

**Skin and Redemption:
Theology in Silent Films, 1902 to 1927**

by

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Abstract

Theology in Silent Films

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This dissertation analyzes theological concepts in silent moving pictures made for commercial distribution from 1902 to 1927, and examines how directors and scenarists sorted through competing belief systems to select what they anticipated would be palatable theological references for their films.

A fundamental assumption of this study is that, the artistic and aesthetic pretensions of many silent-era filmmakers notwithstanding, directors generally made decisions in the conception, production and marketing of films primarily to maximize profits in a ruthlessly competitive environment. As such, directors needed to walk a fine line between alienating the lucrative working class and immigrant audiences that were so important to the profitability of the early film industry, while still broadening the appeal of film to a middle-class clientele.

As a mechanism for ordering society and guiding individual human conduct, the Christian churches in America by 1900 presented believers with a variety of different, even competing, theologies. While the American-Irish Catholic establishment struggled to maintain its authority in the face of Southern European immigration after 1880, American Protestants argued points of doctrine in divinity schools, from pulpits and in the popular press. From this Protestant debate—about questions such as divine transcendence and immanence, Biblical inerrancy, and the soteriological meaning of Jesus' life and death—emerged two broad strains of belief, which were nearly antithetical. Evangelical Protestants, claimants to Calvinist orthodoxy, sought a traditional salvation experience: conviction of sin and redemption, generally experienced in a revival setting. The emerging modernist wing of Protestantism, on the other hand, shifted its

emphasis from ecstatic conversion to the so-called Social Gospel, by which adherents sought to usher in the Kingdom of God on earth.

It is my contention that incorporating religious references to the modernist theology adopted by some mainline denominations after the turn of the twentieth century allowed filmmakers to appeal to Progressive-minded Americas while still highlighting universal moral themes that would be acceptable across a broad range of audiences. The symbiosis between the desire of the mainline churches to promulgate a modernist theology and the power of mass media, along with the broad lay familiarity with theological notions, combined to create both a recognizable theological vernacular that directors could tap for scenario ideas, as well as a cultural milieu in which employing sacred themes dramatically and for profit would be not only acceptable, but even appealing to audiences of diverse Christian beliefs.

This dissertation examines the result of those choices in a variety of film genres: in historicized Bible stories and humanist portrayals of Jesus from 1902 to 1927; in melodramas that use the Social Gospel theologies of the Kingdom of God and the brotherhood of man as a framework for social problem films during the period from 1908 to 1921; in explorations of Christology (themes of atonement and redemption) in feature films from 1915 to 1922; and in recasting familiar notions of sin in comedies and dramas from 1914 to 1928.

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Introduction

I came to the study of silent films by way of the home missions movement. In the course of preparing a master's thesis on the development and financing of a nineteenth-century Methodist Episcopal Church mission for immigrant girls in New York, I spent about four months reading the annual reports of the Women's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church (North).¹ These Methodist women were committed and enterprising financiers, who almost from the outset of their endeavor sold advertising to help defray the cost of professionally printing their hefty annual tomes. The advertising, I noticed in passing, was oriented toward the Social Gospel (even before the movement embraced that nomenclature), and endorsed educational study materials similar to content I had seen in the Chautauqua Institution's monthly periodical, *The Chautauquan*, of the same era. Over the course of those months, I began to discern in these study guides, and the vast study and entertainment edifice of the Chautauqua Institution, the outlines of a mass culture of liberal Protestantism that developed from about 1865 through the 1920s, and to wonder about the extent of it. When it came time to select a topic for my first year research project in the Ph.D. program, I chose to read late-Victorian era liberal Protestant Bible study guides, and examined about 20 or 30 of the most influential books to understand how theologians presented historical criticism to an educated lay audience, and systematized a "mediating" theology consistent with modern life from it.

¹ Susan Craig, "Methodist Women Missionaries and Victorian Activism: The New York Immigrant Girls Home, 1886 to 1920," (master's thesis, Queens College, 2001).

Although I soon had a better grasp of the depth and breadth of printed material dedicated to liberal Protestant ideals in turn-of-the-twentieth century American religious circles, I was nonetheless surprised to see these references presented so frequently in the purely commercial entertainment form of film. Ironically, a seminar on silent film was meant to offer a break from the heavy fare of theological history that had so absorbed me, but it ended up leading directly to this dissertation. Almost from the first screening, I saw explicit references to the tenets of mediating theology and the practical theologies of the Social Gospel in silent films. In movie after movie, I continued to recognize references to an immanent God; an emphasis on the human aspects of Christ; a confirmation of the brotherhood of man; a rejection of the revival conversion so integral to dispensational pre-millennialism; and a certain consistent presentation of what I call “righteousness” in humankind, which centered on good-natured generosity of spirit and tolerance of others, even in the face of incredible persecution. If the liberal Protestant beliefs of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bible study guides could be presented in one idealized movie character, it would surely be Faith, the gentle minister’s sister of HELL’S HINGES (New York Motion Picture Corp., 1916).² Faith’s kindness succeeds in converting this Western sink of iniquity from its rowdy ways, after her brother’s melodramatic revival tactics have generated only derision and hatred.

In the past half century, commercial films with religious themes tend to polarize around tendentious extremes of orthodoxy and iconoclasm.³ Some present familiar Bible

² All initial film references will include the name of the film in small cap letters, followed by the production company name and the year of release. All references taken from the [American Film Institute’s Catalog of Feature Films](#).

³ The purpose of this dissertation is to examine theology as it appears in purely commercial films made by mainstream producers and directors, for the express purpose of generating profit.

stories with a conservative literalist focus, such as Mel Gibson's *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST* (Icon Productions, 2004). Others invoke extra-Biblical material to present a picture of Jesus that feels "real" to modern sensibilities, such as Martin Scorsese's *LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST* (Cineplex-Odeon Films, 1988). Many directors draw on simplistic Christological themes of self-sacrifice and resurrection to bathe explicitly secular film archetypes in an heroic light, as did George Stevens in *SHANE* (Paramount Pictures Corp., 1953). A small but influential coterie of modern independent directors profess personally held religious beliefs through the medium of film, as did Tim Burton with *BIG FISH* (Columbia Pictures Corp., 2003). But the transmission of theologies, both orthodox and heterodox, in popular mass media—the subject of a considerable amount of critical attention in our day—is not as well understood for films of the silent era. This dissertation seeks to answer questions about the theological themes that silent film directors selected for movie content: the tensions between financing, censorship and art; and the early twentieth-century human conception of God and man as interpreted through creativity and imagination. It also sheds light on the motivations and role in film production of individual clerics, groups of mainline Protestant ministers and Social Gospelers who, with some success, sought to influence film content in collaboration with censors, film producers and directors.

Overtly religious themes appeared in movies almost from the very outset of the industry, primarily in the form of recreations of the Gospel story.⁴ They were the ultimate

⁴ Charles Musser, "Passions and Passion Play; Theatre, Film and Religion in America, 1880-1900," *Film History* 5:4 (1993), 419-456. I will use the terms "film" and "movie" interchangeably, but contemporary sources referred to the new entertainment form in diverse ways, including photoplay, flicker and motion picture.

intertextual references, stories so universally familiar that multi-lingual and (possibly) illiterate audiences could easily follow pantomimed action unassisted by dialogue. In addition, pioneering filmmakers were experimenting with ways to ensure that a finished film told a coherent story, in a series of scenes (or shots), continuously progressing from the opening of the film's action to the ending. Various scripts for staged Passion Plays circulating in entertainment circles formed an easy template for the first film "scenarios," which made achieving that goal possible.⁵ Scenarios, also known as "continuities," were written, scene-by-scene descriptions of the action to be shot on the set, cut (or edited) into segments, and assembled together for the final print. The Biblical films based on these primitive scenarios were mostly consistent with the so-called "cinema of attractions," shots of body builders, firemen and dancers, which so captivated the new movie audiences.⁶ From 1898 to 1906, producers in New York and Paris commissioned several Passion Plays (discussed in chapter 2). The novelty of the entertainment form, along with the earliest directors' necessary preoccupation with the mind-boggling technological challenges facing the film industry, including such mundane concerns as the consistent regulation of electrical current, the thickness and flammability of film stock, and ongoing battles over camera and projector patents, ensured that these primitive early films made little attempt to present a coherent plot, much less explore theological cross-currents then circulating in American culture.

⁵ On the importance of Passion Plays, especially that of Salmi Morse, to the evolution of scriptwriting, see Patrick G. Loughney "From 'Rip Van Winkle' to 'Jesus of Nazareth:' Thoughts on the Origins of the American Screenplay," *Film History* 9:3 (1997), 277-289.

⁶ Hundreds of these films are available for viewing at [the Library of Congress](#).

That reality would change rapidly after 1906, mainly because audiences, sated by ten years of filmed reality, began to yearn for more sophisticated content. At the same time, exhibitors sought to legitimize their product and enhance their revenue streams by broadening the appeal of film to a native-born, middle-class clientele, without alienating the lucrative working class and immigrant patrons that formed their early core audience. It is my contention that filmmakers sought to appeal to Progressive-minded Americans—without altogether abandoning the types of subject matter so popular with earlier audiences—by incorporating in their products religious references consistent with the modernist theology being preached at liberal divinity schools such as the University of Chicago and Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Biblical epics continued to attract financing and audiences throughout the remainder of what is known as the silent era, but directors also vastly expanded the range of films in which they explored theological notions, from the early narrative short films of the late 1900s and early 1910s, to more sophisticated feature films of the 1910s and the so-called jazz age studio productions of the 1920s.

Incorporating religious themes in films of the early twentieth century was not the simple matter it might have been even twenty five years earlier. Divided, perhaps, on issues of predestination and original sin, Americans of the mid-nineteenth century were nonetheless a fairly homogeneous bunch, generally advocates of an evangelical vision of faith. By 1900, however, the Christian churches in America presented believers with a variety of different, even competing, theologies. Successive waves of French, German, Irish, Polish and Italian Catholics immigrating to America in the nineteenth century had propelled Roman Catholicism to a dominant position among individual denominations,

while generating all the ethnic and doctrinal tensions that tend to accompany religious pluralism throughout history. After 1880, the American-Irish Catholic establishment struggled to maintain its hegemony in the face of the New Immigration, while Protestants argued fine points of doctrine in divinity schools, from pulpits and in the popular presses. From debates about questions such as divine transcendence and immanence, Biblical inerrancy, and the soteriology of Jesus' life and death, emerged two broad strains of Protestant belief, which were nearly antithetical. Conservative evangelicals, claimants to Calvinist orthodoxy, sought a traditional salvation experience: conviction of sin and redemption, generally experienced in a revival setting. The emergent liberal wing of Protestantism, on the other hand, shifted its emphasis from individualistic, ecstatic conversion to focus on ushering in the Kingdom of God on earth through social justice. Liberals believed they were following a *via media* that negotiated between the extremes of Calvinist orthodoxy and scientific atheism, with a theology they variously referred to as "modern" or "mediating." The acrimonious internecine debate that accompanied Protestant schism spilled over into the broader population as it fractured denominational solidarity, shattered the collegial harmony of the nation's staid seminaries, and generated sensational charges of heresy and widely publicized trials of prominent clergy and outspoken faculty. The uproar fostered a broad familiarity with theological notions among the laity of all denominations, while contributing to the creation of a vernacular of mediating theology that film directors could tap for scenario ideas, as well as a cultural milieu in which employing Christian themes dramatically and for profit would be not only acceptable, but even appealing to audiences of diverse Christian beliefs.⁷

⁷ On the scope of the public debate, see especially Ferenc Merton Szasz, *The Divided Mind of Protestant America, 1880-1930* (University of Alabama Press: University, Ala., 1982), 15, 23, 32-33.

Against this backdrop, the question of how directors selected religious material for commercial films deserves more study for what it reveals about both the lay understanding of mediating theology *and* the embrace of mass commercial entertainment forms in America. This dissertation examines as primary source material roughly one hundred and twenty five silent moving pictures made for commercial distribution in the U.S. from 1903 to 1927, and examines how directors and scenarists sorted through competing belief systems to select what they anticipated would be palatable theological references for their films. The beauty of the mediating theology they selected is that it not only appealed to a broad swath of the mainstream, middle-class Protestant population, but it was also non-ideological enough to appeal to other believers, as well—always excepting the hard core of turn-of-the-twentieth century conservative evangelicals who rejected mediating theology (as their theological heirs tend to now) as a diluted heterodoxy, corrosive of true faith and values in American society.

Foundational assumptions

This dissertation builds on scholarship of the past twenty or so years, which has laid the groundwork for an understanding of film as an early twentieth century mass cultural force, and as the foundation of the entertainment manufacturing behemoth that would emerge by the end of the century as one of the dominant American industries in the world. The work of these scholars has established certain assumptions about the nature of film production, marketing and spectatorship, which are confirmed, and often amplified, by this study of theologies in silent films. One of these assumptions is that, artistic pretensions aside, the individuals and companies who collaborated in the

production, delivery, marketing and consumption of screened entertainment were primarily interested in maximizing profit.⁸ The world of silent film was a cutthroat place, where substantial capital infusions were necessary to manufacture, distribute and exhibit product, in a largely unregulated marketplace comprised of highly motivated sellers and selective consumers.⁹ Within this construct, what were variously billed in marketing materials and industry trade magazines as high-quality plotlines, artistic direction or sophisticated acting were really competitive advantages (real or contrived) that entrepreneurial distributors and exhibitors sought to leverage to entice movie audiences. Although my work does confirm certain aspects of “auteur” theory, which finds directors at the creative center of cinema production, pioneer filmmaker Lois Weber neatly summed up the director’s role when in 1915 she said, “Let those who set themselves up as idealists chatter as much as they please about their art...we’re all in business to make money.”¹⁰

⁸ Berkeley University’s trio of early film industry histories have established how producers, distributors and exhibitors attempted to establish a working model for the financing and marketing of films. Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 1990); Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Richard Koszarski, *An Evening’s Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), especially the first part of his aptly named initial chapter, “An Industry and an Art,” 2-34.

⁹ Access to technology and capital, and the limitations of both, frequently drove content between 1893 and 1905. From 1905 to about 1927, the pace of technological advance and seismic changes in accounting practices and commercial banking probably also had implications for the manufacturing and mass distribution of films, aspects of the industry that are not yet well understood.

¹⁰ Arthur Denison, “A Dream in Realization,” *Motion Picture World* (June 19, 1915), 69; quoted in Karen Ward Mahar, *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 96. See also Griffith’s first contract with American Mutoscope & Biograph Company, which required him to “faithfully and energetically endeavor to increase the business and profits” of Biograph, contract, 17 Aug 1908, D.W. Griffith Papers (DWGP), Museum of Modern Art, New York, series 1, reel 2 (hereafter DWGP 1:2).

A second foundational assumption is that directors understood film had the power to imply a great deal more information than was explicitly stated by a scenario or captured in a scene. By the 1910s, directors and early film writers began to refer to film as a “universal language,” a description that gained broad currency throughout the industry.¹¹ Filmmakers learned that they could use a simple shorthand of now widely recognizable filmic devices to amplify characterization and back story: creating metaphorical links between seemingly unrelated story lines by shifting the action between them, called intercutting; underscoring human behavior and emotion through high contrast lighting of scenes and subjects; and stressing subtle psychological shifts in motivation simply by moving the camera closer to the actors’ faces.¹² Thus, when D.W. Griffith wanted to introduce a prostitute into his 1916 epic film *INTOLERANCE: LOVE’S STRUGGLE THROUGHOUT THE AGES* (Triangle Film Corp., 1916), he knew didn’t need to show explicitly a young woman trading sexual favors for payment. Instead, he cut from a simple two-second shot of a young woman dressed too elaborately for her station in life to an intertitle that dubbed her “The Friendless One,” to make his point crystal clear. The

¹¹ See for instance a review of Charles Chaplin’s 1922 *THE KID*, which describes it as “a real cinematographic work in the universal language of moving pictures. It could be understood, which means mightily enjoyed, anywhere in the world without a single sub-title....” Taken from “The Screen,” n.a. *New York Times* (7 Feb 1921).

¹² The authoritative source on evolving cinematic forms is David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), especially Thompson’s essays on “the formulation of the classical style,” 155-231. On character psychology, see 161-169; on crosscutting, 175-79; on space, 215; on lighting, 223-226. See also Griffith’s “ideological editing” in Bowser, *Transformation of Cinema*, 257-8; on other popular shooting and editing techniques, 87-101, and 261-267. Also influential is Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1991), especially 24, 81. On morality and lighting techniques, see Sumiko Higashi, *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture: The Silent Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 13, 27, 60. For a discussion of DeMille’s particular lighting effects, see Lea Jacobs, “Belasco, DeMille and the Development of Lasky Lighting,” *Film History* 5:4 (1993), 405-18. She characterizes classic DeMille lighting as “confined and shallow areas of illumination, sharp-edged shadows and a palpable sense of the directionality of light,” 408.

post- 1906 advancements to the form enhanced dramatic tension and enthralled viewers—Shelly Stamp has written about narrative film’s striking power to invite viewers to project their own fears and desires on the players, and its equal capacity to engender sympathy for its characters—and audiences and critics more or less constantly badgered filmmakers to refine and restrain the tropes with which they built their photoplays.¹³ Directors from 1908 onwards expanded and refined this filmic vocabulary often through intertextual references to familiar entertainment forms such as vaudeville, fiction and art, which offered helpful signposts to follow the dramatic action in silent films. Equally clear is the fact that viewers understood quite well what directors were suggesting with these filmic tropes.¹⁴

A final foundational assumption is that movie spectators were not simply passive receivers of film content, but instead contrived through various methods—mostly by allocating their hard-earned entertainment dollars according to personal taste—to shape, if not to actually dictate, film subjects. Although directors did plenty of experimenting with film tropes and genres in this period, they didn’t have to look much further than the local vaudeville theatre bill or nickel paperback stand to guess what audiences wanted to see. Americans had already evinced ample desire to consume everything from adventurous Westerns to domestic melodrama, and these were texts that most directors exploited from the outset of their careers. A list of silent-era movie hits that began life as novels, were converted to stage plays and, finally, to films, would be far too long to list

¹³ Shelly Stamp, “Lois Weber, Progressive Cinema, and the Fate of ‘The Work-a-Day Girl’ in SHOES,” *Camera Obscura* 56:19, vol. 2 (2004), 151, 155, 165.

¹⁴ Janet Staiger, *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 53, 78-81.

here, but include such diverse American cultural icons as *The Virginian*, *The Wizard of Oz* and *Ben-Hur*. Equally, directors featured a preponderance of pretty young women and dashing heroes in their movies because audiences (not to mention the exhibitors who sat in darkened theatres watching viewer reactions, then fired off helpful missives to producers and directors alike) expressed a preference for those types of actors. They produced photoplays that revolved around romance, betrayal, suspense and, always, sex, because those were the films that filled theater seats. In the same fashion, my work finds they sought to exploit the broad appeal of religion in American culture, which believers already consumed avidly in commercial fiction and drama, as well as mass-reproduced religious photography and devotional art, by inserting religious references into a wide array of films.

Discourses

An understanding of theology in silent films suffers from a certain disconnect between scholarship that traces the intellectual currents of late-nineteenth and turn-of-the-twentieth century theology, and the nascent body of historical and critical work dedicated to the film industry from 1893 to 1927.¹⁵ Although film emerged as a mass medium concurrently with the rise of theological controversy, the confluence of the two events has not been widely examined because of disciplinary myopia: the subtleties of doctrinal nuance do not fall within the province of cultural historians; neither is popular culture on

¹⁵ As do most historians and film critics, I will use the term “the silent era,” a reference to the fact that films of this time generally lacked a synchronized soundtrack, although the spectators’ experience was far from silent. See Bowser, *Transformation*, 12-18. On singing, lectures and audience participation in film exhibition, see Kathryn Helgesen Fuller, “Boundaries of Participation: The Problem of Spectatorship and American Film Audiences, 1905-1930,” *Film & History* 20:4 (1990), 77-78.

the scholarly agenda of theological historians. In addition, most theological historians approach only reluctantly the study of what David Hall has begun to term “lived religion,” or the collection of moral and ethical guidelines and practices that has since the nineteenth century constituted the religious life for many mainstream Protestants, Jews and Muslims in America.¹⁶ As Nancy Ammerman has noted, what she calls “Golden Rule” Christianity shuns ideology and orthodoxy—its transmission within the confines of popular mass culture necessarily falls outside the purview of intellectual historians who pore over treatises to follow arcane strands of thought from generation to generation.¹⁷

Solid bodies of secondary material that examine film, culture and theology separately have been assembled in the past two or three decades. Film historians such as Charles Musser, Tom Gunning, Eileen Bowser, Richard Koszarski and Jeanine Basinger have examined the making and funding of movies, the personalities who dominated the early industry, and the shift in the 1920s to a studio paradigm of film production.¹⁸ Their work does not, however, examine in any great detail the sources of religious content in scenarios and film production, nor does it differentiate between competing visions of faith as presented in secular stories. The same can be said of groundbreaking studies of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century mass culture. Historians David Nasaw, Kevin Brownlow and Steven J. Ross, for example, have identified class, ethnic and racial forces

¹⁶ David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

¹⁷ Nancy T. Ammerman, “Golden Rule Christianity: Lived Religion in the American Mainstream,” in Hall, *Lived Religion*, 211.

¹⁸ In addition to the works cited in notes 7 and 11 above, see also Jeanine Basinger, *Silent Stars* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1999).

work in the early film industry, but their concern is culture, not faith.¹⁹ The result of their narrow focus is particularly acute in references to the censure religious elites directed at the film industry after 1897, and few historians bother to differentiate between the conservatives who condemned movies, audience demographics, and film venues as morally suspect, and those liberals who were, in turn, repelled by the evangelicals' old-fashioned attitudes. In fact, one point of controversy between conservatives and liberals was technology itself. Movies raised concerns among conservatives because their secular content and modernist implications served (as did any secular entertainment) to distract from sacred contemplation by those most in need of salvation. But technologies like photography, film and electricity exerted a powerful grip on late nineteenth-century liberal Christian imagination. In *The Chautauquan* from 1881 to 1887 for example, readers were subjected to a virtual barrage of articles explaining railways, fire alarms, light bulbs and the advent of "portable electricity," while clerics speculated on the ability of these modern marvels to deepen and spread Christian belief.²⁰

If cultural historians are able to document and explain the fears evangelicals voiced about movie theatres, moving pictures, and audiences, but typically sidestep the liberal viewpoint, historians of theology *are* trained to untangle the theological strains that influenced American culture in the silent film era; but their work generally

¹⁹ See Kevin Brownlow, *Behind the Mask of Innocence: Sex, Violence, Crime* (Berkeley, Cal., University of California Press: 1992); David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press: 1993); Steven J. Ross, *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America* (Princeton, Princeton University Press: 1998).

