the face of contemporary secularizing trends."¹⁹ In fact, the report found only a minute decline in the percentage of Christians in 2008 compared to the last *ARIS* survey in 2001.²⁰ "The percentage of Christians in America, which declined in the 1990s from 86.2% to 76.7%, has now edged down to 76%."²¹ In other words, after a sharp decline in the 1990s, the percentage of Christian Americans has remained virtually stable this decade.

Secular Liberal Hollywood

American conservative political commentator, radio talk show host, attorney, and media consultant Benjamin Shapiro in his newest book *Primetime Propaganda: The Hollywood Story of How the Left Took Over Your TV* (Northampton, Mass.: Broadside Books, 2011) proposes that most Hollywood executives are "politically liberal."²² The author bases his thesis on, among other things, 39 taped interviews of American TV industry executives, writers and producers of the past four decades who, according to recorded testimony, use their clout to advance a liberal political agenda. In one interview, *Friends* co-creator Marta Kauffman states that when she cast Candace Gingrich-Jones, half-sister of Republican 2012 presidential contender Newt Gingrich, as the minister of a lesbian wedding, "There was a bit of [a middle finger] in it to the right wing."²³ She also acknowledges in the interview that she "put together a staff of mostly liberal people,"²⁴ which is another major point of Shapiro's book –conservatives are not welcomed in Hollywood.²⁵ This reality was collaborated by Susan Harris creator of the

popular U.S. TV program *Soap* and *Golden Girls*.²⁶ When Shapiro asks Vin Di Bona, producer of *MacGyver* and creator of *America's Funniest Home Videos*, what he thinks of conservative critics who say everyone in Hollywood is liberal, Di Bona responds: "I think it's probably accurate, and I'm happy about it."²⁷ Leonard Goldberg –who executive produces *Blue Bloods* for CBS and a few decades ago executive produced such hits as *Fantasy Island*, *Charlie's Angels* and *Starsky and Hutch*– was recorded as saying that liberalism in the U.S. mass media is "100 percent dominant, and anyone who denies it is kidding or not telling the truth."²⁸ Fred Pierce, the president of ABC in the 1980s states that "It's very difficult for people who are politically conservative to break into television."²⁹ Those who don't lean left, he says, "don't promote it. It stays underground."³⁰ Producer-director Nicholas Meyer, director of the made-for-TV-movie *The Day After*, when asked point-blank whether conservatives are discriminated against in Hollywood he answered: "Well, I hope so."³¹

Shapiro goes on to explain that "most nepotism in Hollywood isn't familial, its ideological... friends hire friends. And those friends just happen to share their politics."³² Shapiro argues that "Television has been perhaps the most impressive weapon in the left's political arsenal."³³ Fred Silverman, the former head of ABC and later NBC concludes, "There is only one perspective, and it's a very progressive perspective."³⁴ In a personal interview Shapiro explains the reason for his book: "They [Hollywood & the audience at large] should be shocked that opinion is so one-sided in Hollywood; that it's OK to say, 'I'm fine with discrimination'... My whole book is a plea for openness in the industry."³⁵ He concludes by demanding, "Hire people from the other side of the aisle once in a while, or at least stop mocking them."³⁶ And what is true of U.S. television networks is also true for most of Hollywood and the entertainment industry.³⁷

Case Study: Beowulf

The 2007 Robert Zemeckis' *Beowulf* film (written by Neil Gaiman and Roger Avary), is a computer-generated-images (CGI) re-telling of the famous anonymous VIII-XI century Anglo-Saxon story of Beowulf –the heroic Swedish slayer of monsters. "The movie's dark, postmodern re-interpretation of the heroic mythical tale gets in the way of its wonderful, but often gritty, use of motion-capture animation."³⁸ Some Anglo-Saxon scholars, especially from the J.R.R. Tolkien school of thought who re-discovered the story's greatness in the 20th century, may not be happy with Zemeckis' interpretation which almost destroys the original's story heroic tone: "Far too often the plot deviates from the storyline that made the Beowulf epic a classic for the last millennium."³⁹