²⁰ On the Chautauqua Institute's influence on modernism in America, see Thomas J. Schlereth, *Cultural History and Material Culture: Everyday Life, Landscapes, Museums* (Ann Arbor: 1990), 224-223. On the humanist impulse behind Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circles, see Andrew C. Rieser, *The Chautauqua Moment: Protestants, Progressives, and the Culture of Modern Liberalism* (New York: 2003), 104-108.

concentrates on divinity school lectures and clerical treatises, not mass media. This dissertation relies heavily on the mediating viewpoint as depicted by two historians, William R. Hutchison and Gary Dorrien.²¹ Hutchison's seminal *Modernist Impulse* in 1968 explored the strains of European thought that flowered in America after 1850. He defined liberal Protestantism as a philosophy that combined humanistic optimism, religious pluralism, the importance of social welfare (not an exclusively liberal notion, but one that took on new urgency given the mediating stress on Jesus' life of service to the poor and sick), and the incarnation of God through humanity.²² More recently, the two volumes of Dorrien's *Making of American Liberal Theology* analyzed the intellectual development of liberal religious thought in America from 1800 to 1950. Dorrien traced mediating theology from the universities of Europe, to the seminaries of the United States, and finally to popularizing preachers like Henry Ward Beecher who "drizzled" science and ethics over his congregation in sermons with a Social Gospel flavor.²³ But the pop culture forms, mainly literature and devotional images, which played a role in the lay transmission of liberal theology, are beyond their range. As regards film, a surprising number of church historians have examined Christ and Christ-like characters in movies from about 1910 to present, including well-regarded work by Richard Walsh, Lloyd

²¹ William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1977) and Hutchinson ed., *American Protestant Thought: The Liberal Era* (New York: 1968); Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900* (Louisville, Ky.: 2001) and *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism and Modernity, 1900-1950* (Louisville, Ky.: 2003).

²² Hutchison, *Modernist Impulse*, 3.

²³ Dorrien, *Imagining Progressive Religion*, 250.

Baugh and W. Barnes Tatum.²⁴ Along with later religious scholars such as Christopher Deacy, Gaye Ortiz, Clive Marsh, and Stephen Prothero, these authors have identified a filmic context for the historical Jesus as a cultural icon—but they have not delved deeply into the portrayal of complex theological issues across the broader spectrum of films.

The Directors

Another scholarly arena about which my work provides background, is the longstanding argument over the relative influence of individual directors in the monumental collaborative process that is film finance and production, commonly referred to as *auteur* theory.²⁵ In the silent era, at least until the shift to a studio model of business, film manufacturing companies (as they typically referred to themselves) entered contractual relationships with a director to produce an agreed number of films over a one- or two-year period. The director presented the producer with an idea, often one or two paragraphs of text describing a film's action, and an estimate of production costs, which were then translated into an approved budget. At the culmination of the production process, the producer engaged a distribution company to distribute prints of the film to exhibitors, who then showed it to audiences in venues across the country. Ticket sales re-

²⁴ Christopher Deacy and Gaye Williams Ortiz, *Theology and film: Challenging the Sacred/Secular Divide* (Malden Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2008); Jeffrey L. Staley and Richard Walsh, *Jesus, The Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination: A Handbook to Jesus on DVD* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007); Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003), Richard Walsh and George Aichele, eds., *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections Between Scripture and Film* (Harrisburg, Pa.: 2002); Lloyd Baugh and S. J. Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-figures in Film* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: 1997); Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz, eds., *Explorations in Theology and Film* (Malden Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 1997); W. Barnes Tatum, *Jesus at the Movies: The First Hundred Years* (Polebridge Press: 1998, revised and expanded edition).

²⁵ For a concise history of the birth of *auteur* theory and its currently recognized variants, see Virginia Wright Wexman, ed., *Film and Authorship* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003), especially her excellent introductory essay, 1-18.

paid the producers (one of whom was often the director) and any other investors. By controlling the purse strings, the producer held a great deal of power in the making of a commercial film, overseeing a director who was normally expected to report meticulously on the day-to-day costs of writing, shooting and editing the film. After calculating that one of his films cost about \$2,225 an hour to shoot, Cecil B. DeMille neatly summarized the tension between the financiers' budgetary parameters and his own desire to perfect his creation: "The element of time, of course, is of extreme importance. The driving force is the battle of time with art, and time means money."²⁶

Despite the interference a director might endure over the course of a film project—in communications that tended to reach an hysterical pitch as budgets ran in the red—the most successful of them nonetheless crafted films with a distinctive look and feel that conferred upon their work an almost immediate recognizability. In fairness to the virtual army of script readers, scenarists, cinematographers, art directors, set designers, costumers, researchers, editors—not to mention actors—who translated the director's inspiration to a finished product, the fact that most of these directors worked over decades with the same core contingent of collaborators may be an equal force in the creation of their distinctive filmic vision. But, as the most powerful directors in Hollywood and proven hit-makers, most of the men and woman examined in this dissertation had an unusual degree of control over their work. Even for them, the daily process of film financing and production was a constant grind of placating nervous financiers and demanding exhibitors, calming sensitive actors and outwitting censorship

²⁶ Cecil B. DeMille remarks at Harvard Business School, 4/26/1927, Cecil B. DeMille Archive (CBDMA), Brigham Young University, Provo UT, series VIII, box 285, folder 7 (hereafter VIII:285 (7)). DeMille's shooting cost estimate referred to his 1927 release, *THE KING OF KINGS*.

efforts, all of which clearly took a toll on a director's artistic control. In many cases, when a panicked producer restricted the flow of capital, the director's only resort was to mortgage his personal assets, including receipts from any movies currently in release. These directors all lived lavish lifestyles, but each was shadowed by the specter of financial ruin throughout their working years.

All of the directors in this study came to Hollywood after careers in theatre and vaudeville, and several began working in film around the same time, in 1907 and 1908, at the outset of the nickelodeon era. Griffith was one of the first to attain real prominence. In hundreds of one- and two-reel films produced between 1908 and 1912, Griffith explored the hardships of modern life through the everyday experiences of ordinary people, in melodramas and thrillers with a certain polished look and sympathetic intelligence, which made a handsome profit for his first employer, New York's Biograph Company, and the beginnings of a name for himself.²⁷ Years after Griffith left Biograph and film audiences began to crave feature-length stories, the company continued to re-release many of his short films, evidence his work had lasting appeal in an era in which theater owners rarely exhibited any film for longer than a week or so.²⁸ In the same years, Sidney Olcott worked in New York, New Jersey and Florida as principal director at

²⁷ Biograph was originally called American Mutoscope & Biograph Company.

²⁸ In the 1910s, Biograph typically re-released a series of Griffith films, sometimes attributed to the increasingly well-known director, sometimes not. For examples, see *The Biograph*, the company's weekly advertising circulars, September and October 1915, which I viewed at the Warshaw Collection of Business Americana (WCBA), National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Series 1: Business Ephemera; Motion Pictures, box 1, folders 3-6 (hereafter 1:1 (3-6)). Ironically, in this period of his life, which critics believe was a kind of Griffithian golden age, cameraman Billy Bitzer later commented that Griffith actually saw himself as working in a factory, grinding out so many "sausages" each day. Bitzer notes on D.W. Griffith, n.d., DWGP 1:2.

Kalem Productions, where he was known for creating high-quality films in diverse locations, all within Kalem's notoriously tight budgets.²⁹

The year 1912, precisely as Griffith struck out on his own, marked the moment producers and exhibitors began to acknowledge a growing audience preference for full-length feature films of six or more reels. More importantly, it was also a pivotal point in the migration of film production companies out of the dominant film centers in New Jersey, Queens, Manhattan and Brooklyn to a dusty little development in Southern California soon to be known as Hollywood. Although the industry's financial power base remained anchored in New York throughout the remainder of the silent period, historians have chronicled the reasons California appealed to those on the production side: it placed filmmakers at a safe remove from the litigious Motion Picture Patents Company, a cartel of film equipment makers that sought to enforce its copyrights—sometimes violently—in the face of rapid commoditization of film cameras and projectors; and it offered nearly year-round sunlight, which helped filmmakers overcome the deficiencies of electric current supply with abundant natural lighting—so vital to successful focus and depth of field in the finished product.³⁰

While Griffith experimented with independent financing of his projects—and future comedy impresarios Max Sennett and Charlie Chaplin learned their craft under his tutelage—the production companies in sunny Southern California enticed a number of young showmen to join them, including Cecil B. DeMille and his older brother William

²⁹ Gary W. Garner, "The Kalem Company, Travel and On-Location Filming: The Forging of an Identity," *Film History* 10:2 (1998), 188-207.

³⁰ Bowser, *Transformation of Cinema*, 150, 159-165.

C. de Mille, and the husband-and-wife team of Lois Weber and Phillips Smalley.³¹ The DeMille brothers, veterans of the Belasco show circuit in New York City, proceeded to abandon the flat lighting of the earliest period, in which lamps and sun flooded sets and the camera was placed at a considerable distance from the action.³² Mimicking new forms emerging from Europe (and from Griffith's new studio), DeMille began to shoot much closer to his subjects and to rely on lighting techniques that placed a lit subject within the middle of a darkened and shadowy frame—a style he attempted in publicity to cast as artistic by referring to it as “Rembrandt lighting.” Even before the mass shift in audience tastes in the aftermath of World War I, DeMille was one of the directors who attempted to shrug off his Victorian antecedents by anticipating modern tastes, and his treatment of sexuality is considerably more frank than Griffith's ever would be. Despite the elder brother's initial qualms about forsaking the legitimate theater for Hollywood, William de Mille also became a powerful force in the new industry, making small domestic dramas that earned critical acclaim.³³ Lois Weber, working initially with her husband and later alone, was the quintessential product of the Progressive era: with her religious credentials, husband and children in tow, she was able to convince her financiers to let her make the ambitious and intellectual feature films she believed would reform society.³⁴ Another migrant from New York to California in these years was William S. Hart. While never billed as a director, Hart was nonetheless the creative force behind a

³¹ While William preferred the family spelling, “de Mille,” Cecil styled himself in print as “DeMille,” but frequently signed notes “de Mille.”

³² Jacobs, “Lasky Lighting,” 405-18.

³³ The elder de Mille was a featured director in an early manual for aspiring filmmakers: Peter Milne, *Motion Picture Directing* (New York: New York Institute of Photography, 1922), 41.

³⁴ Mahar, *Women Filmmakers*, 89-90.

series of Western films shot in California during the 1910s and 1920s. Hart is influential in this story of film theologies for his consistent depiction of Western heroes as Christ figures.

Methodology

The historian of the silent film era faces numerous obstacles to an understanding of the industry. First, many of the films have been irretrievably lost, thanks to the instability of early film stock, which was brittle and darkened over time, and was susceptible to burned-out spots on well-worn prints. Second, directors were often forced to create multiple versions of their films after release, adjusting to complaints about pacing or content. If only one or two salvageable prints (or portions of full prints) remain extant, it can be difficult to state with any certainty which is the definitive “director’s cut,” if it exists at all, nor to know with absolute certainty which version most audiences saw. Compounding the problem is the fact that film exhibitors frequently took liberties with the products distributed to them, sometimes speeding up the action or slowing it down, and sometimes skipping scenes or as much as an entire reel, if they sensed audiences were becoming bored. Audiences left little record of their impressions, beyond ticket sales collected by exhibitors. Third, relatively few filmmakers left much in the way of archival material (hence the prevalence of studies of DeMille and Griffith, who did) making traditional historical detective work difficult. Fortunately, supplementary primary material is often helpful if used judiciously. For instance, much of the newspaper and magazine coverage of the era was actually sophisticated marketing material manufactured by the filmmakers and their studios, delivered to exhibitors, who in turn repackaged it in

the form of ads and reviews in local publications. This means that often the opening night coverage of a film reflects more clearly how the producer hoped it would be received, rather than any truly objective record of actual audience experience (especially before 1915). My general strategy has been to view a film; access all extant archival material for information about the sources for the film; to read current trade periodicals, marketing materials and newspaper reviews to understand how the film was positioned to the potential audience.

In some cases, the theological sources are included in the material the director, scenarist and art director collected as research for the film; in some cases, I am forced to rely on a detailed “reading” of the film to discern the director’s intentions. While none of these directors, with the possible exception of DeMille, publicly proselytized a mediating theology of faith, there is evidence in their private lives that the religious references in their films were wholly consonant with their own religious convictions. DeMille was a dedicated Episcopalian, and a generous benefactor of his local parish. Throughout the course of his career, DeMille approached his work with an almost apostolic fervor, telling his biographer in 1957, “This is what I’ve given my life to doing—my father gave his life to the same thing—to try to make people realize their relationship with God.”³⁵ Griffith was raised a Methodist and attended that church throughout much of his life. His wife reported that the waning years of his life were spent mainly in Bible study and meditation.³⁶ Griffith and DeMille both had a lifelong fascination with the Bible, religious

³⁵ Art Arthur, Cecil B. DeMille reminisces, 3 July 1957, CBDMA II:13 (30), page 6.

³⁶ On Bible reading in Griffith’s later life, see David Wark Griffith, *The Man Who Invented Hollywood: The Autobiography of D.W. Griffith*, edited and annotated by James Hart (Louisville, Ky.: Touchstone Publishing Company, 1972), especially Hart’s notes on 5-6.

scholarship and theological debate—both claimed mystical experiences in childhood, and DeMille pointed to a number of events (a stray dove lighting on the chalice during the Last Supper scene, for example) on the set of *THE KING OF KINGS* (DeMille Pictures Corp., 1927) as evidence of divine intervention in his project.³⁷ Weber was probably a Christian Scientist and, famously, prominently billed herself as a former missionary, and used religious imagery in many interviews and articles. I have also bolstered my critical reading of these films with secondary research into visual culture, which has helped me interpret the many religious symbols and cues directors embedded in films, many of which had wider currency in American society, making my task less purely intuitive than it may sound.

Because, as Robert Moore-Jumonville has noted convincingly, mediating theology was accepted by broad swath of Protestantism, from the most radical to even some conservatives, I have selected as the baseline for this type of belief tenets originally presented by mid-century English romanticist Frederick William Robertson, and systematized by the early twentieth-century American mainline denominations.³⁸ This faith rejected Calvinist notions like original sin and predestination (long under attack in American religious circles), and emphasized the benign nature and generosity of a thoroughly immanent God. It viewed Christianity as a constructive and positive

³⁷ In 1957, DeMille told his biographer his second *TEN COMMANDMENTS* (Motion Picture Associates, 1956) would not only “carry the Law and the Bible...around the world but it can give men an understanding of God.” Art Arthur autobiography notes, n.d. (1957), CBDMA II:16 (21). DeMille tells of his youthful conversion in William Gammon, “The Faith of Cecil B. DeMille,” *The American Weekly* (20 Nov 1949), 12.

³⁸ Robert Moore-Jumonville, *The Hermeneutics of Historical Distance: Mapping the Terrain of American Biblical Criticism, 1880-1914*. (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2002). Frederick William Robertson, *Life and Letters of Frederick W. Robertson, M.A.* vol. 2, ed. by Stopford Augustus Brooke (London: Henry S. King, 1873), 153. This, and the bulk of the theological works referenced here, are available in their entirety at books.google.com.

force, and identified truth as the force that held together opposing ideas. It deemed Christ's humanity more central than his divinity. Above all, liberals believed Christian truth would best be taught, in Robertson's words, "suggestively, not dogmatically," since the faith operated from an "inward reality to an outward reality." In practical terms, most of these theological positions translated into a defined set of ideas transmitted in mainline American Protestant churches beginning as early as 1850, and refined well into the twentieth century. Ministers emphasized God's loving care for creation—and downplayed the stern and unapproachable Jehovah of orthodox evangelical Christianity. Second, they placed God firmly within history, rather than transcendent over it, through an historical approach to Bible study. Liberal Protestants also re-framed Jesus Christ's role in the drama of salvation, emphasizing his acts of service and healing, and downplaying his atonement in blood for mankind's sins. This theology stressed the brotherhood of man, and the importance of service to the poor and needy in the drama of salvation.

This vision of the nature of God, mankind and goodness is remarkably consistent in silent films, and it echoes the vision presented in a wide variety of mass cultural forms that found their genesis in the birth of liberal Protestantism. This exploration of religious messages in silent films begins with a brief examination of the theological backdrop against which film emerged as an influential mass medium in American culture, as well as a survey of the types of profitable educational, devotional and entertainment materials that served as sources for filmmakers and enhanced the appeal of sacred material in a thoroughly commercial setting.

Chapter one: Mediating Theology in Culture

A fundamental assumption of this study is that, the artistic and aesthetic pretensions of many silent-era filmmakers notwithstanding, directors made decisions in the conception, production and marketing of films primarily to maximize profits in a competitive environment. Within this context, religious references were simply one dramatic element among many that directors used to appeal to the broadest possible audience, and historians have acknowledged the importance of religious content to the early industry.¹ The problem historians have yet to tackle is: against a backdrop of broad theological diversity and fierce doctrinal debate, which specific theologies did directors select to enhance their films? After all, a Marian theology that might be appealing to an Italian Catholic in New York would verge on heresy to a Baptist in the South. And while Biblical literalism might have engaged a Methodist from Georgia, it would have appeared hopelessly old-fashioned to an Episcopalian from Cincinnati. And not only regional theologies differed—American Protestants of the silent film era were grappling with the biggest challenge to religious conformity since Martin Luther’s confrontation with Roman Catholicism in 1517. Mediating theology, the offspring of early nineteenth-century German idealism and Biblical higher criticism, entered into American Protestant thought only after 1850, but soon began to undermine the evangelical solidarity that characterized the mainline denominations of the early nineteenth century. By 1900,

¹ On the popularity in the early film industry of boxing, Passion Plays, and travelogues, see Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 1990). Says Musser, “A strong argument could be made that in the end amusement entrepreneurs exploited religious subject matter for their own commercial purposes and ultimately absorbed it within their own cultural framework.” See also David Nasaw’s contention that showing religious films helped exhibitors sidestep Sunday blue laws, in *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 146.

Protestantism was on the verge of an irrevocable split into at least two distinct variants of the faith: conservative evangelicals who clung to Reformed orthodoxy, and liberals who rejected it in favor of a middle ground between Calvinism and skepticism, which they referred to as mediating theology.² Around the turn of the twentieth century, American Protestant battles over theology reached an inflection point with a spate of well-publicized heresy trials that purged the conservative denominations of prominent liberal thinkers and prompted publication of *The Fundamentals*, a series of 12 pamphlets that established the founding beliefs of conservative theology.³

This chapter will examine both the backdrop of theological controversy against which the mass medium of film exploded on the American cultural scene, and the ways film fit within an emerging liberal Protestant religious ethos that emphasized both religious and cultural criticism as a way to fortify faith in a modernizing world. First we will see how changing the Biblical hermeneutic of the nineteenth century acted to shift the locus of moral authority away from the revered King James Version of the Bible, encouraged Christians to view their individual moral sense as authoritative and invited them to experience faith and God in noninstitutional, and even commercial, settings. The arguments surrounding the modernists challenge to traditional Biblical orthodoxy

² Of special pertinence to this chapter: see Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900* (Louisville, Ky.: 2001) and *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism and Modernity, 1900-1950* (Louisville, Ky.: 2003). William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1977); Mark Massa, "Mediating Modernism." *Harvard Theological Review* 814 (1988): 413-430. Robert Moore-Jumonville, *The Hermeneutics of Historical Distance: Mapping the Terrain of American Biblical Criticism, 1880-1914* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2002).

³ Between 1910 and 1915, the pamphlets were published as *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth* (Chicago: Testimony Publishing Co., 1910-1915). For the story of modern fundamentalism in America, see especially George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: 1991); and *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: 1980).

stimulated broad lay familiarity with theological nuance normally reserved for seminary faculties by bringing arcane religious concepts to hometown pulpits, to the front pages of local newspapers and to progressively oriented periodicals that flooded American mailboxes.⁴ Second, we shall see that the emerging ranks of liberal Protestants believed faith grew best when experienced through contact with other believers, and the churches found themselves engaging with popular culture in all its many guises—in an attempt to disseminate this view to believers who might find their faith challenged by modernity. The theologies that emerged from Biblical criticism, as articulated in America primarily by followers of Frederick Robertson, therefore came to dominate the religious content of most silent-era films.⁵ Silent directors also borrowed heavily from what I term liberal Protestant mass culture—a rich trove of commercially produced material that flowered around mediating theology and the admixture of social improvement impulses grouped under the banner of the Social Gospel: devotional art and ephemera; lay Bible study and educational materials; popular Progressive Christian publications, the Chautauqua Institution, and the “little chautauquas;” and religious fiction and drama, especially Social Gospel novels and plays. For filmmakers, the existence of this liberal Protestant mass culture created a recognizable vernacular that writers could tap for story ideas, as well as a cultural milieu in which employing Christian themes dramatically and for profit would be not only acceptable, but even appealing, to a highly desirable middle-class audience segment. After 1900, the evidence suggests, film became one of the many media, and

⁴ Ferenc Merton Szasz, *The Divided Mind of Protestant America, 1880-1930* (University of Alabama Press: University, Ala., 1982), 15, 23, 32-33.

⁵ Robertson preached societal transformation, but was less militantly socialist than his mentor, Frederick Maurice, and thus, perhaps, more acceptable in late twentieth century American religious circles.

probably the most influential one, to incorporate religious content in popular, commercial entertainment.