The original Anglo-Saxon poem was first composed in the High Middle-Ages, it was set in the late V century, in a pagan culture prior to the Christianization of Scandinavia.⁴⁰ In academic circles there is a long debate whether the tale is solely about pagan virtues or whether Beowulf is a "Christian Ur-hero, symbolically refulgent with Christian virtues."⁴¹ Yet many specific Judeo-Christian references do occur, especially to the Old Testament.⁴² God is said to be the Creator of all things (90-98).⁴³ Grendel is described as a descendant of Cain and an enemy of God and man (104-14). The biblical flood is probably referred to in the story about the sword that Beowulf finds in Grendel's mother's lair, which has engraved on it the story of the race of giants and their destruction by a flood (1687-93). In the poem, the dead await God's judgment: Devils are ready to receive the souls of Grendel and his mother, while believers will be embraced by God (183-88). However, there are no specific references to the New Testament or to Christ, angels, saints, or the cross, although the Christian virtues of moderation, unselfishness, and service to others are highly praised. For example, in the last lines, Beowulf is not

exalted as a fierce warrior, but as "the man most gracious and fair-minded, to his people" (3181-82). Some critics have found analogies between Beowulf and Christ, especially in the story of the dragon, as William L. Tarvin, professor of American and British Literature, proposes: "Like Christ, Beowulf died for the salvation of his people, in fact, by killing a dragon (which in early Christianity was often identified with Satan)." ⁴⁴ Beowulf fights the dragon accompanied by a crew of twelve Wiglaf, one of whom is a criminal; during the fight the twelve take flight, but one Wiglaf returns. These may imply Christ and his Twelve Apostles; the traitor Judas; the flight of the eleven remaining Apostles, and the return of John at the crucifixion. Tarvin suggests, "such an analogy between Beowulf and Christ might explain why there are no overt references to Christ in the original poem, since the listeners would understand the underground allegory."⁴⁵

The 2007 film deletes all references to the Judeo-Christian God found in the original poem and replaces them with references to Norse pagan mythology. Christianity "plays an explicit and confused role in the film, seemingly brought in to act as a counter-point to Beowulf's embodiment of the pagan heroic virtues."⁴⁶ In the 2007 *Beowulf*, the hero is "neither simply a pre-Christian pagan nor a proto-Christian eminent pagan."⁴⁷ The film seems to include only three direct references to Christianity, including two specific references and one general reference to the Judeo-Christian tradition. All but one reference are spoken by Unferth, the King's adviser, who is portrayed as a cowardly and conniving character throughout the film. The first direct reference comes in the first act, after Grendel has attacked, when Unferth asks King Hrothgar whether perhaps he and the people should consider making sacrifices not only to the Norse gods but also to the "new Roman god Christ Jesus" in the hope that He may protect them from the monster. "This is one of the script's few clever moments, hinting that Unferth sees Jesus as just another of

the Roman pantheon, whose favor can be gained not through righteous behavior but through performing the proper rites."⁴⁸ A sobered up Hrothgar rejects the suggestion with disdain. The second reference comes in the third act of the film where Unferth has converted to Christianity, at least in appearance (there is little evidence that he espouses any of its core beliefs). Meanwhile, the great hero Beowulf remains a non-believer and laments the loss of the time of heroes, battles, and monsters. In Beowulf's view the "Christ god has killed it leaving humankind with nothing but weeping martyrs..." It seems Beowulf would agree with Nietzsche's *The Anti-Christ*: "Under Christianity the instincts of the subjugated and the oppressed come to the fore: it is only those who are at the bottom who seek their salvation in it."⁴⁹ The general reference to the Judeo-Christian tradition comes towards the end of the film when Unferth is carried on a cross from his dragon-leveled church hissing about the "sins of the fathers" –an allusion to an Old Testament passage which refers to the sins committed by the fathers visiting their children if they are not addressed properly by the fathers themselves. Lines like this come out of nowhere throughout the film and "play out as unfounded jabs [at religion] rather than the development of a thematic argument."⁵⁰ Another jab comes when Unferth explains the "new" concept of the resurrection and perfunctorily explains to a bystander the advisability of embracing Christianity –while urinating. And this same Unferth seems to be the only one in the movie who not only keeps, but constantly beats, a slave.