The American Experience

Turn-of-the-twentieth century religious controversy turned out to be particularly advantageous for filmmakers and exhibitors primarily because it fostered among liberal-minded Christians an alternative to the kind of conservative evangelical piety that had celebrated visual culture only within a narrow salvational and devotional context.⁶

Liberal Christianity also prepared its followers to accept film as appropriate entertainment by shifting the locus of moral authority in society away from what liberals saw as a mindless veneration of a dated Bible and its suspect doctrine, in favor of an individual moral and ethical sensibility bolstered by advanced critical study of the historical Bible. This attitude was promulgated widely in the religious and secular media, in which liberal Christians in the mainstream denominations learned actively to question religious doctrine, to agitate for societal transformation, and to deploy modern technologies in ways that would reinforce faith and promote progressive action in a rapidly changing world.⁷ At the same time, a flood of Bible study guides and popular religious periodicals deconstructed the Bible to reveal its authorship, source documents, and historical context, while clerics preached from their Sunday pulpits a mediating theology that rejected the pre-millennial dispensationalism that had made revival and

⁶ Andrew Rieser quotes Washington Gladden from an 1884 article: "Amusement, like religion and education, is a real need of human beings." The minister continued by contending the church "has a positive function to fulfill in furnishing diversions that shall be attractive, and, at the same time, pure and wholesome." Quoted in Rieser, *Chautauqua Movement*, 362.

⁷ Rieser, *Chautauqua*, 209.

ecstatic conversion core elements of salvation. For the denominations that embraced mediating theology, the Methodist Episcopal Church (North), the Episcopal Church, the Baptist Church (North), the Congregational Church, and the Unitarian Church, the rejection of evangelicalism meant attracting converts through kind example, not revival, and offering the needy meals, instead of tracts. Most importantly for the film industry, the liberal churches also began to eye mass media, such as drama, literature and film, as vehicles to transmit their mediating theology to an American populace that seemed increasingly reluctant to attend Sunday school and church, and increasingly unsusceptible to the kinds of dense study materials designed to educate and uplift them.

Although a detailed intellectual history of the evolution of mediating theology has been accomplished far better in other sources cited here, it may be useful to trace the main tenets of that theology as they dispersed from a handful of heterodox thinkers in the Civil War period, into influential American seminaries by the end of the nineteenth century and, finally, into lay consciousness and popular culture. The conversion of some American Protestants to the *via media* was accomplished in three distinct waves. From roughly 1850 to 1885, pioneering liberal Protestants wrote foundational works that attacked accepted church dogma and promised to reveal a pure, primitive faith. Though aimed primarily at a scholarly clerical audience, their work is relevant to this study because it included challenges to Church and Biblical authority that, once filtered into the popular consciousness through preachers like Henry Ward Beecher, acted to dent ecclesiastical authority in matters of public morality. The second discernable phase in the transmission of mediating theology began around 1885 as a number of critically minded American theologians adapted textbook material for lay readers, to fill what they

perceived as a widespread hunger for a more sophisticated religious education. By conveying historical, political, cultural and literary context to the Bible, these authors invited everyday Christians to join in the most heated theological dialogues of their day—and to make their own decisions about what was right and wrong. Not long after the turn of the twentieth century, these writers began to fear their work was not achieving the desired results, possibly because the intensive study and esoteric knowledge they demanded turned off many potential converts. The final step in the process, then, occurred as theologians and clergy further re-shaped the mediating message in light of the emerging and highly popular Progressive socioeconomic agenda. This final phase follows closely the mainline liberal denominations' adoption of explicitly social objectives after the turn of the twentieth century. As the churches began to view job training as more meaningful than sponsoring prayer meetings, liberal clergy and theologians published a virtual avalanche of material that emphasized the prophetic warnings of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the overtly social nature of Jesus' mission on earth. It is these writers and their works that would prove particularly influential in early twentieth-century film production.

The Philosophers of Faith

One of the most striking things about silent films is the almost uniformly consistent view they present of the characteristics of that I will term “goodness” in humankind; the direct intervention of God in creation through the actions of people; and the proper relationship between God and man in society. The most distinctively liberal of these ideas were developed in a series of mid-nineteenth century philosophical treatises

designed to introduce mediating theology to an educated readership. Fired by what they experienced as a fresh and compelling take on an old faith, Horace Bushnell, a Yale Divinity graduate and Congregational minister, and his disciple Theodore Munger, also of Yale Divinity but later an ordained Episcopalian, found inspiration in the English Romantics (especially Samuel Taylor Coleridge) and idealist theologians such as Kantian Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher at the University of Halle (later Berlin) and his protégé Isaak Dorner.⁸ In the thirty or so years after 1847, Bushnell and Munger, along with Congregationalist Newman Smyth at Andover Seminary, published a series of books that defined an American mediating theology.⁹ The doctrinal and contemporary issues in their work reflected the profound impact of Robertson's mid-century ideas about a beneficent and loving God presiding over a creation endowed with the potential for a life of goodness and charity. Robertson had defined a mediating faith that challenged orthodoxy at its core.¹⁰ His "constructive and positive" Christianity did not need an eschatological crisis—so critical to dispensationalists—to be revealed. His suggestion that truth could hold together opposing ideas offered hope that the "petrification" of

⁸ The historiography of mediating theology is vast. Of special pertinence to this essay: see Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900* (Louisville, Ky.: 2001) and *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism and Modernity, 1900-1950* (Louisville, Ky.: 2003); William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1977) and Hutchison ed., *American Protestant Thought: The Liberal Era* (New York: 1968); Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill: 1988); Mark S. Massa, "Mediating Modernism." *Harvard Theological Review* 814 (1988): 413-430.

⁹ See especially Horace Bushnell, *Nature and the Supernatural as Together Constituting the One System of God*, 3rd ed., (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons: 1859); Newman Smyth, *That Religious Feeling: A Study For Faith* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Co., 1877) and *The Reality of Faith* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons: 1884); Theodore T. Munger, *The Freedom of Faith* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1883). Munger reprinted Robertson's five core tenets on page 2.

¹⁰ Frederick William Robertson, *Life and Letters of Frederick W. Robertson, M.A.* vol. 2, ed. by Stopford Augustus Brooke (London: Henry S. King, 1873), 153.

dogma could be reconciled through increased knowledge. His notion that truth should be taught “suggestively, not dogmatically,” implied that highly visible public proselytizing in a revival setting lead only to an emotional and shallow conversion. Furthermore, Robertson’s key contention that Christ’s humanity was “antecedent” to his divinity meant Jesus’ works were more significant than his miracles. His view that Christianity works from an “inward reality to an outward reality,” meant conversion should be a private and intensely personal process of prayer and self-examination. Finally, Robertson based his entire theology on a belief in “the soul of goodness in things evil.”

In addition to offering this distinctive vision of faith, which stood so clearly at odds with traditional evangelicalism, nearly all of Robertson’s followers struck a blow for modernism by explicitly citing the reconciliation of science with religion as the immediate motivating factor behind their work. On the one hand, they sought to reassure wary believers that science was not breaking down the foundations of faith. Bushnell, for example, informed readers that science is not against religion, but rather working to generate “general progress toward mere naturalism,” high praise from one who believed the faith had been obscured over time by false interpretation.¹¹ For Bushnell, the bigger threat to modern Christianity was actually ignorance of currents of thought that were ripe with fresh ideas and proofs of the ancient faith. In an appeal to Christians who were particularly attracted to the theory of evolution, Smyth published an apologia that would “adapt the usual forms in which evidences of faith” were presented “to the skeptical surroundings of thought in our day.”¹² Far from destroying the Biblical understanding of

¹¹ Horace Bushnell, *Nature and the Supernatural*, 16.

¹² Smyth, *That Religious Feeling*, v.

creation, Smyth sought to demonstrate how a “process of natural selection” had actually distilled the purest thoughts of German idealism and English positivism into an American form of mediating theology.

These theologians suggested that modern-leaning believers could use Biblical exegesis to rejuvenate a tired faith and create a way to believe without being old-fashioned. Clergy of the early Victorian era, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, had muzzled themselves or resigned their posts rather than confront their flocks with challenging conclusions emanating from Europe.¹³ Munger took the opposite path, directing his work specifically at those Christians who might be uncomfortable with theological change, in the firm belief that his conclusions would “do something towards quelling the anarchy of fear and doubt that now prevails.”¹⁴ Smyth began his work with a quote from one of Robertson’s teachers English Christian socialist Frederick Dennison Maurice, who believed new theology offered “great reconciling principles which, if I could declare them, might set the age free from some of its divisions.”¹⁵ To Smyth, believers were not so much skeptical as in need of a purifying force to reveal the “natural, the living, and the real in Christian faith and practice.”¹⁶

At its most profound, abstract level, it is clear that the advocates of mediating theology understood their work had the power to generate a fundamental re-ordering of Christian thought and social priorities. That is because all Christian doctrine, no matter how ancient or widely accepted, was subjected to their critical re-examination. The

¹³ Elizabeth Hurth, “Emerson and the Lord’s Supper,” *Church History* 622 (1993): 190-206.

¹⁴ Munger, *Freedom of Faith*, 5-6.

¹⁵ Smyth, *Reality of Faith*, title page.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, v.

philosopher-theologians questioned the divine nature of scripture. Bushnell, for example, rejected scriptural inerrancy, a closely held tenet of evangelical Protestantism, and narrowly avoided heresy charges for saying so.¹⁷ The liberals probed the authenticity of the creeds that had outlined the basics of Christianity since the earliest days of the faith: Munger doubted many of his readers believed the creeds they recited at all.¹⁸ And they deconstructed many of the most “holy mysteries” of the faith, the sacraments and liturgies that had governed major stages of human life for almost 2000 years.

The Critic-Theologians

The philosopher-theologians of the middle and late nineteenth century offered many Christians the option to bring their modern sensibilities to bear on matters of faith—but they did little to de-mystify the scholarly work that backed up their arguments. From 1885 to 1905, a new generation of academic theologians led the second phase of the lay education effort by filling this gap with Bible study materials on higher criticism and its power to strip away the dogma and cant of the centuries.¹⁹ This second generation

¹⁷ Bushnell described the “advocates of strict, infallible inspiration . . .so manifestly tangled and lost in the trivialities they contend for,” *Natural and Supernatural*, 35.

¹⁸ Munger, *Freedom of Faith*, 269, 297, 300-301. Conceding that the bodily resurrection of Jesus was a very early Church belief (and, thus, normally deserving of favorable consideration), he nonetheless charged the “Fathers” with teaching “not only the resurrection of the flesh but [drawing] it out to the most absurd particulars....” Actually, both Paul (writing around 50 CE in 1 Corinthians 15:35-44) and Augustine (in the early fifth century, in *On Christian Doctrine* 1:19), rejected the notion of a physical resurrection. Wrote Paul: “But some *man* will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come? *Thou* fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die....” (ASV)

¹⁹ Again, the historiography devoted to this topic is extensive. Of special interest for this essay, see: Robert Moore-Jumonville, *The Hermeneutics of Historical Distance: Mapping the Terrain of American Biblical Criticism, 1880-1914* (Lanham, Md.: 2002); Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: 1974). See also Robert W. Funk, “The Watershed of American Biblical Tradition: The Chicago School, First Phase 1892-1920.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976): 4-22; Jerry W. Brown, *The Rise of Biblical Criticism in America, 1800-1870*,

of theologians, most of whom were long past their most productive years by the time the movies became a broadly available entertainment form, are significant in film production for two reasons. First, their work provided historical detail for several producers of Bible epics, one of the most prolific genres in the silent film era. In addition, they served prominent roles as mentors and teachers of the theologians and clergy who would ally themselves with the Progressive movement and the Social Gospel and, through these social movements, the film industry itself. They disseminated mediating theology directly in their books, but also in the popular and religious press, as so many of them faced highly public and contentious heresy trials. They fell under attack from church hierarchies, local ministers and the public, as they continued on the work of mediating European scholarship to their American congregations.

Critic-theologians like Presbyterian Charles Augustus Briggs at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, Methodist Borden Parker Bowne at Boston University, Congregationalist Charles Foster Kent at Brown University and, later, Yale Divinity School, and Baptists Harper and Ernest DeWitt Burton at the University of Chicago, published a series of works designed to explicate the complex Biblical exegesis behind mediating theology. These authors became more expressly systematic in their teaching efforts, organizing their works into series with authoritative titles, like the University of Chicago Press's *Constructive Bible Studies* and Scribners' *Series on Studies in Theology*. Many of these titles would find their way into the libraries of prominent filmmakers, including Sidney Olcott, Cecil B. DeMille, and D.W. Griffith. The critic-theologians appealed explicitly to their readers' intellect by praising the power of study to

The New England Scholars (Middletown, Conn.: 1969); Naomi W. Cohen, "The Challenges of Darwinism and Biblical Criticism to American Judaism," *Modern Judaism* 42 (1984): 121-157.

overcome superstition and cant, and peppered their books with sophisticated exegetical terms, technical Hebrew and Greek translation problems and extensive reading lists. They also displayed prominent verbal and visual cues to reinforce the comforting message that, far from being dangerous to the faith, examining the Bible with a critical eye was the work of recognized experts. For students who feared that critical theory bordered on heresy, these authors emphasized their own impressive credentials and consistently affirmed that their ideas had gained a sort of common currency in the field. The filmmakers who drew on their work employed a similar strategy when they prominently cited these authors' works on film intertitles and in advertising.

Like the philosopher generation, the critic-theologians offered believers express encouragement that the investment of time and effort in a systematic course of study would pay off in a heightened faith. The Congregational minister Lyman Abbott promised willing students that higher criticism would make even the most esoteric Bible passages relevant for modern readers, and give a "new and deeper spiritual significance" to others.²⁰ Methodist Alvah Hovey promised to bring modern interpretative tools to bear on "obscure language, unsound argument, false interpretation, scientific error, historical error, contradictory teaching, false prophesy, bad theology and bad morality."²¹ He added that "the Bible addresses the intellect as well as the heart," and advised that students should expect "hard study" to learn about it properly.²² Congregationalist Rush Rhees, at Andover Newton Theological Seminary, promised that his study of Jesus would "help

²⁰ Lyman Abbott, *The Life and Literature of the Ancient Hebrews* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1901), v.

²¹ Alvah Hovey, *The Bible and How to Teach It* (Philadelphia: Griffith & Rowland Press, 1903), 47-48.

²² *Ibid.*, n.p.

thoughtful readers of the gospels to discern more clearly the feature of him whom those writings inimitably portray.”²³

This generation of writers continued to chip away at the authority of the old King James, locating scriptural authority instead in the textual, linguistic, cultural and historical disciplines of Bible criticism. Briggs, in an 1883 volume that presaged the works to come, rhapsodized on the profundity of Biblical study, and how it epitomized the long held Protestant emphasis on direct contact with the Scriptures in the vernacular.²⁴ For Briggs, higher criticism offered students a way to break free of stifling Bible orthodoxy “with the right of private judgment in its interpretation.” He laid out a comprehensive history of the critical disciplines, included an illuminating discussion of the 1,600-year process of devising an official Biblical canon, and sorted out the more prominent authorship controversies (the writers of the Psalms and Proverbs, among them). Frederic Gardiner even warned students that lessons in Bible interpretation might lead to further interpretive challenges: the prudent student would “beware of so committing himself to his interpretations that their modification shall become difficult.”²⁵ Greek Testament theologian Burton, a logical thinker, analyzed teachings of Paul that seemed to conflict with the Gospel message. Regarding Paul’s dualistic ruminations on flesh and faith, to say nothing of his injunctions against female participation in the church sacraments, Burton implied that their relevance needed to be weighed against the cultural and political backdrop to Paul’s thoughts. “Fix in mind the facts recorded in the New

²³ Rush Rhees, *The Life of Jesus of Nazareth: A Study* (New York, 1900), vii.

²⁴ Charles A. Briggs, *Biblical Study: Its Principles, Methods and History* (New York: 1883, reprinted 1891), 5-7.

²⁵ Frederic Gardiner, *Aids to Scripture Study* (New York: 1890), 162.

Testament,” he suggested, “and study the letters of the Apostle from the historical point of view.”²⁶

Perhaps the most helpful contribution of the critic-theologians to the future of silent film was to discourage believers from linking divine inspiration of the Bible with a literal reading of its passages—thereby setting stage for dramatization of Bible stories.²⁷ The Social Gospeler Washington Gladden was particularly blunt: “The work of putting the Bible in its present form was not done in heaven, but on earth,” he said, while scorning the literally minded as no better than Mormons who believed in Joseph Smith’s revelation set forth on golden plates.²⁸ For Gladden, the Bible was more of a spiritual document than a miraculous one, and he encouraged readers to base their faith “less on the letter and more...on the spirit” of its message.²⁹ The authors of this period also continued to discuss more sensitive theological questions, including the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement and, of course, the resurrection. Elizabeth Cady Stanton worked with women theologians “of earnestness and liberal ideas” to compile the *Woman’s Bible* in 1895.³⁰ In it Stanton argued that a triune God with a female component would have been more rational than one of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, and wondered why the church founders did not “improvise an earthly father as well as an

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

²⁷ Briggs, *Biblical Study*, 241.

²⁸ Washington Gladden, *Who Wrote the Bible? A Book for the People* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1896), 1-4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

³⁰ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *The Woman’s Bible* (1895; reprinted Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993). Stanton published her book expressly to demonstrate that, despite modern scholarship, the Bible remained one of the most powerful forces holding women in subjugation to men, 7-8.

earthly mother,” contending that “the Jewish idea that Jesus was born according to natural law is more rational than is the Christian record of the immaculate conception.”³¹ Abbott praised literary criticism for making “credible as fiction some passages which had been incredible as history,” in reference specifically to Eve’s sin and Jonah’s experiences living inside the whale.³²

Certainly some of this material was far beyond the critical capabilities—or the simple desire—of average lay people to tackle and the end of this middle period brings a slow shift in purpose, away from providing formal lessons in Biblical criticism toward offering a theology practical for modern believers.³³ The critic-theologians and a new crop of popular ministers like Abbott and Gladden began to reduce their emphasis on the particulars of Biblical revelation and explore Jesus Christ’s human aspects, as well as the great figures of his Jewish heritage and the Christian “fathers” who built a church around his life and death. They urged Bible students to change their focus from the Messiah who turned water into wine and calmed a choppy sea to the itinerant teacher who preached of love and healed the sick. It is nonetheless apparent that the writers perceived that lay reverence for “God the Son” remained a powerful force—and they were torn between a desire to jettison the divine Christ in favor of the social worker Jesus, and the need to teach suggestively, not dogmatically. Rhees, for example, praised the fact that God had chosen to reveal his divine nature through the human life of Jesus of Nazareth, but was

³¹ Ibid, 17, 113. The “immaculate conception” does not refer to Jesus’s birth but, rather, to Mary’s status as one born without sin.

³² Abbott, *Life and Literature*, v.

³³ James T. Kloppenberg, *Uncertain Victory: Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920* (New York, 1986); Bruce Kuklick, *Churchmen and Philosophers: From Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey* (New Haven: 1985).

careful to add: “It is with no lack of reverence for the importance and truth of the divinity of Christ that this book essays to bring the man Jesus before the mind.”³⁴ William E. Barton, who with his son consulted for Cecil B. DeMille on the 1927 *King of Kings* carefully suggested that Jesus was proof that “humanity did not lose its capacity for divinity by the Adamic fall,” while noting that Jesus himself liked being the Son of Man, and referred to himself using this terminology.³⁵

Making Jesus “seem real,” and a fit model for modern living, was Barton’s real objective—as it was for most of the critic-theologians.³⁶ Rhees put a human spin on the sensitive issue of the Lord’s Supper, evaluating discrepancies between the Gospels to determine if Jesus specifically instituted the Eucharist as a sacrament and whether it should be offered freely to the non-baptized—his conclusion: Jesus offered the Last Supper as an “institution which should symbolize the new covenant” of brotherly love and service.³⁷ Barton suggested that Jesus might have referred to all mealtimes in his famous invocation to the disciples (“do this in remembrance of me”). He suggested that Christians celebrate the Last Supper as a call to fulfill the new covenant, rather than the model for an institution that subordinated “the spirit to the letter” of the scripture.³⁸ Later in the decade Barton would co-author a study guide that celebrated Jesus as the “uncompromising enemy of sham,” and emphasized the “comfort and promise” of the

³⁴ Rush Rhees, *The Life of Jesus of Nazareth: A Study* (New York, 1900), preface viii.

³⁵ William E. Barton, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Story of His Life and the Scenes of His Ministry* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1903), 49-50.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, n.p.

³⁷ Rhees, *Life of Jesus*, 184-185.

³⁸ Barton, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 392-393.

shared meal—a powerful symbol of Jesus’ loving desire to complete his earthly mission of sacrifice and join his Father in heaven.³⁹

The Popularizers

Many of the most influential works for silent film directors appeared after 1905, as writers began to decode the oblique scriptural references that filled Jesus’ recorded teachings. More and more study materials built their search for useful meaning on the social orientation of the Hebrew Testament prophets and leaders who Jesus admired. The purpose, as Lyman Abbott stated it at the turn of the century, was to remove the problematic fact of certain Bible stories—one unpopular passage was Jephthah’s ritual sacrifice of his daughter after a military victory—that seemed crude or even barbaric to modern readers, without losing the universal messages they were meant to convey.⁴⁰

Charles Foster Kent in 1908 suggested that some of information could safely be dismissed out of hand, pointed for example to the binding of Isaac as an object lesson in the way critical theory could bring new meaning to controversial Bible stories.⁴¹ While Christian tradition had long celebrated this story of child sacrifice as a lesson about the importance of blind obedience to God’s will, Kent suggested Isaac’s last minute reprieve

³⁹ William E. Barton, Theodore G. Soares and Sidney Strong, *The Week of Our Lord’s Passion* (New York: 1907), 109-110.

⁴⁰ The story of Jephthah’s daughter is at Judges 11:29-40. The quote is in Abbott, *Life and Literature*, v. He sought to “make practically applicable to our time” the ancient writings of Israel—while placing at a safe, historical remove stories that posed “ethical difficulties” for modern readers.

⁴¹ Charles Foster Kent, *Heroes and Crises of Early Hebrew History: from the Creation to the Death of Moses* (New York: 1908; reprinted 1912), preface v. Kent explained that the canon included “certain writings, which possess only a secondary historical and religious value.”

was the story's true focus, meant to deplore ritual murder in ancient Mesopotamian society.⁴²

Possibly the most startling turn in the post-1905 study guides, however, was the distinct turn toward secular concerns and Progressivism, and it is this literature that provided a rich vernacular for film projects. The books of the next decade or so show a marked tendency to read into Hebrew and Greek Testament stories a liberal twentieth-century sensibility, and writers in this third phase encouraged believers to make improving society (albeit within proscribed, orderly bounds) a primary objective of their faith. Barton and Theodore Soares in 1908 addressed some of these concerns in their book about Christ's death.⁴³ The authors first noted Jesus' reverence for the house of God in his cleansing of the temple, then extended the story to describe the "temple of God in the human soul."⁴⁴

Sociologist Charles Henderson's 1909 book on the social responsibilities of believers, part of Chicago's *Constructive* series, offers some hints as to why authors deemed a sea change in study guide content necessary.⁴⁵ For one thing, Henderson made an explicit appeal to believers who might find the kind of critical Biblical scholarship

⁴² Ibid., 93. Abraham's abortive sacrifice "clearly represents one of the earliest protests of the enlightened prophets and lawgivers against the horrible rite of human sacrifice," he concluded.