In the DVD release of the movie, in the extra-material, especially a segment called "The Origins of Beowulf", writers Neil Gaiman and Roger Avary explain that they worked on the assumption that Christian monks who first transcribed the story edited out certain elements, so they put back in what they imagined had been removed and removed what they imagined the Christian monks had added.

They wanted to explore Beowulf as a man, not the infallible hero of the epic poem. Their story's focus indeed is on the struggles that King Hrothgar and Beowulf have with Grendel's mother and with their own inner demons, taking away from the godly heroics of the original poem. Their re-telling "is conflated with a dynamic from another great hero saga, that of King Arthur and his demise at the hands of his bastard son Mordred."⁵¹ Zemeckis also provides his take on the story when he states: "This has nothing to do with the Beowulf you were forced to read in junior high school. ... It's all about eating, drinking, killing, fornicating!"

Journalist Raymond Ibrahim bemoans: "The same subtle depictions and motifs present in movies from decades past were once again present, a favorite being the attempt to try to depict pagans as 'open-minded' and 'free-spirited' peoples, or, quite anachronistically, as medieval counterparts to the modern, secular, liberal. The idea being that pagan peoples – unencumbered by the suffocating forces of Christianity – were/are happy, passionate folk, able to live life to the fullest."⁵² As always it is better to read the original epic to experience its original worldview: "Blessed God out of his mercy this man hath sent to Danes of the West, as I ween indeed against horror of Grendel. And to know that: God is able this deadly foe from his deeds to turn!" (381-384).

Conclusion

The perceived conflict between religion and secularism is clearly evident in the United States context when it comes to views about Hollywood and the entertainment industry and the general U.S. population. Hollywood and the entertainment industry, as particularly pointed out by Shapiro and the re-imagining of the Beowulf saga, are often seen as in conflict with the values of certain religious groups, and a significant number of the general population (42%), including a majority of some religious groups who specifically expressed this view. American mass media tends to dramatize

and legitimates the power of small secularizing and liberalizing forces in contrast to the grand majority of conservative and religious "Middle America." Unfortunately, most Americans (56%) disagree with the idea that their values are threatened by Hollywood, especially among teenagers (67%) of the Y Generation (born 1979-90) –the future of America!⁵³

However, one trend that contradicts all the trends of the past, according to youth experts, is that this Y or Millennial generation has a deep desire to believe and hope and trust: "In the midst of a spiritual vacuum that has been left by the selfishness and materialism of contemporary American society, young people have been asking questions in a search for meaning, love and purpose."⁵⁴ Historian Vincent Harding comments, "Parents are bankrupt spiritually. We have more technological advancement, more creature comforts, more opportunities than ever before, but no hope."⁵⁵ Consequently, more American young people than ever are turning to God in hope of making some sense out of a confusing and often threatening world.⁵⁶ Dr. Frederick Price, a Los Angeles area pastor, estimates that 70% of his Crenshaw Christian Center congregation are young people: "I've seen this upsurge for several years," claims Price. "As I travel around the country, I see young people coming forward, hungry to know about the things of God. They're coming by the truck loads!"⁵⁷

American young adults today, although they are less church-connected than prior generations were when they were in their 20s; they're just about as spiritual as their parents and grandparents were at those ages.⁵⁸ Members of today's Millennial generation are as likely to pray and believe in God as their elders were when they were young. "They may be less religious, but they're not necessarily more secular" than the Generation X (born 1960-1978) or Baby Boomers (born 1940-1959) who preceded them, says Alan Cooperman, associate director of research at the Pew Trusts.⁵⁹