⁴³ William E. Barton, Theodore G. Soares and Sydney Strong, *The Week of Our Lord's Passion* (New York: Hope Publishing, 1907).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 93. Having thus metaphorically called on Christians to purify the human souls around them, they were typically careful to qualify their call to action. Noting that Jesus's actions were specifically directed at a contaminating force—profit—in a holy place, they explained that he did not advocate widespread "destruction of the social order," 102.

⁴⁵ Charles Richmond Henderson, *Social Duties from the Christian Point of View: A Textbook for the Study of Social Problems* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1909), especially comments on 2, 5 and 19.

described above less than stimulating.⁴⁶ Decrying the “repetition of traditions and monotonous adherence to consecrated dullness” in most study guides, he claimed to offer “...science and law [and] contemporary fact, rather than insipid anecdote and threadbare exhortation.” For Henderson, Bible study for the purpose of reinforcing one’s faith or clarifying God’s revelation was pointless. He suggested that Sunday-school teachers instead focus on “specific social aims,” to keep the resulting discussion on track.⁴⁷ His table of contents reads like a laundry list of turn-of-the-century social concerns, with topics such as “Social Duties Relating to the Family;” “Social Duties of Urban Life: Public Health;” and “Social Duties of Urban Life: Municipal Government.” For those worried about American imperialist actions in Spain’s former holdings, as well as troubles brewing in Europe, he even offered a section on “Social Duties in International Relations.”

For Christians whose social concerns fell closer to home, Georgia Chamberlin (who wrote *Constructive* studies for children) and Henry F. Cope, billed as general secretary of the Religious Education Association, turned to Bible study for the family.⁴⁸ In her forward, Chamberlin promised to place the Bible in its historical context, but asked students to apply its precepts to their own lives. She also explicitly incorporated the Social Gospel into her study, advising students to look to the Hebrew Testament for the “conception of one universal God,” and to the Greek Testament for “...a sense of the

⁴⁶ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁸ Georgia Louise Chamberlin, *The Hebrew Prophets or Patriots and Leaders of Israel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1911); Henry F. Cope, *Religious Education in the Family* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1915).

brotherhood of men.”⁴⁹ Cope viewed the family as the font of all Christian progress, “essentially an institution for religious education,” in his words.⁵⁰ And, good liberal that he was, Cope was careful to warn parents against the kind of emotional conversion and “facile” understanding of God that could accompany evangelical religion. In fact, he became almost unintelligible in his effort to present a thoroughly modern and suggestive alternative to the traditional Sunday-school curriculum: “Education is the orderly development of lives, according to scientific principles, into the fullness of their power, the realization of all their possibilities, the joy of their world, the utmost rendering in efficiency of their service.”⁵¹

Kent in 1917 wrote possibly the most singular practical Bible study guide, *Social Teachings of the Prophets and Jesus*.⁵² In this fascinating departure from an extensive body of otherwise traditional scholarship, Kent promised to reveal modern discoveries about the social foundation of prophecy, teachings “so deeply embedded” in scripture as to be inaccessible to average students.⁵³ Writing at the peak of the war, he found in the Bible justification for workers rights, temperance, economic reform and many other popular Progressive causes. His table of contents tells a story in and of itself, with headings like “Moses’ Assertion of the Rights of the Industrially Oppressed;” “Amos’s

⁴⁹ Chamberlin, *Hebrew Prophets*, xvi-xvii.

⁵⁰ Cope, *Religious Education*, 46.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵² Charles Foster Kent, *Social Teachings of the Prophets and Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1917). Burton was thinking along the same lines a decade earlier in notes on “Two Characteristics of Christian work suggested by Modern Business Methods” in Notebook, 1906, in Ernest DeWitt Burton Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, Chicago, Ill.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 7.

Interpretation of the Responsibilities of the Rich and Ruling Classes;” and “The Economic Significance of Intemperance and Luxury.” For those who failed to grasp the message, Kent dedicated one whole section to social reform in the seventh century, with a subsection on the “Irresponsible, Unprincipled Rich.” He rounded off the contents neatly with a section on “Jesus’ Economic Teachings,” including “the Right Use of Wealth.”

Kent’s lessons are just as Progressive-minded as the table of contents indicates. In his presentation on Moses, “the first man in human history with a well-developed social consciousness,” Kent found a fitting blueprint for labor agitation in the modern world. Noting that Moses was attracted to the “freer, more democratic social life” of the nomadic Hebrews, he saw in the initial flight from Egypt Moses’ recognition of the “colossal injustice of the Egyptian industrial system.”⁵⁴ Moses’ “well-planned campaign” of education, organization, demands and “practical agitation” having proved fruitless, the leader then “depended upon patient, persistent waiting for the outworking of the social and economic laws through with the rule of God is manifested.”⁵⁵ In the parable of the householder and the laborers who were paid the same amount for their work no matter when they started (commonly interpreted as evidence of universal grace), Kent claimed to find evidence of a sort of divine endorsement of living wage theory, a “doctrine that every man who is willing to work should be given an opportunity to earn a living for himself and for those dependent on him.”⁵⁶ Kent brought his study of Jesus to an ominous climax around the story of the temple cleansing: he contended that Jesus’ crucifixion,

⁵⁴ Ibid., 8.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 235

when viewed in the “clear light” of the Bible story, was the result of his visible campaign of support for the “oppressed masses against their rapacious rulers.”⁵⁷

Liberal Protestantism in Mass Culture

Despite the barrage of lay educational programs and study materials, and widely publicized sermons advocating Bible criticism as the way to deepen faith in a skeptical world, well into the 1910s and 1920s Christians continued to verbalize misgivings that Bible study had done nothing but render the foundations of their faith wobbly. In letters to ministers and to religious periodicals, they lamented what they perceived were the costs that better education, a cosmopolitan outlook and industrialization had wrought—an arid faith, devoid of miracle and magic, lacking the substance to provide the kind of life foundation their evangelical grandparents had taken for granted. For some of these seekers, intensive Bible study programs offered relief. Yet even the most practically oriented materials, aimed not so much at increasing believers’ theological sophistication but at encouraging a life of active social service, appealed to relatively few in the burgeoning ranks of the new liberal Protestants.⁵⁸ To meet the needs of this particular community, after about 1885 a wide range of popular literature emerged to emphasize the place of good works and social activism in a fulfilled Christian life. So popular was this material that the great majority of liberal Christians began slowly but discernibly to shift

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁵⁸ For two fascinating studies of the tension between institutionalized theological study and “lived religion,” as well as lay resistance to complicated sermons and study course, see Erin A. Smith, “‘Jesus, My Pal’: Reading and Religion in Middlebrow America,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 37 (2007: 2), 149-181; and, “‘What Would Jesus Do?’: The Social Gospel and the Literary Marketplace,” *Book History* 10 (2007), 193-221.

the center of theological authority in their lives from institutionalized study materials and clerically mediated theology to this new mass religious culture.⁵⁹

Liberal Protestant mass culture of the 1900s to 1930s played a critical role in the film industry because it formulated the vernacular language, a sort of familiar shorthand of liberal Protestant belief, which filmmakers could embed to great effect in plots and characterizations. These references were immediately recognizable to middle-class Protestant audiences, and they conveyed a great deal of nuance in very few words or images. In addition, they presented filmmakers with a vast trove of ready-made story ideas and intertextual sources upon which to construct their motion pictures. Exhibitors, never shy about informing directors what was working to fill seats, were abundantly clear on several matters, one of which was that familiar stories, which did not need a great deal of dialog or explication to advance the plot, tended to go over big with audiences.⁶⁰

The great bastion of liberal Protestant mass culture was the Chautauqua Institution, formed in 1874 when the owner of a defunct Methodist revival camp on Chautauqua Lake New York heard the inspiring words of John Heyl Vincent, a Methodist preacher agitating for reform of Sunday school teaching methods. Lewis Miller saw an opportunity to turn his abandoned camp into a money maker. He suggested to Vincent that Sunday school teachers could benefit from yearly retreats to a pastoral setting, but he

⁵⁹ Smith, "Jesus, My Pal," 163. For views critical of the legitimacy of mediating theology in mass culture, see Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Farrar, 1977); T.J. Jackson Lears and Richard Wrightman Fox, *Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980* (New York: Pantheon, 1983); and David S. Reynolds, *Faith in Fiction: The Emergence of Religious Literature in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

⁶⁰ The other frequently delivered message was that pretty girls were an important film draw.

had his work cut out for him.⁶¹ Vincent initially was concerned that the site, with its revivalist connotations, would not serve the purpose. In the end, the two men agreed to establish a summer program of intensive study that focused on ancient history and classical language, and included worship and discussion groups. Within a decade, the Chautauqua Institution added science, geography and literature to the summer program, featuring a list the lecturers, readers and artists who were the popular entertainers of the day. By 1878, the Chautauqua had expanded its program to encompass Literary and Scientific Circles, a university extension that offered a four-year liberal arts degree in three parts: an annual reading list, a monthly magazine and the summer Assembly course.

Seeking to elevate what one enthusiast called “the three-fold piety of the heart, the intellect, and the will,” the Chautauqua in its many iterations played a critical role in conveying a common religious and secular cultural currency across the nation, especially in the isolated hinterlands of the Midwest, West and Southwest.⁶² Three Chautauqua programs intersected in significant ways with the film industry. First the Chautauqua Institution’s Literary and Scientific Circles mediated to literally hundreds of thousands of Americans by 1914 the basics of history and culture, including Biblical criticism.⁶³ In addition, the popular *Chautauquan* magazine offered monthly doses of the same fare, along with articles on the practical benefits of virtually every new technology available in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century America, including electricity, photography

⁶¹ Rieser, *Chautauqua Moment*, 36-37. See also Henry P. Harrison and Karl Detzer, *Culture Under Canvas: The Story of Tent Chautauqua* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1958), 39.

⁶² Emily Raymond, *About Chautauqua: As an Idea, as a Power, and as a Place* (Toledo: Blade Printing and Paper Co., 1886), 12.

⁶³ Rieser, *Chautauqua Movement*, 207. Russell L. Johnson, “‘Dancing Mothers’: The Chautauqua Movement in Twentieth-Century American Popular Culture,” *American Studies International* (June 2001: 39, 2), 53. In the 1900s, Rieser concludes that one million people visited the summer camp each year.

and light bulbs.⁶⁴ The *Chautauquan* encouraged its readers to open their minds to the benefits of exposure to beauty in landscape and art, fostering the appreciation of photography, magic lantern shows and *tableaux vivantes* that were part of the early acceptance of film as an entertainment form.⁶⁵ Finally, historians agree that the “little chautauquas,” circuits of for-profit Chautauqua-style entertainment programs played a big role in introducing Americans to the new medium of film—to such an extent that most scholars agree that the chautauqua circuits began to be replaced by movie theaters as preferred affordable entertainment by 1910.⁶⁶

Perhaps even more influential in the production of silent films, however, were the vast ranks of Social Gospel and liberal Protestant novelists, who filled books stores and reading lists with a steady stream of popular stories that emphasized their values. Erin Smith finds that publishers presented around 100 of these novels from 1886 to 1914, including the wildly popular *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* by Charles Sheldon in 1897, Winston Churchill’s *Inside of the Cup* in 1913. The Social Gospel messages in these bestsellers share a number attributes with religious themes in silent films. Many, like those listed above, extol the virtues of study in advancing an enlightened faith, while celebrating the importance of direct contact simple human kindness (the “Golden Rule”) in dealings with the poor and outcast of society. Others offered stock characters who behaved in ways that illustrated liberal Protestant beliefs—a good example is the contrast

⁶⁴ For typical examples, see virtually any issue from 1880 to 1900, including April 1887, on “practical incandescent, or glow, lamps;” May 1894, on “portable electricity;” November 1896, on “privy vaults, the relic of barbarism.”

⁶⁵ Rieser, *Chautauqua Movement*, 229-31.

⁶⁶ Johnson, “Dancing Mothers,” 61, 63. Johnson asserts that the advent of radio and television completed the eclipse of the circuit chautauquas, 59.

between playwright Lottie Blair Parker's Squire Bartlett and his wife in *Way Down East*. While the conservative Squire spouts Old Testament condemnation and seeks to persecute a young woman who shows up on this doorstep, unsure she has lived a blameless life, his wife instead asks him to extend to her the kindness implied by the Golden Rule. The body of Liberal Protestant fiction provided substantially the types of characters and plotlines filmmakers adopted—when they weren't simply adapting these bestsellers for the screen.

Conclusion

As this study will reveal, almost from its inception, the film industry squared off behind the liberal flank of Protestantism, betting its fortunes on those who accepted Darwin's theory of evolution, embraced modernism and felt free to question Bible truth. By presenting the liberal gospel in their films, filmmakers could appeal to a desirable audience segment: educated, middle-class, native-born Americans with disposable income, adequate leisure time and a demonstrated proclivity for cultural uplift.⁶⁷ At the same time, this content helped to bolster their legitimacy as a socially acceptable entertainment medium with liberal Protestant clergy and theologians, many of whom were closely allied with the Progressive movement. The symbiosis between liberal Protestantism and film went both ways: even the most intellectual and committed Biblical exegetes by the early 1900s realized that the kind of rigorous study and reflection necessary to experience faith in a modern way were beyond the attention span and

⁶⁷ Nancy T. Ammerman, "Golden Rule Christianity: Lived Religion in the American Mainstream," in David D. Hall, ed. *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 196.

resources of average Christians. Films offered an attractive medium for presenting complex liberal theological messages in an appealing dramatic form that all participants realized had a power far beyond that of the written or spoken word—the potential threat to society’s moral fiber presented by Hollywood’s burgeoning rank of sexy starlets was minor, in comparison.⁶⁸

The study courses, magazines, and fiction of liberal Protestantism was critical to film’s explosive growth as a mass medium in many ways—it prepared believers to shift the focus of moral authority from the Church to themselves. It removed God from a heavenly distance and put him firmly on earth in the form of the human Jesus. It spawned a literature of ready-made melodramatic stories that provided a good source of intertextual references to appeal to wary middle-class film goers. Perhaps most importantly, it also provided a vernacular language of compassionate service and individual morality that had immediate resonance for some audiences. One of the earliest and most enduring results of the film industry’s interest in religious themes grew naturally from the liberal Protestant emphasis on two theologies: the importance of historical context in exploring the mysteries of Scripture; and the human Jesus as a force for good in modern society. From the very earliest days of film practice, directors, producers and exhibitors enthusiastically included Bible stories in their commercial programs, from filmed Oberammergau performances and two feature length productions in the early silent era, to the wildly popular Italian epic features of the early 1910s and

⁶⁸ On the power of film, reformers of the day were concerned about what Kathryn Helgesen Fuller describes as the medium’s “overwhelming narcotic power.” See her thoughtful article “Boundaries of Participation: The Problem of Spectatorship and American Film Audiences, 1905-1930,” *Film & History* 20:4 (1990), 75-86, which endorses the notion that audiences remained fully engaged and interactive with filmed material—rather than “subdued into passive modes of reception,” as other historians suggest, 75.

Hollywood productions too numerous to count in the 1920s. Put simply, for filmmakers throughout the twentieth century, the Bible was very good business.

Chapter two: “Impersonating God”

When Fox Film Corporation in 1921 asked Dr. John Roach Straton of New York’s Calvary Baptist Church to consult on a proposed life of Jesus Christ, the minister let loose a broadside of negative publicity about the project.¹ The producer’s agent had circulated to various ministers a letter and other advance material about the proposed film for the purpose of soliciting clerical assistance in adapting the Oberammergau Passion Play. The *New York Times* quoted from Fox’s letter, in which the film company indicated its interest in allocating some of its “vast resources” to motion pictures “containing the message of the churches to the people,” specifically “along the lines of Protestant ideals and teachings.” Not even Fox’s assurance the film would “contain an atmosphere of extreme reverence” could tempt Straton to take part, however, and he ran through a typical list of objections to dramatized Biblical stories. Portraying the life of Jesus for commercial gain was his primary protest, but he also found offensive the fact that Fox had been particularly associated with showing films on Sundays and with salacious content in other popular movies. Finally, Straton doubted that the actors playing Biblical roles would be of the same pious temperament as the players at Oberammergau were thought to be. Asked for a response to these allegations, a spokesman for Fox probably shaded the truth a bit when he averred that the film company had never intended to make money off the project, saying it was “to be purely a philanthropic production.” The spokesman further noted that Fox had successfully recruited several clerics to the project, and expected more to join.

¹ “Straton Refuses to Aid Passion Film,” *New York Times* (2 Nov 1921). From 1918 to 1929, Straton was senior pastor of Calvary Baptist, located at 57th Street and Sixth Avenue, where it remains today.

Despite Straton's qualms about the suitability of dramatizing Holy Scripture, admittedly rather conservative for the post-World War I era, the minister essentially was fighting a lost battle.² Biblical epic films were certainly not new to American movie screens in 1921, and film companies continued to release a steady stream of them throughout the decade.³ Although Roman Catholics had long accepted imagery, and even dramatized Bible stories, as devotional and educational tools, as late as the early nineteenth century evangelical Protestants were generally resistant to these forms of worship on the grounds they were potentially idolatrous and certainly tainted by their association with sinful humanity. Across the century, however, there was a marked softening of opposition to visual explorations of faith due mainly to the widespread embrace of historicism, or critical study of the Bible's historical context, by liberals and moderates.⁴ Prosperous and educated, many Protestants had by 1900 proven themselves to be enthusiastic and sophisticated consumers of Bible criticism, supporting a religious educational infrastructure established to feed their hunger for a deeper knowledge of Scripture.

² Typical negative press for Biblical films include an unsigned editorial on "The Life of Christ as Shown in the Movies," *Current Opinion* 57 (September 1914), 192, which quoted "German writer of note" Dr. H. Petri, as suggesting a Pathé Life of Christ's scenery was beautiful, but obviously driven by "sensational or semi-sensational purposes rather than religion." A *New York Times* review in 1916 criticized "scenes in which the Christ is impersonated, always a questionable proceeding if the feelings of many are to be respected."

³ On the importance of Biblical films, especially lives of Christ, in early cinema, see Patrick G. Loughney, "The First American Film Spectacular: FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS" *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*, 40:1 (Winter 1983), 56-69; and "From 'Rip Van Winkle' to 'Jesus of Nazareth': Thoughts on the Origins of the American Screenplay," *Film History* 9:3 (1997), 277-289; also see Charles Musser, "Passions and Passion Play; Theatre, Film and Religion in America, 1880-1900," *Film History* 5:4 (1993), 419-456.

⁴ On historicism and Bible criticism in American Protestantism, see footnote 3 in chapter one. An examination of the limits of historicism is in Dorothy Ross, "Historical Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Historical Review*, 89:4 (1984), 909-928.

Historicizing the Bible contributed to a shift in American attitudes toward Biblical history and art.⁵ Along with the rejection of ornate neo-Gothic “Victoriana” in favor of spare neo-classicism, the late nineteenth-century love of Bible study generated among Christians an almost insatiable desire to experience the Holy Land in a first-hand, personal way.⁶ Americans of limited means could only dream of travelling by camel caravan from Damascus to Jerusalem, as popular American humorist Mark Twain did in 1867, so satisfying the craving for an authentic Holy Land experience fell to an unlikely assortment of enterprising clerics, utopians, artists and crackpots, who wrote travelogues, assembled pictorial tours and maps, and even constructed full-scale models of notable Palestinian sites across America.⁷ Fortunately for pious American consumers, the purveyors of Holy Land representations were always quick to emphasize the pure and unspoiled Palestinian landscape, vowing erroneously that social customs and forms of dress remained unchanged from the first century, and playing down the poverty and crass

⁵ See especially the chapter on Charles Foster Kent, Biblical geography and fashionable Holy Land entertainments of the late nineteenth century in Burke O. Long, *Imagining the Holy Land: Maps, Models and Fantasy Travels* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2003), 89-129. See also David Morgan, *Protestants and Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). Morgan finds that “the desire to form rather than merely inform character made special use of images and thrived among liberal protestants...,” 11. Interestingly, Morgan suggests turn-of-the-twentieth-century imagery created “an iconography of the face,” an idea that shares certain currency with film scholars who find the facial close-up to be an essential feature of the allure of classical film style. Morgan, *Protestants and Pictures*, 11. and David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 190-191.

⁶ Works influential in this study include: Long’s *Imagining the Holy Land*; John Davis, *The Landscape of Belief: Encountering the Holy Land in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1196); Jeffrey Watson, “Holy Land: Land of Memory and Promise,” *American Jewish Archives* 47:1 (1995), 96; Lester Vogel, *To See a Promised Land: America and the Holy Land in the 19th Century* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993); Robert T. Handy, ed. *The Holy Land in American Protestant Life, 1800-1948: A Documentary History* (New York: Arno, 1981).

⁷ Long, *Imagining the Holy Land*, 3. See also, Franklin Walker, *Irreverent Pilgrims: Melville, Browne, and Mark Twain in the Holy Land* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974). Twain sailed on one of the first steamer cruises, which he later called “a funeral procession without a corpse,” 163.

commercialism that shocked so many in the real Holy Land.⁸ Americans responded by purchasing lavishly illustrated books that promised readers a virtual encounter with the most sacred sites of Christianity, such as Charles Widemann Lee and Robert E. M. Bain's 1894 publication *Earthly Footsteps of the Man of Galilee*, a million-copy seller featuring 400 photographs and an introduction by Chautauqua founder John Heyl Vincent, as well as Henry Van Dyke's 1905 *The Childhood of Jesus Christ*, illustrated with reprints of famous paintings.⁹ More ambitious in conception were two prominent landmarks of visual religious culture in turn-of-the-twentieth-century America, the Palestine Park exhibit at the Chautauqua campground in upstate New York, and the Jerusalem Exhibit at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair (see figures, page 220).¹⁰ The World's Fair exhibit dominated the St. Louis skyline with full-scale reproductions of Jerusalem sites, including the Dome of the Rock (called by the exhibit's producers "The Mosque of Omar), familiar from American Colony photographs. The purpose of this barrage of Holy Land material was to offer participants what Long calls a "personal, unmediated experience of God (Christ) in the heart."¹¹ The advent of filmed scenes in the Holy Land would trump all of these experiences however, by promising a glimpse into the "real" world of the Bible.