To quote O'Brien again "Film can function as a myth, which explains the status quo, or as an allegory that subverts it and attempts to rethink the religious tradition."⁶⁰ In the case of the U.S., Hollywood does not seem to reflect the majority of contemporary American views but that of a strong and upcoming minority that wishes to subvert it. Moreover, as Douglas Kellner argues, today, radio, television, film, and other means of mass communication transmit and provide the stories and materials out of which "we forge our very identities; our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female; our sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of

sexuality; and of 'us' and 'them.'"⁶¹ Media images help shape our worldview and our deepest values. Media stories can "provide the symbols, myths, and resources through which we constitute a common culture and through the appropriation of which we insert ourselves into this culture."⁶² Will the America of the future become more secularize due to the influence of Hollywood? Nothing has more power over the imagination than Hollywood.⁶³ However, America still posses a strong spiritual –if a declining religious– character as statistics show, especially among its young. The future can still be bright.

NOTE:

¹ Catherine O'Brien, *The Celluloid Madonna: From Scripture to Film* (London & New York: Wallflower, 2011), p. 3.

² Razib Khan, "The Secularizing & de-Catholicizing 1990s" in *Discover Magazine* (12 April 2009), n.p., url: <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/gnxp/2009/04/the-secularizing-de-catholicizing-1990s>.

³ Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture. Cultural Studies, Identity, and Politics: Between the Modern and the Postmodern* (London & New York: Routledge 1995), p. 2.

⁴ The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *2007 U.S. Religious Landscape Survey*, url: <http://religions.pewforum.org/comparisons#>.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁶ The Pew Charitable Trusts, "Three Ideas on Why Americans Remain Religious" in *Trust Magazine* (Fall 2008), url: http://www.pewtrusts.org/our_work_report_detail.aspx?id=43644.

⁷ *Idem.*

⁸ *Idem.*

⁹ The United States has a long history of conflict between the tradition of separating church from state and an equally powerful inclination to mix religion and politics. Great political and social movements –from abolition to women's suffrage to civil rights to today's struggles over abortion and gay marriage– have drawn upon religious institutions for moral authority, yet the views of various faiths have also caused conflict.

¹⁰ Pew, "Three Ideas," n.p.

¹¹ *Idem.*

¹² See especially John Micklethwait and Arian Wooldridge, *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).

¹³ Pew, "Three Ideas," n.p.

¹⁴ *Idem.*

¹⁵ *Idem.*

¹⁶ Pew, *U.S. Religious Landscape*, p. 8.

¹⁷ Mark Silk, "ARIS!" in *Spiritual Politics* (blog), url: <http://www.spiritual-politics.org/2009/03/aris.html>.

¹⁸ Pew, "Three Ideas," n.p.

¹⁹ Tom McFeely, "A Glass Three-Quarters Full" in *NCR* (10 March 2009), url: http://www.ncregister.com/blog/a_glass_three-quarters_full.

²⁰ Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, *2008 American Religious Identification Survey* (ARIS) (Hartford, CT.: Leonard E. Greenberg Center/Trinity College, 2009), url: <http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris>

²¹ Silk, "ARIS!," n.p.

²² Ben Shapiro is a graduate of UCLA (which he entered at the age of sixteen) and Harvard Law School. At seventeen, he became the youngest nationally syndicated columnist in the United States. Shapiro is the author of the national bestsellers *Brainwashed*, *Porn Generation*, and *Project President*, and hosts *The Ben Shapiro Show* in Orlando, Florida. He is married and lives in Los Angeles.