⁸ Franklin, *Irreverent Pilgrims*, 181, 28-29.

⁹ On Lee, see Long, *Imagining the Holy Land*, 53. Also Davis, *Landscape*, 77-79. On Van Dyke, see Handy, *Holy Land*, xvi-xvii.

¹⁰ On the Chautauqua model, see especially Long, *Imagining the Holy Land*, 28-39. On the 1904 World's Fair, see especially Vogel, *Promised Land*, 213-236.

¹¹ Long, *Holy Land*, 39.

But it was not only the authentic Holy Land that attracted American Christians. The emergence of mass-reproduced religious art as a Protestant devotional device was another development that proved critical to the acceptance of Biblical subjects in commercial films. The immense popularity of religious pamphlets, pictorial Bible cards and color-printed illustrated Bibles helped overcome objections to dramatic renderings of the sacred subjects because directors could use their most famous scenes to shape their own compositions.¹² This is most obvious in the filmic treatments of Jesus' last meal with his disciples, which directors portrayed in an historically suspect way made popular through some of the most well-known and widely copied art from the Renaissance through the late Victorian era. Other prominent sources for film directors included James Jacques Joseph Tissot's two-volume collection of watercolors of Bible subjects and Frenchman Gustave Dorés illustrated Bible. The original artwork of both artists was widely available throughout American society, reprinted in books, on devotional cards and exhibited in prominent museums, Tissot's at the Brooklyn Museum of Art (which owns many of the original watercolors) in 1889 and the Chicago Art Institute in 1899. Also successful were tracts and pamphlets on religious subjects, many illustrated with engravings of familiar Gospel scenes by Tissot, Doré and German artists Heinrich Hoffman and Bernhard Plockhorst. These latter were available in a variety of media for public exhibition, including slides.

The emergence of fictionalized Bible stories also played a role in the eventual acceptance of Biblical films because they helped to legitimize the presentation of sacred

¹² Morgan, *Protestants and Pictures*, 269. Stephen Prothero chronicles the rise of Jesus imagery in nineteenth-century America, in *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux: 2003), 60-70.

material in a secular format. Popular evangelical fiction had for decades wrapped scandalous stories of sexual betrayal, female degradation and immorality in a thin veil of propriety by featuring one or more characters acting in a Christ-like way, often by resolving social tensions through extreme personal suffering and sacrifice.¹³ But most of these novels were produced to proselytize one or another way of faith, or evangelical issue. Cheap printing, in the form of the low-priced “dime novel,” brought a wider range of fictionalized Biblical material and romantic evangelical stories to an American public eager for entertaining literature but leery of explicitly secular themes. Fictionalized Bible narratives allowed authors like Lew Wallace to place imaginary characters in compelling (even scandalous) circumstances and exotic Biblical locales, as he did in his 1880 novel *Ben-Hur*, while mentioning the Savior only obliquely. The script from a staged version of *Ben-Hur* formed the basis for one of the first narrative films, by Kalem Company in 1907, and it played a critical role in establishing copyright law in the film industry when Wallace’s estate and the book’s publisher, Harper & Brothers, successfully sued the film company and scenarist Gene Gauntier for her adaptation.¹⁴ Twenty years later, Gauntier commented that the sixteen-scene film was “atrocious” by later standards, but the “chariot race was the great climax and ‘sold’ the picture.”

It was perhaps inevitable that, with Biblical historicism so much in vogue after 1890, these forms of religious mass culture—along with the Bible itself—would begin to find dramatic life on the stage, largely the result of attempts by showmen and theatre

¹³ Examples include *Ramona* and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. On the cultural impact of evangelical fiction, see Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

¹⁴ Gene Gauntier, “Blazing the Trail,” *Women’s Home Companion* 55:10 (Oct 1928). The quote is on page 7. The text of Gauntier’s autobiography is at the Museum of Modern Art, Film Study Center.

exhibitors to elevate popular perceptions of theatre and vaudeville. As would movie theater owners some 20 years later, late-nineteenth century entrepreneurs found that bringing proven literary hits of any sort to the stage helped to de-stigmatize their product, perceived in “polite” society as suitable only for immigrants and blue-collar workers.¹⁵ The Oberammergau Passion Play, a nineteenth-century German nun’s fevered vision of Christ’s torment and death, rejected as profane by American Protestant audiences in the 1880s, began to circulate more successfully in dramatic and religious educational circles a decade later.¹⁶ By 1904 the Redpath chautauqua circuit combined religiously oriented skits and dramatic readings with its program of lectures and musical events.¹⁷ Thanks to travelling entertainer-lecturers, audiences also enjoyed photographic tours of the Holy Land, Oberammergau recreations, and other sacred material in church basements and small theatres across America. These screened entertainments, many combining static and moving pictures and most vaguely associated with the Chautauqua Institution’s

¹⁵ David Nasaw discusses vaudeville, white-collar workers and “cheap, respectable theatres” in *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 40. See also Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 142-3.

¹⁶ Doris Alexander first chronicled the slow rise to respectability of Passion Plays, beginning with Salmi Morse’s failure to bring the Oberammergau spectacle to San Francisco in “The Passion Play in America,” *American Quarterly* 11:3 (Autumn 1959): 350-371. Charles Musser chronicles his New York failure in “Passions and Passion Play: Theatre, Film and Religion in America, 1880-1900,” *Film History* 5:4 (1993), 419-456. An approving 1905 *New York Times* review of an Oberammergau presentation of the *Life of David* praised the lead actor’s natural but “reverential” demeanor, “The Play at Ober-Ammergau,” *New York Times*, 11 June 1905.

¹⁷ Musser locates these educational entertainments along a continuum of “screen practice” that stimulated early interest in creating and viewing motion pictures in America in *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley, University of California Press: 1990), 40-43. For an overview of the creation of the chautauqua circuit (deliberately differentiated from the Chautauqua Institution in New York and the hundreds of officially sanctioned, local “Little Chautauqua” assemblies, by use of the lower-case letter) and the economics of it, see Andrew C. Rieser, *The Chautauqua Moment: Protestants, Progressives, and the Culture of Modern Liberalism* (New York, Columbia University Press: 2003), 270-3; and Charlotte M. Canning, *The Most American Thing in America: Circuit Chautauqua as Performance* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), especially 8-12. See also Nasaw’s discussion of religion and educational programs in *Going Out*, 146-47.

program for intellectual elevation and moral uplift, boosted the appeal of religious subjects to early film audiences. In ways that have not yet been thoroughly analyzed by cultural historians, the dark room, the church-like setting, the “holy” subject matter, and, perhaps, the distancing effect of the projected image itself, somehow contrived to remove the taint of theatre from these productions.¹⁸

After 1893, the mass culture of liberal Protestantism—and its purveyors—quickly found a way to the screen, in the form of silent Biblical films. Not only did Salmi Morse’s failed Oberammergau Passion stage production provide one of the first film scenarios, but later filmmakers exploited the wide familiarity with Holy Land images to appeal to potential audiences with familiar Bible stories and the location shots of the fabled Biblical landscape.¹⁹ And what better way to for a film director to assuage any vestiges of Protestant discomfort with visual renderings of Bible figures than to imitate Tissot’s heartwarming earth tones and Europeanized faces?²⁰ The silent-era lives of Christ prominently featured the most beloved scenes based on Christian images from the artistic sources cited above, including the Adoration of the Magi at Jesus’ birth, surmounted by the Star of Bethlehem; Christ defending the children whom his followers would chase away; and Christ praying in the Garden of Gethsemane (or on the Mount of

¹⁸ In Musser, “Passions and Passion Play,” 420, the author contends that the absence of live performers, plus film’s positive association with technological progress and the old nineteenth-century educational lantern slide shows, helped garner acceptance for Biblical films.

¹⁹ Salmi Morse’s partner Albert Eaves owned the stage play, and in 1898 he partnered with Eden Musée president Richard Hollaman to make a filmed Passion on Grand Central Station in New York. Loughney, “Jesus of Nazareth,” 280; Musser, “Passions,” 240.

²⁰ On the Tissot Bible, see Nancy Rose Marshall and Malcom Warner, *James Tissot: Victorian Life, Modern Love* (New Haven, Conn., Yale University Press: 1999). Cecil B. DeMille used the Tissot Bible as visual source material for his 1927 production of *The King of Kings*; Bessie McGaffey memo to Gladys Rosson 6 Jul 1927, CBDMA 285 (1); catalog of CBDM personal Bibles (ca. 1927), CBDMA 181 (1).

Olives, depending on the Gospel version cited), while his followers sleep. By using these images as templates for their films, silent era filmmakers were able to tell powerful dramatic tales and evoke strong emotions in their audiences, while still presenting material with a certain comfortable familiarity.

After 1907 and the audience embrace of narrative form, Biblical stories offered another critical advantage for film directors because they allowed for plotting complexity at a time when films could not rely on spoken dialog to advance dramatic action. After all, Bible stories were intimately familiar to a broad audience segment, whether from direct personal contact with Scripture or mediated in Sunday services and sacramental settings (baptism, marriage, burial). The period from 1898 to 1928 saw four major productions of the life of Jesus, and there is evidence of numerous minor productions, as well. In the same years, American directors produced at least three films containing Old Testament content, as well as two adaptations (in 1907 and 1925) of *Ben-Hur*.²¹ This chapter will examine four Gospel epics and three Old Testament dramas to see how directors, scenarists, art directors and publicity departments sought to enhance the appeal (and profits) of these films by using liberal Protestant Biblical theology and popular religious imagery to shape the dramatic content. At the same time, the films, with their similar content, offer an opportunity to review how film practice evolved in thirty years, from the production of crude vignettes in the first decade, to more dramatically sophisticated and intellectually complex output in the last decade of the period.

²¹ The 1907 BEN HUR was written by Gene Gauntier and directed by Sidney Olcott for Kalem Company; the 1925 version was directed by Fred Niblo from a scenario by June Mathis for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Corp. I have chosen not to include these fictionalized versions in this analysis.

The Films

Early twentieth-century film goers proved willing to experience the Bible in an entirely new medium.²² Already in first decade of commercial film production, when directors were able to satisfy the demand for film with simple “flickers” of popular entertainments and everyday human activities, at least two popular American films were released based on dramatized renderings of the Passion of Christ. The first was a filmed version of a Bohemian Passion reenactment, *THE HORITZ PASSION PLAY* (1897), produced by Klaw & Erlanger and marketed by Edison Manufacturing Company. The second was the Eden Musée’s *PASSION PLAY OF OBERAMMERGAU* (1898), initially billed as an authentic Oberammergau performance, but later acknowledged as a local New York City production.²³ In stark contrast to Passion stage plays, which in the 1880s generated ferocious criticism for their impious and commercial nature, both the *HORITZ* and *Eden* films were immediate and fairly longstanding successes.²⁴ At least two minor productions followed, about which information is sketchy.

Four years later, however, the French film company Pathé Frères distributed one of the most popular movies of the early twentieth century, *THE LIFE AND PASSION OF JESUS CHRIST*, initially released in 1902, then expanded and re-released in 1905. Directed by Ferdinand Zecca and Lucien Nonguet, the original release included about 12 scenes

²² Musser mentions a 12-scene French version filmed in 1897, but finds the Horitz play to be the first shown in America. Musser, “Passions,” 435. For an examination of the early use of film in religious education see Kevin Lewis, “Rev. Herbert Jump and the Motion Picture,” *Film History* 14 (2002): 210-215, as well as the reprint of Jump’s 1910 pamphlet *The Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture*; 216.

²³ Prints of these films are not available at this writing, although bits and pieces exist in different formats in several archives, including the Library of Congress, Eastman House and the UCLA Film Archive.

²⁴ Musser, “Passions,” 438, 443.

(later expanded to 20), acted in a declamatory fashion on rudimentary stage sets with Pathés widely admired special effects (mainly double exposures), and some authentic historical touches. One of the film's most appealing aspects is its use of stenciled color, which clothed actors and angels in hues of yellow, red and blue (figures on page 195). The production's bobbing haloes and visible stage risers contribute an amateurish feel to the movie in today's eyes, but it was one of Pathé's most enduring hits, and was part of the reason the French production house enjoyed a brief reputation as the producer of the highest quality films for distribution in America.²⁵

In the wake of Pathés hit, Alice Guy (later Guy-Blaché), French photography and motion picture pioneer Léon Gaumont's secretary-turned-film-director, directed *LA NAISSANCE, LA VIE ET LA MORT DE NOTRE SEIGNEUR JÉSUS CHRIST*, distributed in the United States as *THE BIRTH, THE LIFE AND THE DEATH OF CHRIST* (Gaumont Film Company, 1906). Guy's 20-minute film has not yet been restored for commercial release in the U.S., although snippets are visible in Marquise Lepage's 1995 documentary *THE LOST GARDEN: THE LIFE AND CINEMA OF ALICE GUY-BLACHÉ*, which included filmed reminiscences of the director, her daughter and her grand-daughter.²⁶ The film is a string of vignettes, shot mainly on stage, but with two or three scenes shot at an unidentified outdoor location. The action moves abruptly from scene to scene, skipping several of the Gospel stories featured in other silent lives of Christ, most significantly, as we shall see, Christ's violent confrontation with the moneylenders in the Temple, as well as the raising

²⁵ Richard Abel, *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1999, 31, 34; see also ads for *THE LIFE AND PASSION OF JESUS CHRIST* in 1907 and 1908, on 46, 53. Musser, *Emergence of Cinema*, 412.

²⁶ Charles Silver, curator of the Museum of Modern Art's film collection, generously provided the author with a screening of this rare film.

of his friend Lazarus from the dead. With films like Guy-Blaché's, Gaumont, alongside rivals Pathé and Georges Méliès, created in the twentieth century's first decade a sort of golden age of French film, of which the Gospel two-reeler was a popular and critical success.

Six years later, the widespread adoption within film practice of narrative style and feature length brought with it a third major life of Christ, *FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS* (Kalem Company, 1913), by director Olcott and scenarist Gauntier, who also played Mary, the mother of Jesus.²⁷ The Kalem production was one of the first huge movie spectacles, both in its filming and in release. Olcott and Gauntier stoked interest in the film by issuing a barrage of short Middle Eastern melodramas, documentaries and news reports about their adventures in Turkey, Egypt and the Holy Land. Olcott, after years of shooting films in such locales as Florida and Ireland, was the acknowledged master of the location shoot, and he put his considerable skills to good use, capturing spectacular images of the Holy Land that appealed to clerics and lay people alike. Olcott took a small group of actors with him, recruited others from Europe and, as was his common practice on location, made ample use of local civilians as extras. The film that Olcott and Gauntier completed was markedly more sophisticated than almost any yet released in America—Biblical or not. The portrayals were restrained and realistic, while the plot was driven less by technical wizardry and more by Jesus' doomed advance toward Jerusalem and martyrdom. In a departure from its predecessors, Kalem's

²⁷ The film deserves far greater scholarly attention than it has thus far garnered, and not only for its exquisite cinematography and sophisticated acting. Olcott and Gauntier wrote and pre-produced the film on a cruise ship bound from Europe to the Holy Land. This story of the film's production is taken from Gary W. Garner, "The Kalem Company, Travel and On-Location Filming: The Forging of an Identity," *Film History* 10:2 (1998), 188-207, as well as Gauntier's unpublished autobiography, New York Museum of Modern Art, Center for the Study of Film.

production employed scriptural citations on frequent intertitles to advance the plot and lend theological credibility to its scenario. This film was immediately popular with audiences and its advertising played up the \$100,000 budget, exotic locales—even the herds of camels used in shooting—to emphasize its authenticity. Gauntier later commented that the Holy Land of 1911 was so little changed from Christ’s time that the director had only to gather artisans from the Jerusalem city gates to portray accurately the sellers in the temple, “without a change of make-up or props.”²⁸

Also in 1912, famed director D.W. Griffith, fed up with Biograph Company’s grudging attitude toward his directorial perquisites, walked away from his employer, leaving behind his first full-length feature film, the Biblical epic *JUDITH OF BETHULIA* (released by Biograph Company, 1914). Griffith, already an admired craftsman of artistic one- and two-reel short films, was reportedly spurred to attempt a feature-length project after viewing the Italian historical epic *QUO VADIS* (Enrico Guazzoni, 1912), which used immense sets of Ancient Rome as a backdrop for a complex stories of love, betrayal, murder and revenge—in short, a blockbuster adventure tale that entranced audiences all over America. Griffith, who had experience with outdoor shooting on a smaller scale, applied his considerable skill at character development and plot pacing to retell the Apocryphal story of Judith, a beautiful Jewish widow who kills King Nebuchadnezzar’s general to break the siege of Bethulia.²⁹ Starring Henry Walthall as the general, Holofernes, Blanche Sweet as Judith, and Mae Marsh and Lillian Gish in small parts,

²⁸ Gene Gauntier, “Filming ‘From the Manger to the Cross’ the First Moving Picture of the Life of Christ Made in the Land Where He Lived and Died” (1927; reprinted in condensed form in liner notes, Image Entertainment, 2003).

²⁹ The Book of Judith is included in the Apocrypha, but not the canonical Hebrew Testament.

JUDITH is rarely mentioned in the same breath as Griffith's two subsequent epics, *THE BIRTH OF A NATION* (David W. Griffith Company, 1915) and *INTOLERANCE: LOVE'S STRUGGLE THROUGHOUT THE AGES* (Wark Producing Corp., 1916), although it clearly offered Griffith a testing ground for the battle scenes in *BIRTH OF A NATION* and the lush Babylonian sets of *INTOLERANCE*. Griffith's films often contrast the sturdy courage and resourcefulness of a seemingly helpless woman with the psychological moral weakness of a brutishly powerful man. In *JUDITH*, his camera alternates between still moments with its winsome star as she develops her plan, and the doomed hero, as he moves his armies into place. In *JUDITH*, Griffith's many experiments with continuity at Biograph also began to bear fruit, as the feature advanced with few of the issues that made so many early silent-era films difficult to follow. The movie was not without its controversial points, including an orgy scene and the harrowing image of Judith as preparing to behead her lover and mortal foe in order to save her people, but Griffith received little criticism about its subject matter.³⁰

Despite the success of *JUDITH*, Griffith never completed another Bible epic. Instead, partly to answer the charge of racism leveled at him in the wake of his cinematic adaptation of *The Clansmen*, novelist Thomas Dixon's paean to the Lost Cause, Griffith in early 1915 decided to expand a feature film he had finished some months earlier, provisionally titled *THE WOMAN AND THE LAW* (released by D.W. Griffith Productions in

³⁰ The movie continued to be popular long after Griffith left Biograph, with ads running in its weekly ad circular to film exhibitors throughout 1914, 1915 and 1916. Calling *JUDITH*, "Biograph's Masterpiece," the film company emphasized that viewers appreciated being able to see the film two or three times. *The Biograph* 1:16 (19 Dec 1914), WCBA 1 (3).

1919 as *THE MOTHER AND THE LAW*, with an altered ending). By adding three, additional, historical story lines to this original, modern-day story of industrial greed and capital punishment, Griffith created one of his own favorite films, *INTOLERANCE*. The most spectacular of the plotting sequences was set in ancient Babylon, fabled locale of Israel's sixth-century B.C.E. exile. An additional, Roman-era story arc related "the Nazarene's" ministry, passion and death. *INTOLERANCE* was never popular with audiences of its day—the four stories were muddled, the allusions to intolerant attitudes forced and preachy, and the story lines difficult to keep straight. Rapid intercutting between them diluted the emotional impact of the climactic scenes, two of which featured the heroines, played by Constance Talmadge and Mae Marsh, attempting to avert disaster in gripping chase scenes (the former by chariot and the latter by race car). But *INTOLERANCE* set precedents for the quality of subsequent Biblical productions with its monumental Babylonian sets and cinematic tension.

Cecil B. DeMille, an artistic director of high-toned dramas and drawing room comedies, in 1921 approved a publicist's idea to launch a story contest to generate subjects for his next film. The most popular of 48,000 entries from readers of a popular publication was the Hebrew Testament story of the Exodus, and DeMille paid \$100 to each of eight people who suggested it—plus a second prize payment of \$50 to N.A. Strong of Los Angeles, who submitted a story titled "Thou Shalt Not," which attacked those who would characterize "innocent amusements and pleasures on Sunday" as sin.³¹ The film DeMille created drew on Griffith's notion of multiple themes and was called,

³¹ Art Arthur's notes on DeMille's reminisces 4 Apr 1955, CBDMA 13 (30). Strong's undated note is transcribed in CBDMA 242 (8). Other entries DeMille kept included a modernized Faust story, ancient Assyrian epics, the story of Madame Butterfly's son and the story of a huge planet about to collide with Earth, *ibid*.

simply, *THE TEN COMMANDMENTS* (Famous Players-Lasky, 1923). Believing, as he later said, that Griffith “told four stories under the guise of one, and consequently all four failed,” DeMille limited his film to two story lines: the tale of Moses leading the Exodus followed by a modern-day morality play, with no potentially confusing intercutting between them.³² Instead, he used the actual commandments themselves, repeatedly depicted on elaborate intertitles seemingly carved (with Roman numbering!) on stone tablets, to connect for audiences the two plots. DeMille’s Biblical segment revealed the considerable talents of his research team, writers and crew, with its detailed rendering of the architecture, clothing and lifestyles of ancient Egypt. Viewers were especially thrilled by the dramatic parting of the Red Sea, which DeMille achieved through convincing use of miniaturization, gelatin, and expert lighting and art direction.³³

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS of 1923 was such a hit that when DeMille began to search for film ideas in 1926, one of the first topics he considered was another Biblical epic. After learning that a competing film company might be about to undertake the story of Noah and the flood, DeMille asked an assistant to draft a treatment for the Gospel story.³⁴ Denison Clift immediately applauded the thought. “Why skirt around the one great single subject of all time and all ages—the commanding, majestic and most sublime thing that any man can ever put on the screen...to my mind, you are the one to do it,” he wrote DeMille. The end result of their correspondence was a piece of Hollywood history,

³² George C. Pratt, “Forty-five Years of Picture Making: An Interview with Cecil B. DeMille,” *Film History* 3 (1989), 137.

³³ In a Harvard University lecture on the business of film, DeMille discussed the Red Sea sequence, including the challenge of creating the illusion of a wet sea floor within the time constraint created by the passage of sunlight, 26 Apr 1927, CBDMA VIII: 285 (7).

³⁴ Denison Clift memo to Cecil B. DeMille, 20 May 1926, CBDMA 278 (9). See also Robert S. Birchard, *Cecil B. DeMille’s Hollywood*, (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 217.

THE KING OF KINGS (DeMille Pictures Corp., 1927). DeMille's film illustrated the challenges of wrapping a pious story in Hollywood glamour. Despite his stated desire to emphasize the humanity of Jesus using the most modern scholarship available, the production was heavy on scantily clad slaves, grandiose settings, a heart-stopping death scene and titillating extra-Biblical elements designed to embellish the narrative and add sexual spice to the story of Judas' craven betrayal of the Messiah. And despite his considerable efforts to imbue the costumes and sets with authentic Roman-era touches, his studio production doesn't begin to match FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS in terms of verisimilitude. That said, from May to December 1927, during the extensive pre-production phase of KING OF KINGS, DeMille's chief researcher Elizabeth MacGaffey provided an astonishing 150 clarifying notes to the director and production crew (including those from two rabbis DeMille consulted frequently) on subjects that included such seemingly arcane facts as: salutations in the days of Herod; the composition of the Sanhedrin; common Roman methods of execution; the history of the Roman cohort; common children's toys of the era; and the appearance of a typical wax tablet of the day.³⁵ Still, in his attempt to make an appealing and profitable film, DeMille was often tempted to reject modern Bible criticism in favor of more dubious sources, using historically questionable material if it offered the familiar imagery and spicy anecdotes he believed would bring his story alive. A list of art and historical works that MacGaffey collected during preproduction illustrates the point neatly, with authoritative books on ancient and medieval religious art and George A. Barton's 1916 *Archaeology and the Bible* appearing alongside American diplomat-turned-historian Selah Merrill's crude

³⁵MacGaffey's typed undated list is in CBDMA XII: 771 (1). All the notes cited were taken in June 1926. The originals are in CBDMA VIII:278 (6).

1908 history of Roman Jerusalem and a popular pseudoepigraphical collection of Sanhedrin and Talmudic writing dubbed *The Archko Library*, which even DeMille conceded was of “doubtful authenticity but interesting.”³⁶

Historical Criticism and Religious Art in the Production Process

Given the strong connection between early twentieth century middle-class culture and Bible study, it is understandable that Olcott, Griffith and DeMille, three filmmakers particularly associated with efforts to broaden the appeal of film to precisely this kind of audience, turned to Biblical subjects at critical points in their careers. From Bible study, middle-class audiences learned to respect modern Biblical scholarship, they learned to enjoy visual religious mass culture, and they experienced a great deal of this new world in settings mediated by nationally influential ministers and local clergy. Directors leveraged all three of these aspects of liberal Protestant mass culture to produce and publicize their films. Historical criticism and popular devotional materials emerge from archival production notes, marketing ephemera and the films themselves as influential in the construction of Biblical films. Directors used scholarship, both academic and popular, to lend realism to their stories, props and costumes (see figures, page 221-4). Then they recruited popular ministers and influential theologians to promote the films from the pulpit and in the popular presses.

Many of the theological points that stemmed from higher criticism were implicit in the production of Biblical films—after all, dramatizations deconstruct Bible myths and

³⁶ The undated list, with DeMille’s handwritten comments on the Archko material, is at CBDMA VIII:278 (14).

explore the historical realities underlying them. Actors give depth and emotion to Bible characters, raising them from the two-dimensional page. Even the crude 1902-05 Pathé *LIFE AND PASSION* shows some influence of historicism. The filmmakers presented stories from the life of Christ, most of which are included in Gospels of Mark (considered by critics to be the earliest and, therefore, most historically accurate gospel, written around 50 C.E.) and John (written some 40 years later). The Pathé Jesus wandered through obviously constructed sets in a dream-like state, in static shots that offered a nod to authenticity primarily through elaborate costuming. Just six years after Pathé's second version, the Kalem film, however, really shows how desirable historical authenticity had become. Opening with a map of the regions of Galilee, Samaria and Judea, Olcott informed audiences they were experiencing the reality of Christ's life. "The scene of this history is the Holy Land," the opening title reads, with "scenes filmed at Jerusalem, Bethlehem and other authentic locations in Palestine."

In a strategy that would become a convention of the genre, Olcott literally cited chapter and verse (from the still-popular King James) on intertitles to emphasize the film's adherence to Bible truth. While Nonguet and Zecca had concentrated largely on Mark and John, Olcott "harmonized" the four Gospel versions, a practice (still common) that smoothed out some of the glaring inconsistencies between the four writers. The four-fold harmonization allowed him to pick and choose among many events in Christ's life to craft his film, rather than limiting his dramatic options by sticking to one version that might omit scenes with filmic potential. The roughly 70-minute film was sprinkled with more than 80 intertitles referencing verses that described scenes, moved the story forward and clarified matters of historical fact. Olcott was not shy about adapting the King James

for maximum dramatic effect. Thus, he took verses out of strict chronological order when necessary for his story, used quotes out of context, and sometimes split up verses or used partial quotes to build suspense. Olcott used parts of one verse over two or three intertitles, for example Matthew 27:31 in the story of Christ's humiliation before Pilate, which stretches across two intertitles. He also from time to time used several different Gospels referencing the same event, as when he cited passages from Mark 15, Luke 23 and John 19 at the death of Christ.

A decade later, DeMille used Bible verses on intertitles in both *THE TEN COMMANDMENTS* and *THE KING OF KINGS*, although not to a great extent in the former. In the ancient segment of *THE TEN COMMANDMENTS*, DeMille cited the Book of Exodus in two places: with a reference to Exodus 1:13 (“And the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigour”) before the slaying of Egypt's firstborn ; and with a quote from Exodus 15:2 when the Red Sea closes over Pharaoh's pursuing army, drowning them.³⁷ Perhaps the director felt the need to bolster scenes depicting God as a bloodthirsty avenger, who first kills Egyptian children to prompt Pharaoh to release the Israelites, then hardens the king's heart against Israel and kills him for pursuing the chosen people. DeMille not only used the King James translation for his Bible verses, scenarist Macpherson also wrote all the other intertitles in similar flowery language, and placed them against backgrounds that, as previously noted, were meant to replicate the carved stone of the tablets Moses brought back from his encounter with God on Sinai, albeit with anachronistic Roman-style numbering. Six years later, the production materials for *KING*

³⁷ The critical pre-production materials for *THE TEN COMMANDMENTS*, which might illuminate DeMille's motives, were removed from the director's papers before their acquisition by Brigham Young University's film archive.

OF KINGS reveal that DeMille and Macpherson used the Bible (in various translations) as a resource throughout pre-production of the movie. In the days before shooting his Gospel film commenced, DeMille asked his longtime researcher to provide him an index of popular Bible verses, and provide him with a comparative Bible from which to check passages himself.³⁸

While Olcott was content simply to reference the Gospels as a source in the opening sequence of his film (see figure, page 223), sometimes filmmakers also sought to reinforce the legitimacy of their interpretations through references to the work of academic, popular and artistic sources.³⁹ The opening title of JUDITH OF BETHULIA, for instance, credits the Apocryphal book of Judith and a 1904 play “and the poetical tragedy of *Judith of Bethulia*, by Thomas Bailey Aldrich—by permission, Houghton Mifflin & Co.” Aldrich was a popular adapter of religious material in entertainment circles. Similarly, an intertitle in INTOLERANCE introduced the Gospel story of Jesus’ first miracle at a wedding in Cana (figures on page 221), where he at his mother’s prompting rescues the host from embarrassment by turning water into wine, with a list of authoritative-sounding sources: “Note: The ceremony according to Sayce, Hastings, Brown and Tissot.” Like the King James scriptures Griffith used, his “experts” combined academic and popular purveyors of religious educational materials. Archibald Sayce, for example was a noted Assyrian specialist, and James Hastings wrote Bible books for children, among other popular religious material. Tissot, it is true, drew heavily on higher criticism

³⁸ Gladys Rosson to Bessie McGaffey, 17 Aug 1926, CBDMA VIII:278, (10). See also various notes from MacGaffey giving Bible citations and comparisons to DeMille, CBDMA VIII:278 (9). See also list of titles with corresponding Bible verses, 29 Oct 26, CBDMA XVII:1256 (3).

³⁹ Thomas Bailey Aldrich, *Judith of Bethulia: A Tragedy* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1904).

I am unable to ascertain the author “Brown,” to whom Griffith refers.

to create his impressionistic Bible scenes, but his conception of Christ, like that most others, was rejected by liberal academics, who recognized that the Christ of early twentieth century art was too Western European in appearance.⁴⁰ Olcott did provide sources for his rendition of the first century Temple in Jerusalem in the film's publicity, which specifically mentioned utopian missionary Conrad Schick's model of the Temple, popularized in the United States by the American Colony's photographers (figures on page 223).⁴¹ A four-page circular advertising the movie to theatre owners included a list of effusive clergy endorsements, including one Rev. John Battersby's pious assurance that "the films (sic) inspired me as deep, *instructive* (author's emph.) precious."⁴² Most of the articles also exploited Olcott's decision to shoot in Holy Land locations, which gave the film such a palpable immediacy and poignancy. A *New York Times* 1913 mention of the film underlined the authentic locales, and even venturing to bill the movie as "an appropriate feature for Easter Sunday."⁴³

Clerical Consultants in Production and Publicity

All the filmmakers publicized their use of experts in crafting their films, but DeMille was singular in employing a staff of theologians and clerics to sort out questions of historical authenticity and theology from the very inception of his projects. His

⁴⁰ Morgan, *Protestants and Pictures*, 298.

⁴¹ See the *New York Times* review of the film's London release, which commented on the budget and the Holy land locations. "Clergymen, Who see London Exhibition, Inclined to Approve it," said the article's reassuring subtitle. *New York Times*, 27 Oct 1912.

⁴² *Kalem's Biblical Masterpiece*, n.d. publicity circular, WCBA box 1 (25).

⁴³ "Special Feature at Regent," *New York Times*, 23 Mar 1913.

meticulous and voluminous records reveal that these clerics had diverse motives, to say the least, in working with a Hollywood director.⁴⁴ Some refused payment for services; others demanded it. One worked through the film censor's office, which was sponsored by the big motion picture companies and acted as more of a public relations vehicle for the directors than a vehicle for the transmission of public expectations (as the municipal censors normally did). A surprising number of clergymen approached the director directly. Many of DeMille's experts served a dual purpose: they were hired to provide expertise on factual matters, but later were expected to lecture on behalf of the film in influential congregations; and to respond in the press to challenges regarding a film's authenticity and suitability.

The KING OF KINGS project began after DeMille reached out to writers for conceptions of a picture on the life of Christ in May of 1926. For the next four months, until shooting commenced in September, he and his researchers corresponded with Rev. George Reid Andrews of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America; Congregationalist and Oberlin Theological Seminary graduate Rev. William E. Barton; and his son, advertising man Bruce Barton, a writer of popular business books including the 1925 *The Man Nobody Knows*, about Jesus. DeMille also consulted with Talmudic scholar Rabbi Ernest R. Trattner, and another local rabbi, Henry Radlin. DeMille used these clerics in the pre-production process to provide information critical to the development of the plot and the characterizations of Jesus, his followers, Mary

⁴⁴ Dyer sermon transcript, 15 May 1927, CBDMA II:12 (4). Rev. Charles F. Aked letter to DeMille offering his services as literary adviser, 30 Jun 26, CBDMA XII:770 (19). George Reid Andrews offered DeMille use of a letter he had written to a Jewish Rabbi, rebutting concerns about KING OF KINGS, 26 Oct 1927, CBDMA VIII:287 (8).

Magdalene and, especially, Judas Iscariot.⁴⁵ For instance, in June, Radlin informed MacGaffey that the Talmud described Mary Magdalene as the Hellenized daughter of a wealthy Jewish family, who mocked the temple, was excommunicated, married a Greek merchant, was rejected by him and sank into prostitution. In August, Macpherson told DeMille that Andrews had given her the correct seating arrangement for the Last Supper, “Judas and John with Jesus between them; Peter across the table.” A month later, during shooting, William Barton explained that the Mary’s anointing of Jesus at Bethany was likely to have occurred on a Wednesday, and not on the Jewish Sabbath.

The fees for these services ranged from informal (roses for the altar or complimentary tickets for the staff at a large parish) to financial.⁴⁶ Probably the most audacious of the clergy was Andrews, who, upon learning of DeMille’s project, lobbied Will Hayes of the censorship board for a meeting with the director before he should make “arrangements” with any other consultant. “The last conversation I had with you on the subject you said to me that no picture dealing with the Life of Jesus would be made by one of your companies without a full and satisfactory understanding and settlement with us; that you considered, so far as your companies were concerned, that we had preempted (sic) this field,” Andrews wrote. His agenda for Hayes was ambitious—besides requesting the censor’s influence in bringing several competing projects currently in development to a halt, Andrews offered access to “any and all knowledge that I may possess or secure” about Jesus. “I on my part agree to do all that I can to throw the

⁴⁵ Henry Radlin to MacGaffey 10 Jun 26, CBDMA VIII:278 (6); Macpherson to CBDM 18 Aug 26, CBDMA VIII:278 (13); William Barton to MacGaffey 26 Oct 26, CBDMA VIII:278 (6).

⁴⁶ George Fox, SJ and DeMille corresponded over the former’s visit to the set and DeMille’s gift of altar flowers, Aug 1926, CBDMA 12:770 (23). The Research Department suggested DeMille offer Rabbi Magnin a small book as a token of esteem—“I know he would not accept money,” 5 Aug 1926, CBDMA 12:771 (8). Andrews to Will Hays, 14 Jun 26, CBDMA 8:288 (10).

influence of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America...provided it is a picture which we of the Federal Council can endorse," he added. In return, Andrews asked for expenses and a reasonable salary, followed by 10% of the gross receipts of the film to be paid to the Church and Drama Association, of which he was chairman, or, if that organization was defunct, to the Federal Council, and if both were "unable to receive the funds, then they shall revert to me personally." In 1928, Andrews bombarded DeMille with ideas for a subsequent project, but DeMille shrugged off his many communications. By then, the director was deeply involved in a film on homes for juvenile delinquents (*THE GODLESS GIRL*, produced by C.B. DeMille Productions, released in 1929) and, for the time being, uninterested in pursuing Biblical topics.

DeMille, Olcott and Griffith all relied on clergy as "expert" consultants and spokesmen to reassure wary Christians and Jews by testifying to the suitability of their dramatizations. Olcott listed no fewer than six clergy in his publicity circular, most of whom praised *MANGER*'s moral tone and sacred tenor.⁴⁷ The Rev. A.R. Holderby of Atlanta, for example, found the film to be a "sermon that preaches itself." In similar fashion, DeMille's consultants often agreed to lend their names and sermon transcripts to the filmmaker's publicists, and the director went to great lengths in publicizing *KING OF KINGS* to emphasize the ecumenical and pious spirit in which it was produced.⁴⁸ One of DeMille's supporters was the Rev. Dr. Frank Dyer of Wilshire Boulevard Congregational Church. A sermon Dyer provided to DeMille praised *KING OF KINGS*' quality and

⁴⁷ Advertising circular, WCBA 1 (25).

⁴⁸ Cecil B. DeMille, "The Screen as a Religious Teacher," *Theatre* (June 1927). DeMille referred to "the assemblage of representatives of more than thirty religious sects and beliefs who gathered at the studio last August, opening the film-taking with a service of prayer."

insisted, with impeccable liberal theological reasoning, that dramatizing the gospel was an entirely appropriate treatment of Jesus' story.⁴⁹ "If Christ, Divine as we believe Him to be cannot be portrayed by man, then...He could not have continued his impact upon the life of the world," Dyer told his congregation. He sent a draft of the sermon to DeMille, with permission to cite it, a communication in which he also roundly denounced those members of his flock who might be reluctant to view the new Bible extravaganza. Dyer contended that it was the church's officious attitude toward Jesus and the Gospel that had kept the truth of the Savior's life from many potential believers. "They have not seen Him in His sincerity, purity and truth," he opined. The minister also addressed those who asked how the divine Lord could be played by a mere man. "My answer is: He has always been portrayed by man and if he cannot be portrayed by man then he cannot be portrayed at all." Andrews also fulfilled his bargain with DeMille in 1926, when he told a reporter that his group would encourage audiences to patronize "wholesome plays." Andrews said that "the churches generally have been too negative in their attitude toward both stage and screen" and that he hoped all groups involved would cooperate under the auspices of the Council's Film and Drama Committee.

⁴⁹ Rev. Frank Dyer's sermon of 15 May 1927 was distributed by DeMille; CBDMA 12 (4). Rev. George Reid Andrews's offer to support the film's release with press interview and sermons is in CBDMA 235 (8). The Andrews' article is in CBDMA 770 (19). DeMille's 1957 reminiscence is in CBDMA 16 (7).

Historicism in Mass Culture

Given the broad array of sources these filmmakers drew from, and the profit motive that drove them, it comes as no surprise that both the factual backdrop and the Christology of immanence and service that was so integral to liberal Protestantism's take on the Bible was skewed in silent Biblical epics. Despite the time and money expended to bolster a production's historical *bona fides*, these filmmakers frequently sacrificed authenticity for the sake of art. Some divergences from historical fact were minor, dictated perhaps by the need for physical objects to dominate the screen and draw the viewers' eye to plot points. DeMille, for example, after the release of *KING OF KINGS* received a number of communications pointing out that the coins Judas received from Caiaphas were not historically accurate.⁵⁰ In fact, the coins in the film's final cut were the third set fabricated by Paul Iribe's art department—he corrected the initial set once in August after Macpherson and researcher MacGaffey noticed they were from the wrong era. Macpherson then approved manufacture of a second set in silver and gold for the shooting. In November, DeMille consulted the production notes on Roman coins and shot the pivotal scene in which Judas receives payment from Caiaphas, with a lingering close-up of the coins in the betrayer's hand. Unfortunately, while finishing the film in February Macpherson (probably at the insistence of editor Anne Bauchens) realized that the coins were too small to be viewed properly and, thus, lacked dramatic impact. MacGaffey, after consultation with Andrews, produced new specifications based on a different coin, but

⁵⁰ Research staff note regarding coins 3 Aug 1926, and approving finals 11 Aug 26, CBDMA XII:770 (25). Unsigned note to Macpherson with list of Roman money 13 Nov 1926, CBDM XII:771 (1). Notes between MacGaffey and Macpherson on substituted coins, 7 Feb 1927 to 8 Feb 1927, CBDMA XII:771 (1). John Rolfe letter to CBDM noting the coins were wrong and follow-up notes 18 Oct 1927, CBDMA VIII:286 (1).

one she and the minister felt would suffice. Iribe re-cast the coins, and Bauchens inserted new footage using them in the final film. When the vigilant fan later pointed out the anachronism of the replacement coins, DeMille, ever patient with the Bible experts who proffered suggestions at the culmination of each film, explained why he needed larger coins. Similarly, he acknowledged Pomona College professor Joseph Pijoan's complaint that the head-dresses Pilate's wife wore were "fifty years out of fashion." "You are quite right in the various points you make, and I agree with you entirely, but wish to explain that I felt it necessary to take certain liberties with facts in the interest of obtaining certain effects both dramatically and pictorially," said DeMille.

But as DeMille hints, it was not only in the matter of small scenic elements that silent directors deviated from Bible authority. Griffith vowed in *JUDITH OF BETHULIA* to pay "strictest attention to detail in costume, weapons and instruments of war, customs of the people and correct scenic backgrounds."⁵¹ But he also borrowed Aldrich's fictional love affair between Judith and Holofernes to increase the tension as the story moved toward the climactic moment when Judith must behead the general to save her people, an artifice is all the more striking because the scriptural reference is careful to note that no such liaison existed. Likewise, while practically everyone involved in *KING OF KINGS* urged DeMille *not* to employ a similar device in creating a love affair between Judas Iscariot and Mary Magdalene, he did it anyway.⁵² Not only is such an event extra-Biblical, it is not even supported by the considerable body of early anti-Christian

⁵¹ Motion Picture Descriptions, Library of Congress, LU1591 17, November 1913, page 3.

⁵² For comments on Mary Magdalene story line see Cliff's original treatment cited above, Bruce Barton script notes to CBDM 16 Aug 1926, CBDMA VIII:282 (1). Clifford Howard treatment (n.d.), CBDMA VIII:280 (1). CBDM notes on revised continuity scripts 2 Aug 1926 and 12 Aug 26, CBDMA VIII:280 (5). DeMille synopsis for cast and crew 23 Aug 1926, CBDMA VIII:282 (10), page 54. Dennison Clift, *Suggested Dramatization of the Bible version*, n.d., CBDMA VIII:278 (9).

polemic, which includes nearly every scurrilous story imaginable about Jesus, his mother, his dubious paternity and his sexuality, sources that DeMille consulted.⁵³ DeMille was convinced the putative affair would not only generate dramatic interest, but would also help explain why Judas would betray his friend and teacher.⁵⁴ Despite pleas from Bruce Barton, Clifford Howard (a script consultant who suggested, as an alternative, an affair between Simon of Cyrene and Shoshanna), writer Denison Clift (who suggested an affair between the High Priest Caiaphas and Mary Magdalene), his brother William, and most of the rest of his staff, DeMille opened his film with sexually charged scenes between Mary and Judas, which set up Judas's jealousy of Mary's newfound devotion to Jesus as the reason for the betrayer's later actions. DeMille did, however, cut extensive subsequent scenes in which a distraught Mary begged Judas to abandon his plan. "Judas, Judas, you are crucifying God. Don't do this," read DeMille from the shooting draft, at a pre-production meeting. Later, he also cut a segment in which Judas confronted a sleep-tousled Mary with his deed.

Sometimes even important theological aspects of the Gospel story clashed with dramatic imperative in Macpherson and DeMille's vision of the picture, as illustrated by their discussion of Jesus' extreme passivity before the Roman authorities.⁵⁵ In November, on DeMille's copy of the Construction Notes for the scenes before Caiaphas and before Pilate, Macpherson appended a note to the director, questioning his decision to have

⁵³ The undated *List of Books Covered On "King of Kings,"* includes "The Apocryphal Acts of Paul, Peter, John and Andrew, by Bernhard Pick" and "The Apocraphal (sic) Books of New Testament, by [James] Baikie," CBDMA VIII:278 (14).