²³ Ben Shapiro, *Primetime Propaganda: The Hollywood Story of How the Left Took Over Your TV* (Northampton, Mass.: Broadside Books, 2011), p. 147.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

- ²⁷ Ibid., p. 62.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 63.
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 62
- ³⁰ Idem.
- ³¹ Idem.
- ³² Ibid., p. 57.
- ³³ Ibid., XII.
- ³⁴ Ibid., p. 61.
- ³⁵ Paul Bond, "TV Executives Admit in Taped Interviews That Hollywood Pushes a Liberal Agenda," in *The Hollywood Reporter* (6 January 2011), n.p., url: <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/tv-executives-admit-taped-interviews-193116>.
- ³⁶ Idem.
- ³⁷ See Steven Mintz and Randy W. Roberts (eds.), *Hollywood's America: Twentieth-Century America Through Film*, 4 ed. (Chichester, U.K: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*, 2 ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994); Jason Mattered, *Hollywood Hypocrites* (New York: Threshold Edition, 2012).
- ³⁸ *Movieguide*, "Beowulf. A Dark Tale of Sin and Temptation" in *Movieguide*, n.p., url: <http://www.movieguide.org/reviews/movie/beowulf.html>.
- ³⁹ Jordan J. Ballor, "Movie Review: Beowulf" in *Acton Institute Power Blog* (28 November 2007), n.p., url: <http://blog.acton.org/archives/2063-movie-review-beowulf.html>.
- ⁴⁰ M. H. Abrams, (gen. ed.), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (London: W. W. Norton and Co., Ltd., 1986), p. 19.
- ⁴¹ Robert F. Yeager, "Why Read Beowulf?" in *Humanities* Vol. 20, No. 2 (March/April 1999):n.p., url: <http://www.neh.gov/news/humanities/1999-03/yeager.html>
- ⁴² William Tarvin, "Beowulf" in *Tarvin's Literary Blog* (3 June 2009), n.p., url: <http://tarvinlit.com/wordpress/?s=beowulf>.
- ⁴³ Line numbering of the Francis B. Gummere translation (The Harvard Classics, Vo. 49, London: Collier & Son, 1910), url: <http://www.brian-t-murphy.com/Beowulf.htm>.
- ⁴⁴ Tarvin, "Beowulf," n.p.
- ⁴⁵ Idem.
- ⁴⁶ Ballor, "Beowulf," n.p.
- ⁴⁷ Idem.
- ⁴⁸ Steve Biodrowski, "Beowulf (2007) – Film & DVD Review" in *Cinefantastique* (February 2008), n.p., url: <http://cinefantastiqueonline.com/2008/02/film-and-dvd-review-beowful-2007>.
- ⁴⁹ F.W. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, Trans. by H.L. Mencken (New York: Alfred a Knopf, 1918), n. 21.
- ⁵⁰ Jason Morgan, "Review: Beowulf" in *AMCFilmcritic.com* (16 Nov 2007), n.p., url: <http://www.filmcritic.com/reviews/2007/beowulf>.
- ⁵¹ Ballor, "Beowulf," n.p.
- ⁵² Raymond Ibrahim, "Anti-Christian Crusade" in *National Review Online* (30 November 2007), n.p., url: <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/222897/anti-christian-crusade/raymond-ibrahim>.
- ⁵³ Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *Religion among the Millennials* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2010), p. 24.
- ⁵⁴ Jay Rogers, "The 1990s: Decade of a New Generation," in *The Forerunner* (December 2007), n.p., url: http://www.forerunner.com/forerunner/x0859_new_generation.html.
- ⁵⁵ Idem.
- ⁵⁶ Idem.
- ⁵⁷ Idem.
- ⁵⁸ Pew, *Millennials*, p. 2.
- ⁵⁹ Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Young Adults 'Less Religious,' Not Necessarily 'More Secular'" in *USA Today* (17 February 2010), n.p., url: http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-02-17-pewyouth17_ST_N.htm.
- ⁶⁰ O'Brien, *The Celluloid Madonna*, p. 3.
- ⁶¹ Kellner, *Media Culture*, p. 1.
- ⁶² Idem.
- ⁶³ See Colin McGinn, *The Power of Movies: How Screen and Mind Interact* (New York, N.Y.: Vintage, 2007).