⁵⁴ It is also possible that DeMille was interested in providing alternative reasons for Judas's betrayal to short circuit any charges that he was blaming Jesus's death on the Jews

⁵⁵ Construction Notes with CBDM marginalia and typed memo from Macpherson, 10 Nov 1926, CBDMA VIII:282.

Jesus reply to Pilate in the critical scene. Such a reply was not only extra-Biblical, she reminded DeMille, it also contravened doctrine that held Christ was silent before his accusers—an early Church “proof” that Jesus fulfilled an Isaiahan prophesy of the coming of the Messiah.⁵⁶ Macpherson further explained that the writers had actually borrowed Christ’s words to Pilate from Luke’s account of the examination by the Sanhedrin, in which Jesus parried the council’s query about his messianic identity, saying “If I tell you, ye will not believe: And if I also ask *you*, ye will not answer me, nor let *me* go.”⁵⁷ In conclusion, she asked DeMille how to balance the theological and dramatic imperatives of the scene, suggesting it might be more impressive if Jesus did not reply to Pilate (as the Gospel of John relates of his sentencing before Pilate). “On the other hand—those who know little of Jesus’ character may merely think he is ‘stumped’ if we DON’T give him an answer (emphasis original),” she said. In the end, the film included Jesus’ responses to Caiaphas.

It is also clear that theological adaptation could result from a director’s own prejudice. At the pre-shooting review of the script, DeMille and his writers engaged in considerable discussion of various scenes that were not included in the shooting script, as well as scenes that could be cut without sacrificing desirable aspects of Christ’s life. William de Mille (a talented filmmaker in his own right), believed the raising of Lazarus from the Gospel of John could be deleted without much detriment because it placed too much emphasis on magical miracles in the gospel story. Someone else (who’s name

⁵⁶ Isaiah 53:7, “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.” (AV)

⁵⁷ Luke 22: 67 (AV). In fact, in the Lukan version, Jesus replies cryptically to the priests who ask him if he is the messiah; tells Pilate “Thou sayest it” (Luke 23:3) at his first hearing; and is silent before Herod (Luke 23:9); and before Pilate at his sentencing.

unfortunately slipped by the stenographer recording the conversation) then asked who had deleted from the script Jesus' famed entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. "I did. I did it with malice a-forethought," DeMille responded firmly. "That is one thing that I have against Jesus Christ, from the standpoint of moving pictures. He did something that we cannot show on the screen, the picture of an heroic conqueror entering a city on a donkey."

Perhaps the biggest failure of cinematic Bible epics, however, is in their treatment of Jesus. In the 1840s, Frederic Robertson had posited that evaluating the Bible in a new way lead to distinct changes in faith. Under his tutelage, liberal Christians came to reject the transcendent God of history and celebrate the immanent God, present here and now in creation, benevolent and intimately concerned for the welfare of his children. In addition to a kinder God, liberals also reframed the Christology of orthodoxy, emphasizing instead of Jesus' martyrdom, his life; the kingdom of God incarnate through a carpenter's son. In the liberal construct, Jesus is critical for the redemption of mankind not necessarily through his suffering, death and resurrection. Instead, late-nineteenth and early twentieth century liberals celebrated Jesus' way of living and his teaching, especially his ministry to the sick and social outcasts. Liberal Christology provided a powerful ideology for home missions and the nascent social work movement of the early twentieth century and, as we will see, it was everywhere apparent in the plotlines of secular American silent films of the middle era, from 1908 onwards. Ironically, the filmmakers who did present sophisticated Christological elements in silent films tended to do it through wide variety of secular characters—but not in the person of Jesus.

Given the popularity of “the historical Jesus” in American Protestant circles of the day—and the fact the directors of Biblical epics, especially DeMille, extolled the ability of their films to reveal the human side of Christ—it is surprising these movies (with the possible exception of Olcott’s) portray a Jesus consistent with conventional orthodoxy. One problem was the fact that the historical Jesus who emerged from a thorough evaluation of the gospels was a man of contradiction, who resisted religious and secular authority practically from birth and challenged social conventions at every turn. He ranted in the town square like a madman, disavowed his family, and socialized with prostitutes. He advocated the overthrow of the social order, repeatedly condemned the rich, and repelled his followers when he told them they would have to drink his blood to be saved. Furthermore, higher criticism cast doubt on the literal truth behind many of the spectacular gospel stories—Mary’s virginity or Jesus’ ability to raise bodies from the dead, for example.⁵⁸ That conception of Jesus presented a big problem to filmmakers: as DeMille pointed out to his cast and crew, Jesus trudging into Jerusalem on a donkey had the potential to be anticlimactic. Bible miracles, on the other hand, presented an opportunity too tempting to pass up, a chance to thrill audiences and boost ticket sales with gaudy special effects. This natural tendency to showmanship on the part of producers and exhibitors carried with it a price in terms of Jesus’ humanity, however, as all of the silent era films largely ignore the human stories that make the gospels such revealing portraits of a young Jewish prophet. They also ignore the parables, which are primarily collected in the gospel of Luke. The parables are dense, heavily coded—and

⁵⁸ Munger referred to modernist skepticism as “the anarchy of fear and doubt.” Munger, *Freedom of Faith*, 5-6. See also Rush Rhees’s preface to *The Life of Jesus of Nazareth: A Study* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910), vii-ix.

sometimes baffling—examinations of God’s essential nature in relationship to the creation, many of which masqueraded as simplistic morality tales.

Despite their claims to historical authenticity, the directors’ reliance on Bible interpreters and their purported desire to capture the human Jesus on celluloid, silent era films generally present a wooden and lifeless Savior. For instance, in the 1902-05 Pathé *LIFE AND PASSION* Nonguet and Zecca married the conflicting Matthean and Lukan stories of Jesus’ birth, followed his life story largely from the pages of Mark and John, and closed out the tale with the trial, death and resurrection according to Matthew. The common practice of harmonizing the gospels had the effect of overstating the miraculous aspect of Jesus’ ministry, for instance by including three resurrection stories when no single gospel does this.⁵⁹ And this tendency to emphasize miracles resulted in an distortion of Jesus’ life as it was revealed in each of the four individual tales. For instance, while each includes what liberal theologians of today would term “magical” miracles, they are also replete with teachings and ordinary events in Jesus’ life. So while the Pathé Jesus had time to linger and argue with the Pharisees, chat with a woman at a well and heal the many sick people, he also walked on water and encouraged his fishermen friends to throw out their empty net one more time and drag in a huge catch. Out of 32 scenes in the final film, 13 feature miracles, including the most spectacular ones: the virgin birth; water turned to wine; the raising from the dead of both Jairus’s daughter and Jesus’ friend Lazarus—not to mention the angel’s pronouncement in front of the empty tomb that Jesus himself had risen from the dead.

⁵⁹ Jesus himself is not resurrected in the oldest versions of the Gospel of Mark; and the raising of Jairus’s daughter does not occur in Matthew; the raising of Lazarus is only in John.

Olcott, it must be stated, is the most successful of the silent directors surveyed here in presenting a natural Jesus. He used the Gospel of Luke as the template for the birth sequence, Matthew and Luke for scenes from Jesus' early life and after his baptism, and bits of all four gospels for his ministry, arrest, trial and death. The Jesus of Olcott's film, played by Englishman Robert Henderson-Bland, is worth noting because of the extreme popularity of this portrayal. His darkened visage, slight frame and hollow-eyed stare as he stood, mute, before Pilate, continued to mesmerize audiences for decades after the film's release; one English critic questioned how DeMille could possibly believe that Warner's mechanical 1927 performance could ever outshine Henderson-Bland's *tour de force*.⁶⁰ The actor presented a convincing picture of a man tortured and humiliated by his accusers, and his agony as the soldiers nail his hands to the cross is graphic and believable. It is ironic that DeMille's Christ is so disappointing, given the director's extraordinary attention to detail in the making of the KING OF KINGS, and the mountains of research used in writing and filming it—so much of it devoted to the historic Jesus.⁶¹ From the very start, DeMille expressed his desire to portray Jesus as a man. At the inception of shooting, he told the cast and crew that “this would not be a play of sorrows....Nobody is going around with their arms folded on their breast, and rolling their eyes toward an imaginary heaven as though they had had a breakfast that had disagreed with them. Nobody is going to look holy.” DeMille's staff had spent months

⁶⁰ “Hollywood's Life of Christ: Do the British Public Want to See It?” *London Sunday Express* 23 Oct 1927; CBDMA VIII:288 (8).

⁶¹ The DeMille quote is at CBDMA VIII:282 (11), p. 10. See also Radlin's note on the Talmud, 15 Jun 1926 CBDMA VIII:278 (7). Jungmeyer commentary, n.d. Ibid. (8), p 1. Jungmeyer suggested DeMille add the triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

reading up on Jesus' life in sources as diverse as the Bible and the Talmud, which they received from R. Radlin, *The Jewish Encyclopedia* and *The Catholic Encyclopedia*.

Clerics Andrews and Barton had also insisted that DeMille must portray Jesus as a man if he wanted his film to have any relevance.⁶² Andrews had hinted this in his June letter to Will Hays, urging him to use his influence with DeMille to “make the right sort of a picture of Jesus.” Andrews subsequently sent DeMille a 1923 sermon of Harry Emerson Fosdick, a popular Presbyterian radio preacher and author of many devotional works, including the 1914 *Manhood of the Master*. “If I understand you correctly it is the interpretation we have agreed upon,” Andrews said. Bruce Barton offered his father’s thoughts on Jesus’ penchant for the “out-of-doors” and the strength he was likely to have developed as a carpenter. And it was not just clergy who advocated a human Jesus for DeMille’s film. Hollywood writer Jack Jungmeyer weighed in, warning DeMille that the film’s reliance on miracles threatened to diminish the importance of Jesus’ humanity. “Christ himself was not eager for reverence to Himself, but to establish faith in what he stood for. He did not like to enact miracle; often had a positive aversion to it.” The actor who played Judas, Joseph Schildkraut, asked MacGaffey to translate for DeMille a fictionalized German gospel, and writer Olga Printzlau’s early script treatment summed up her (somewhat incoherent) view of the savior. “Jesus lived and acted purely as a good man. He was tempted—he was ignorant of many things. He corrected himself—he changed his opinion,” she wrote.

⁶² Andrews to Hays, 14 Jun 1925 CBDMA VIII:288 (10). Andrews to CBDM, 31 Jul 1926, CBDMA VIII:285 (8). The arch tone is typical of Andrews’s communications to DeMille. Barton to DeMille 12 Aug 26, CBDMA VIII:278 (12). Jungmeyer commentary, n.d., CBDMA VIII:278 (8), p 1. Jungmeyer suggested DeMille add the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. MacGaffey to DeMille on the translation, n.d., CBDMA VIII:280 (2). Printzlau treatment, n.d., CBDMA VIII:280 (4).

The fact that the three lives of Jesus reviewed here include the raising of Lazarus demonstrates the pressure directors faced to include miracles in their movies (figures on page 225). The raising of Lazarus is the concluding miracle in Jesus' ministry in the Gospel of John, itself the most allegorical of the four gospels and the last to be written. John's version of Jesus' life places the cleansing of the temple (the precipitating cause of his arrest in the synoptic gospels) at the beginning of his ministry, soon after his baptism. The miraculous raising of a dead man at Bethany becomes the precipitating event in his arrest and execution as the religious authorities, watching Jesus' popularity rise with the resurrection of his friend, plot to rid themselves of him once and for all.⁶³ As noted above, Guy-Blaché omitted the raising of Lazarus from her film. The Pathé *LIFE AND PASSION* included an abbreviated scene, placed between a double exposure showing Jesus walking on water and his transfigured appearance before his disciples with Moses and Elijah. In response to the dead man's sisters' charge that Jesus could have saved Lazarus had he been nearby, Jesus asks a group of mourners to roll back the stone before his friend's tomb, points within and bids the dead man to rise. In the Olcott film, Jesus raised Lazarus between his visit to Mary and Martha, and his trip to Jericho. In this longer segment, Lazarus's sisters tell him their brother is ill, and Jesus goes to the tomb some four days after his friend is dead. Olcott used this scene to emphasize Jesus' humanity as he wept in anguish over Lazarus's plight. At Jesus' bidding, Lazarus emerges from his tomb wrapped in burial linens, and tears away the loose cover over his face, as the onlookers stare in amazement.

⁶³ John 12:10-11. The passage concludes with the chief priests' decision to seek death for both Jesus and Lazarus.

At various points throughout the making of his film, DeMille's staff debated whether to show the raising of Lazarus, and it is apparent that director and crew were ambivalent about its theological and dramatic import.⁶⁴ DeMille's critical sources would certainly have indicated that the raising of Lazarus was unlikely to be historical truth, although its depth of detail and placement in the Johannine chronology indicate some event surrounding the women of Bethany and Lazarus probably occurred shortly before Jesus' arrest. The director's brother thought the story was unnecessary, and another commentator at the pre-shoot review (probably Macpherson) concurred, suggesting that the miracles in the film threatened to overwhelm the basic humanity of the story. Scenarist Macpherson also voiced concern she would be forced to shoehorn the Sermon on the Mount (a sort of summary of Jesus' main teachings), the miracle in which Jesus feeds thousands of followers with a few fish and loaves of bread, *and* the raising of Lazarus in an already overloaded script. "We cannot have both the raising of Lazarus and the feeding of the five thousand," she commented somewhat acerbically, reminding DeMille, "we decided on the Sermon on the Mount because it told more of the things that Jesus stood for, than the immortalizing of one man." A subsequent summary that DeMille requested of the crew's comments reported that some wanted Lazarus in, some didn't care, and that the irrepressible MacGaffey's chief wish was to learn more about Lazarus's earlier life. "She feels it would be a shock only to know him after he is dead," assistant researcher Beulah Flebbe reported to DeMille.

⁶⁴ CBDMA VIII:282 (11), pages 89-90. See also Beulah Flebbe's comments from staff, 27 Aug 1926 CBDMA VIII:278 (9).

In the end, DeMille included the lengthy and visually powerful raising of Lazarus in the final print. The director initiated the segment with shots of Mary and Martha, Lazarus's sisters, running through the Judean countryside, searching for Jesus to tell him of their brother's recent illness and death. Jesus follows them to the tomb, where DeMille reminds his audience that "...Lazarus had lain in the grave four days." In the next scene, the camera has moved inside the tomb; stairs descend from right of frame into the darkened chamber and a closed sarcophagus sits prominently to the left (figure on page 198). Light seeps into the picture as Jesus enters the chamber and descends the staircase with the sisters, a crowd of followers and, at the last, the Pharisees who watch with growing alarm as their nemesis enacts his miracle. The rough-hewn stone staircase, the dark, subterranean chamber, even the classic Roman-era sarcophagus, would have appeared familiar to DeMille's American audiences from Bible study guides, while Holy Land travelogues often included photographs of recently excavated burial sites in Palestine to feed the keen American appetite for authentic scenes from ancient Jerusalem—especially the type of tomb that was the scene of their Savior's triumph over death. DeMille's set is also strikingly similar to the Tissot and Doré versions. Details such as the stone steps and Lazarus's shroud, which DeMille depicted as one large piece of fabric instead of the bandage-like linen strips of previous Gospel films, were recreated nearly exactly. As Jesus raises his friend from the dead, the strips fall away and the camera reveals the glow around Jesus head that DeMille used throughout the film to denote the working of a miracle.

The raising of Lazarus was a moment that encapsulated the both the profane and the sacred, macabre graveside magic, mummy and Savior, all wrapped up in a scene that

DeMille, the instinctive showman, was probably correct in assuming audiences would love. Despite all the authoritative texts consulted, and the qualms of a staff that clearly believed raising Lazarus was one too many miracles in a film that sought to portray the human face of Jesus, DeMille could not resist the opportunity to increase ticket sales by including it. As did artists seeking to present a familiar face of Jesus, and writers who sought to enhance the appeal of their Holy Land travelogues by disguising the tawdry realities they uncovered in Palestine, it is a quandary many directors seeking to portray a liberal Protestant vision of faith and practice in films would face. In some cases, the dictates of the marketplace inevitably meant that liberal theological precepts were compromised in filmic renderings, and the historical reality of a human savior did not adapt easily to film. Directors found themselves on much safer ground, however, when presenting the cosmology of liberal Protestantism, which celebrated an immanent God, the brotherhood of mankind and a Kingdom of God on earth, and films based on these ideologies flourished in the silent era.

Chapter three: “Thy Kingdom Come”

As he sits at the kitchen table after a fruitless day looking for work, the unemployed husband in D.W. Griffith’s *ONE IS BUSINESS, THE OTHER IS CRIME* (Biograph Company, 1912) casts a long, frustrated glance at his ailing wife. When he resolutely heads back out onto the street, it is no surprise that he will follow the path of temptation straight to the house of the wealthy Henry B. Harcourt (figure on page 199). While helping a fellow laborer earlier in the day, the poor man peeked through a window at the sumptuous furnishings of Harcourt’s drawing room and watched as he secreted \$1,000 in bribe money in a desk drawer. Now the worker is hungry, afraid and angry—and Griffith shows exactly why in contrasting scenes: his pinched and despairing wife lies upon the bed in a dingy one-room apartment, an arm thrown across her eyes, while Harcourt’s wife, played by the “Biograph Blonde” Blanche Sweet (then 15 years old), lounges about her lavish home in a silk dressing gown. In an already popular film trope, the fey Mrs. Harcourt hears the burglar breaking into her house and grabs a gun to confront him. “My past is honorable,” he cries, sinking to his knees before her in contrition as he returns the money—along with an accompanying letter that reveals her husband’s shameful behavior. When Harcourt suddenly returns home, his wife charges him with the greater crime and insists he allow the poor burglar to go free. Next glimpsed back in their homes, the men ponder the consequences of their actions, while the movie again alternates between shots of the two women, this time as they contemplate the potential ruin of their lives. In its final moments the film’s painful conflicts are resolved tidily: Harcourt returns the bribe money, and then offers the poor husband a life-saving

job. Both couples embrace happily, their security restored by a redeeming act of kindness on the one hand, and access to work on the other. Thus does Blanche Sweet's rich housewife fulfill the role of *deus ex machina*, the bringer of divine justice through an improbable plot twist: first by stopping the poor man, driven by hunger and desperation, from acting on his criminal impulses; and then by helping her husband not only to undo his own, bigger crime, but also to earn redemption by delivering the justice of a living wage to the poor husband. "Finally, on the straight path," the closing intertitle intones.

In words that could have struck a satisfying chord with evangelical Christians, Griffith's final thought reveals that this scantily clad beauty's gun-toting confrontation with a burglar is more than just a secular morality tale. In fact, Griffith's story contains much more complex ideas, ones that appear strongly grounded in the liberal Protestant beliefs, specifically the Social Gospel. As we shall see, the plight of the unemployed worker in an industrial society was one of the Social Gospel movement's earliest and most publicized rallying causes. Griffith's compassionate treatment of the poor husband reflects typical Social Gospel attitudes, as the man doggedly searches for work only to face time and again a prospective employer's dismissive headshake or turned back. When the desperate husband resorts to anti-social activities to feed himself and his family, Griffith here indicated that the lack of work, not a fundamental weakness of character, prompted the great bulk of criminal behavior. Finally, prominent Social Gospel teachings that craven individual greed had so distorted turn-of-the-century economic conditions as to make it impossible for the honest poor to find gainful employment inflects Griffith's treatment of Harcourt's bribe. When Harcourt refuses the bribe and then offers the

worthy poor man a job, he acts out the Social Gospel's twin themes of fairness and compassion.

From about 1878 to 1930 the Social Gospel had great appeal for a significant segment of American Protestantism.¹ In the Hebrew Bible's prophecies of pre-exilic Israel's destruction, liberal Protestants discerned a stunning indictment of a social order they found alarmingly familiar. Ancient Israel had allowed its divinely constituted ethical foundation to be eroded by the lust for profit and wealth. Now American industrialists sought to justify their depredations on society by wrapping their harsh treatment of workers in the banner of efficiency and progress. Further, some liberal Protestants concluded that American society had failed to fulfill Christ's basic covenant with humanity, cravenly ignoring the command to "love thy neighbor as thyself," and tolerating cruel poverty and desperation among the working classes.² Convinced that America would incur God's displeasure with the extremes of abundance and want they observed all around them, these liberal Christians sought to reform the existing social order in accordance with their understanding of Jesus' ministry of love and compassion

¹ Social gospel histories influential in the construction of this chapter include Mary Agnes Dougherty, "The Social Gospel According to Phoebe: Methodist Deaconesses in the Metropolis, 1885-1918" in Russell E. Richey, Kenneth E. Rowe, and Jean Miller Schmidt, eds., *Perspectives on American Methodism: Interpretive Essays* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1993), 361; William McGuire King, "The Biblical Base of the Social Gospel," in Ernest R. Sandeen, ed., *The Bible and Social Reform* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982); Janet Forsythe Fishburn, *The Fatherhood of God and the Victorian Family: The Social Gospel in America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981); and William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). Also of interest are the essays in Robert T. Handy, ed., *The Social Gospel in America, 1870-1920: Gladden, Ely, Rauschenbusch* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

² Prominent Social Gospel economist Richard Ely cited this passage in his groundbreaking *Social Aspects of Christianity and Other Essays* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1889); also excerpted in Handy, *Social Gospel*, 184. The new covenant is set forth in Matthew 22:35-40: "Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked [Jesus] a question, tempting him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (KJV)

(and fend off anarchism and socialism), through a Social-*ist* Gospel. Beginning around 1885, this vision began to be widely articulated in books and popular periodicals.³ By 1908, the Federal Council of Churches in Christ in America had institutionalized the Social Gospel in the Social Creed of the Churches, which was embraced by all the mainline denominations. The first Creed called for the reform of the social order through the establishment of equal rights and justice for “all men in all stations of life,” for fairness in labor relations, for protection from workplace hazards (especially for children and women), for an end to sweat shops and the outright abolition of child labor, and for a living wage that was “the highest wage that each industry can afford.”⁴

Griffith’s short film is associated with a genre known as the “social problem” film, which emerged around 1909 and enjoyed a long decade of popularity with audiences. In the middle of the silent era (from roughly 1908 to 1921), when film emerged as more than just a vaudeville sideshow but also a popular entertainment all its own, some Progressive activists believed this new medium might be a potent way to expose social problems.⁵ A wide array of filmmakers agreed, and social problem films

³ Seminal works of Social Gospel theology include Washington Gladden, *Applied Christianity: Moral Aspects of Social Questions* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1886), [google books edition](#); Ely’s *Social Aspects*; Francis G. Peabody, *Jesus Christ and the Social Question: An Examination of the Teaching of Jesus in Its Relation to Some of the Problems of Modern Social Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1900), [google books 1915 edition](#); Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1907), [google books edition](#). Popular Social Gospel periodicals included: *Century* and *The Chautauquan*. For an examination of an earlier, brief foray into Social Gospel reportage, see Jacob H. Dorn, “Sunday Afternoon: The Early Social Gospel in Journalism,” *New England Quarterly* 44:2 (June 1971), 238-258.

⁴ For a succinct history of the Methodist Episcopal Church’s social action goals, adopted in 1908 by the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, an alliance of mainstream liberal denominations, see Donald K. Gorrell, “The Social Creed and Methodism Through Eighty Years,” in Richey, et al, *Perspectives*, 386-90.

⁵ On social problem films, see especially Kay Sloan, *The Loud Silents: Origins of the Social Problem Film* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1988), and Kevin Brownlow, *Behind the Mask of Innocence: Sex, Violence, Prejudice, Crime; Films of Social Conscience in the Silent Era* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1990).

became popular with directors including Lois Weber, Cecil B. DeMille, and, perhaps most prominently, Griffith. As artifacts of the transmission of mass culture, social problem films provide good source material on the ways filmmakers used Progressive ideology to expand the appeal of movies beyond early immigrant and working-class audiences. Historians like Shelly Stamp, Arthur Lennig and Jan Olsson have begun the painstaking work of deconstructing these films, examining (often scanty) production materials, publicity and the discursive backdrop against which they were constructed, to identify the sources directors used in crafting them.⁶ They find these directors accessed a range of intertextual resources to craft social problem films, adapting plays and novels for the screen, and expanding articles from popular periodicals into scenarios. What is less well understood is that filmmakers also drew on what I will contend was a loose canon of Social Gospel literature for original story ideas and, perhaps more importantly, on a vernacular language of the Social Gospel, drawn frequently from its underlying Gospel theologies, for an ideology that shaped and even enhanced otherwise mundane plotlines.⁷ In the same way filmmakers leveraged the familiarity of Bible stories and the ubiquity of Holy Land representations in popular culture as a sort of template for epic films they

⁶ Articles influential in the methodology of this chapter include Shelly Stamp, "Lois Weber, Progressive Cinema, and the Fate of 'The Work-a-Day Girl' in SHOES," *Camera Obscura* 56:19, vol. 2 (2004), 141-169; Jan Olsson, "Trading Places: Griffith, Patten and Agricultural Modernity," *Film History* 17 (2005): 39-65; and Arthur Lennig, "The Mother and the Law," *Film History* 17 (2005), 404-430. Also of methodological interest for this chapter is Sumiko Higashi's examination of the ways class and ethnic attitudes shaped dramatic types in depictions of the popular fictional Irish rounder "Chimmie Fadden" on stage and screen, in *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture: The Silent Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 65-70.

⁷ I am indebted to Candy Brown's insight into the existence of a canon of evangelical literature a half century before the events I relate here. Brown believes the evangelical canon acted much as film genres did, because "familiarity with previous texts affected authors' and publishers' organization of experiences and oriented readers to receive new texts in partially prescribed ways." Candy Gunther Brown, *Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 7, 11.

believed American audiences would understand and enjoy, these directors used the literature and language of the Social Gospel to create fresh stories with cutting edge plots that nonetheless included discernible undercurrents of the Bible theologies undergirding the movement: the brotherhood of man, the kingdom of God and Christ's oft-proclaimed mission to feed the hungry and heal the sick.

Just as modern-day historians differentiate the Social Gospel from the broader Progressive movement, with which it often shared leadership, general objectives and foot soldiers, by its focus on the kingdom of God in the here and now, and its preoccupation with Christ's transformative power in culture, films specifically influenced by the Social Gospel are distinguishable from the broader ranks of social-problem films largely by frequent Biblical and Christological references.⁸ The Social Gospel appeared in silent films in several ways. It showed up as evocative intertextual allusions, some literary and artistic, but mostly Biblical, which directors embedded in film plots and on intertitles. Of course, quoting Bible stories, popular novels and famous authors was a tried and true tactic early filmmakers used to transfer the popularity of other media to movies—and to give audiences helpful cues for negotiating silent stories. But these directors typically chose Biblical allusions drawn from the foundational theology of the Social Gospel. Secondly, the vernacular language of the Social Gospel also appeared in generally sympathetic attitudes toward the poor and marginalized of society, familiar to middle-class liberal Christian audiences from Bible study courses, home missions appeals and Social Gospel texts. Finally, deconstructing several Social Gospel-inflected films reveals

⁸ On the theology that separates the Social Gospel from Progressivism, see King, *Social Gospel*, 60, 63; Handy, *Social Gospel*, 6, 10. See also Susan Curtis, *Consuming Culture: The Social Gospel and Modern American Culture* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2001), xxi.

their dependence on story lines strikingly similar to the types of melodramatic tales (some presented as reportage, some fictionalized, and some probably pure fiction) that Social Gospellers disseminated to advance their cause. After all, the Social Gospel had deep roots in praxis. Grounded in a complex and sophisticated theology founded on Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of God, it nonetheless involved little heady theorizing—the kind of restructuring necessary to cure America's ills appeared obvious to its adherents: shorter work days, higher wages, and a re-orientation of industrial practice from ruthless efficiency to a system that preferenced the social, moral and physical well-being of workers over an increase in profits, would achieve their objectives.

Censorship Pressures and the Social Gospel

Filmmakers mixed proselytizing and profit when appealing to Social Gospel sensibilities in silent-era movies. Social problem films, more generally, are part of the even broader category of “uplift” films, which began to appear around 1910 as the industry initiated a campaign to ward off criticism of moving pictures as unsuitable entertainment, without giving up the enticing subject matter they knew was integral to selling tickets.⁹ From the very advent of the form, segments of “polite society” had evinced concern about the cultural value and social influence of film, alongside much hand-wringing over the composition of audiences, and the safety and propriety of

⁹ See Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early-Twentieth Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 6. Grieveson indicates his agreement with William Uricchio and Roberta Pearson's contention that the industry drew on the “cultural capital” of theatre, opera, churches and literature in its attempts to gain respectability. See also Kathleen D. McCarthy, “Nickel Vice and Virtue; Movie Censorship in Chicago, 1907-1915,” *Journal of Popular Film*, 5:1 (1976), 51.

exhibition venues.¹⁰ Christians were no exception. Charles Musser notes that conservative evangelicals of the old school—who believed that most entertainment was a frivolous temptation from more pious pursuits—particularly objected to the advent of movies to Coney Island in 1897 (the first year of successful motion picture exhibition in America). That brash amusement park, with its electric lights and opportunities for unsupervised encounters between men and women on rides and at exhibits was already a popular target for moral censure. The immediate popularity of the new “peep shows,” tall stands or boxes that allowed a single person to peer through a viewfinder at a movie projected on a small-screen (the viewer advanced the film by a hand crank), ratcheted up concerns that sexually and ethnically mixed audiences were enjoying entertainment of questionable moral tone with little or no middle-class mediation. After 1905, the so-called “nickelodeon craze,” the proliferation of small storefronts that displayed films on large screens to viewers seated theater-style, brought with it a whole new round of complaints, primarily about the safety and hygiene of crowded movie venues. Tiny, makeshift theaters, so popular with poor workers and their families, were potential death-traps when, as happened with alarming frequency, highly flammable strips of film advanced in front of a hot projecting lamp too slowly or, worse, became stuck.

Catastrophic fires highlighted the need for crowd management, fire exit placement and

¹⁰ On peep shows, Coney Island and the Methodist Episcopal Church’s movie program, see Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1990), 184-5. On worries about the “promiscuous intermingling” of classes, ethnicities and sexes in Coney Island,” see David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 81-82; on reform efforts, 180-185.

better sanitary conditions in these theaters. Also of concern was the security of vulnerable women and children from men who might harass them with unwanted overtures.¹¹

The critical voices only became louder as filmmakers began to deploy increasingly powerful cinematic devices to heighten the appeal of movies, discussed in more detail in the introduction.¹² But the same emerging conventions that made films so irresistible to audiences gave the medium what one Progressive group in 1911 acknowledged was a “didactic and political function,” and a judge five years later flatly termed a “capacity for evil.”¹³ When New York’s Mayor George B. McClellan in late 1908 precipitated an industry crisis by closing down the city’s nickelodeons, a great deal of the public threat he perceived centered on the issue of safety and hygiene in theaters. Yet McClellan clearly understood that activities up on the screens had the potential to generate as much harm as the physical environs.¹⁴

¹¹ Grieverson, *Policing Cinema*, 59-60. On complex attitudes towards the propriety of single young women patronizing nickelodeons, see also Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 151-3. While “civic leaders” worried about the sexually charged environment at the movies, parents often perceived in the local nickelodeon a family-oriented amusement that was safer for young girls than the popular dancing hall.

¹² See for instance, Griffith’s “ideological editing” in Bowser, *Transformation of Cinema*, 257-8; on other popular shooting and editing techniques, 87-101, and 261-267. Also influential is Tom Gunning, *D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1991), especially 24, 81. On morality and lighting techniques, see Higashi’s *DeMille*, 13, 27, 60. The authoritative source on evolving cinematic forms is David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), especially Thompson’s essays on “the formulation of the classical style,” 155-231. On character psychology, see 161-169; on crosscutting, 175-79; on space, 215; on lighting, 223-226. For a discussion of DeMille’s particular lighting effects, see Lea Jacobs, “Belasco, DeMille and the Development of Lasky Lighting,” *Film History* 5:4 (1993), 405-18. She characterizes classic DeMille lighting as “confined and shallow areas of illumination, sharp-edged shadows and a palpable sense of the directionality of light,” 408.

¹³ Rosenbloom, “From Regulation to Censorship; Film and Political Culture in New York in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 3:4 (2004), 379, 388.

¹⁴ See especially Rosenbloom, “From Regulation to Censorship,” 373-74, and “Between Reform and Regulation: The Struggle over Film Censorship in Progressive America, 1909-1912,” *Film History* 1:4 (1987), 307-08; and Robert Fisher, “Film Censorship and Progressive Reform: the National Board of

The problem was fairly simple: exhibitors who ignored criticism and openly catered to popular preferences risked becoming the target of campaigns like McClellan's, but those who sought to place morality above taste found themselves out of business fairly quickly. Like Chicago settlement house sponsor Jane Addams, whose attempt to offer a program of uplifting films failed miserably in 1907, reformer-exhibitors discovered that a thinly veiled political and moralistic agenda did not suit the more escapist aims of the ticket-buying public.¹⁵ To be successful, non-commercial exhibitors, such as church groups, needed to avoid moralizing and appeal to the same basic tastes the peep shows did. The successful ones omitted overtly violent and salacious movies, such as boxing and muscleman shows, and exhibited the rest in venues deemed more suitable than crowded storefronts and beachside arcades. In this way, the mainline Methodist Episcopal Church, which had voiced its censure of commercial amusements as late as 1896, soon after the turn of the century found success with film programs offered at churches and lectures halls across the United States, while standard nickelodeon fare became a popular part of the chautauqua circuit. Fortunately for exhibitors, flirtatious sexual material triggered few censorship threats in the early and middle years of the silent era.¹⁶ The film industry's pioneers early on figured out that placing fetching young

Censorship of Motion Pictures, 1909-1922," *Journal of Popular Film* 4 (1975), 143-56. See also Bowser, *Transformation of Cinema*, 48.

¹⁵ On the rise of Chautauqua circuits and their secularized content, see Andrew C. Reiser, *The Chautauqua Moment: Protestants, Progressives, and the Culture of Modern Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 270-71. See also Musser's evaluation of the decline of educational films and church-sponsored programs after 1903, in *Emergence of Cinema*, 369. McCarthy writes of the failure of Jane Addams's film program at Hull House, "Nickel Vice and Virtue," 43-45.

¹⁶ See Janet Staiger, *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 63-65. Staiger notes that explicit pornography in the form of suggestive nudity or sexual encounters was not typically featured on film in this period.

actresses in perilous situations was a prime movie attraction, and tender kisses, artfully revealed ankles and school-girl pillow fights were all popular early film subjects. As film studies scholar Russell Merritt points out in the commentary to Image Entertainment's 2002 re-release of D.W. Griffith's *RAMONA* (Biograph Company, 1910), exhibitors were well aware it wasn't the film's portrayal of the plight of American Indians that brought in the crowds—it was Mary Pickford's winsome heroine who filled seats.

Gratuitous criminal activity, however, along with the physical degradation of women and a ribald disregard for polite manners (all of which flourished as part of the shift to narrative film practice in the middle of the century's first decade) did engender strong disapprobation.¹⁷ Complaints about films issued from many vantage points. To some viewers, casual (and sometimes romanticized) criminal violence encouraged young boys to admire countercultural heroes and embrace a delinquent lifestyle.¹⁸ While using women as the object of audience fantasy was acceptable, female desire and sexuality were touchy subjects. True, critics objected to films that showed extreme violence toward women, but they especially criticized films that showed women acting out their sexual impulses in anti-social ways—to entice a married man to stray, for instance, or to distract a lover and allow him to be robbed by an accomplice.¹⁹ Finally, to both conservatives and Progressives alike, the slapstick style of humor that dominated comedic films from about 1905 to 1908 was rife with offensive material. Its rude innuendo and immature antics generated criticism by ridiculing virtually every segment of society—making

¹⁷ McCarthy, "Nickel Vice and Virtue," 42.

¹⁸ See Higashi's analysis of Chimmie Fadden, *DeMille*, 65-70.

¹⁹ McCarthy, "Nickel Vice and Virtue," 42.

countercultural heroes out of otherwise shady characters who outwitted buffoonish authority figures and sanctimonious reformers.

Almost from the birth of screened entertainment, however, the industry found itself with an unlikely champion in liberal Protestantism, especially the Social Gospel movement. From nearly the outset of organized Social Gospel activism in the United States, theologians and activists had advocated a role for entertainment in the lives of the poor and middle class, along with the educational power of new mass communications technologies.²⁰ Because suppressing wide categories of content threatened their ability to use film to educate audiences and promote discussion of solutions to society's ills, around 1909 a number of Progressive, liberal Protestant and Social Gospel groups, among them the People's Institute, the Chautauqua Institution and the Federal Council of Churches, began working in alliance with the industry to thwart growing censorship efforts.²¹ The allies argued vigorously in the courts, local legislatures and the press that (within the bounds of good taste) frank depictions of poverty, crime, and untrammelled sexuality could advance the restructuring and reform of society and, thus, deserved protected status as free speech under the Constitution. But, recognizing the strength of the forces arrayed against them, as early as 1908 they also began to contemplate some form of "prior censorship," as they referred to it, which they hoped could accomplish regulation of

²⁰ Curtis, *Consuming Faith*, xviii-xix. By the 1920s, Curtis contends that Social Gospellers "became obsessed with mass media."

²¹ Harris Ross, "D.W. Griffith v. City Hall: Politics, Ethnicity, and Chicago Film Censorship," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 100:1 (2007), 19; Grieveson, *Policing Cinema*, 25; Rosenbloom, "From Regulation to Censorship," 369-406, and "Between Reform and Regulation," 307-25; McCarthy, "Nickel Vice and Virtue," 37-55; Fisher, "Film Censorship," 143-56.

cinematic content in an orderly, predictable and profit-sensitive way.²² They envisioned a system that allowed production and exhibition of material within certain clearly understood parameters, with the blessing of an independent review board, and without undue tampering with dramatic license (or potential profits) after a film was completed. Under the auspices of the People's Institute, and with early funding from producers including Jesse Lasky and Adolph Zukor, the anti-censorship allies established the National Board of Censorship, in anticipation that a New York-based stamp of approval would serve to appease the various censorship mechanisms across the country, generally municipal police departments enforcing local decency statutes.²³ While directors continued to complain loudly about intrusions into their artistic domain, clearly this type of prior censorship offered a number of benefits. First and foremost, voluntary adherence to the Board's guidelines might help avoid the financial disaster that regularly ensued when film already printed, copied and distributed had to be re-edited (sometimes even re-shot) and re-printed to comply with arbitrary censorship demands in this or that locality across the nation.²⁴ And it created a level playing field: scattershot local censorship efforts often meant that content deemed acceptable in one location at one time might be utterly rejected later, and vice versa, giving directors an incentive to push the boundaries of taste in the scramble to produce hit material. By standardizing what types of behaviors would be acceptable to the censors, the industry could avoid the kind of one-upmanship

²² The U.S. Supreme Court rejected treatment of film as free speech in the "capacity for evil" ruling of 1915.

²³ See Bowser's synopsis of the founding of the National Board of Censorship in 1909. It was re-named the National Board of Review in 1915. Bowser, *Transformation*, 49.

²⁴ McCarthy, "Nickel Vice & Virtue," 46.

that was likely to end in calls for mass public oversight of film content—an outcome that producers, directors and exhibitors all sought to avoid.

Working with the middle-class, middle-aged women who served (generally without pay) as censors, directors used strategies they had learned a decade earlier, when many of them had worked successfully to broaden and legitimize the appeal of vaudeville and travelling dramatic acts.²⁵ In the main, they extolled the power of narrative film to educate and uplift audiences. But filmmakers also charmed censors, Progressive luminaries and liberal clergy with opportunities to visit their sets and, especially, to meet high-minded female writers and crew. They issued explicit invitations to comment on works in production. Prominent directors began taking advantage of film's ability to influence without overt lecturing or moralizing by making movies they thought would satisfy their supporters—and still please audiences. Modern scholars use the term “uplift” to signify the wide range of films that resulted from this impulse, from exploitative white slavery pictures that swathed prurient content in high-minded morality, to films based on famous operas or the plays of Shakespeare.²⁶ Uplift films are distinctive to the middle era of silent film—after the turn to plot-driven scenarios around 1907 allowed for more sophisticated film output, but before the post-World War I “Jazz Age” brought

²⁵ Karen Ward Mahar, *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 134. Weber and others invited prominent reformers to their sets. Women on the set became a powerful force to co-opt the censors. *Ibid.*, 88, 89-90. “As the uplift movement continued, essentialist claims for feminine artistic sensibilities meshed with assumptions of female morality to create a powerful context for women filmmakers,” Mahar notes. Women also became prominent in the ranks of exhibitors, where they were thought to lend an aura of gentility to the business; Bowser, *Transformation*, 45.

²⁶ Most directors, including Griffith and Weber, but most prominently George Loane Tucker, who directed the immensely popular *TRAFFIC IN SOULS* (Independent Motion Picture Company, 1913), exploited in one way or another salacious fantasies that masqueraded as social concern for the plight of young women forced into prostitution.

widespread demand for films as pure, stylish entertainment. Social problem films fall into this category of work. As the censorship crisis of the 1910s demonstrates, successful early twentieth-century motion picture directors needed to appease a range of forces—often arrayed in direct opposition to each other. Their financiers wanted proven stories and reliable hits to increase their profits; exhibitors demanded frank, visually appealing and innovative content to draw a broad-based audience; and the censors preferred a high moral tone in plotlines.²⁷ The prophetic literature of the Social Gospel was a boon to directors who were expected to churn out two to five short films every week and desperately needed fresh sources to generate scenarios.

The Social Gospel in Mass Media: Canon and Vernacular

As we saw in the second chapter, filmmakers interested in selling Biblical epic movies drew on the rich mass culture of liberal Protestantism for an ideology that supported presentation of sacred material in secular setting, along with a wide variety of educational materials and images that made studying the historical Jesus and the Roman-era Holy Land a cornerstone of faith. Along the way, they clearly suggested that Biblical films, with their impeccable sources, could resolve certain tensions in a pluralistic and modernizing society: in short, people who might be reluctant to commit their leisure time to critical Bible study—or in fact, any Bible study at all—might be willing to pay a nickel

²⁷ D.W. Griffith's first contract required him to create films "of such merit in the opinion of purchasers and lessors that the business and profits of [American Mutoscope and Biograph Company] will be increased thereby...." Contract, 17 Aug 1908, DWGP 1:2. Weber summed it up when she said, "Let those who set themselves up as idealists chatter as much as they please about their art... we're all in business to make money" in Arthur Denison, "A Dream in Realization," *Motion Picture World* (19 Jun 1915), 69; quoted in Mahar, *Women Filmmakers*, 96. With more than a decade of filmmaking under his belt, DeMille claimed his producers wanted to finance only stories that had already proven successful; Harvard address 26 Apr 1927, CBDMA, VIII:285 (7).

to watch Jacqueline Logan play Mary Magdalene in gossamer lounging pajamas. These films expanded and amplified the purely entertaining aspects of certain materials formerly considered suitable only in a devotional or educational setting, including paintings and photographs of the Holy Land and Biblical scenes, historical analysis of ancient Rome and dramatic Bible readings, such that Biblical epic films became part of a continuum of commercialization of religion in American culture.

In a similar fashion, social problem films based on the Social Gospel placed a veneer of respectability over otherwise taboo film subjects, with a format that, again, built on familiar Social Gospel mass media while heightening their commercial aspects. The literature and language of the Social Gospel offered particular rich fields of evocative material for directors hungry for good ideas and the early film archives are full of films taken from Social Gospel periodicals, novels, and, one suspects, directly from the pages of home missions education and fundraising circulars. The limitations of early film production materials sometimes make it difficult to determine precisely how Social Gospel themes found their way into films, a problem most critical for Weber and Hart, who were unable to preserve much of their working papers as their careers declined. But a great deal of circumstantial evidence points to the likelihood these ideas were deliberately placed. First, as I have explained elsewhere, the religious temperament of Griffith and Weber, who in interviews and autobiographical material consistently emphasized their Christian leanings and modernist tendencies, inclined them toward liberal Christian causes; Griffith's highly visible and often intimate associations with liberal clergy and liberal Christian organizations like the Chautauqua Institution and the Federal Council of Churches in Christ in America provide more evidence. Griffith also

spoke enthusiastically of his work using the language of missions and ministry. In 1919 he told an interviewer that, "...it is in helping to bring men and women together in a universal understanding of their essential brotherhood that the screen can do its greatest work." Weber, the one-time missionary, early in her career described movies as the most effective pulpit imaginable. Even committed showman Cecil B. DeMille, a practicing Episcopalian who experimented with social problem films in the 1920s, commented that directors who failed to include high-minded messages in their films were wasting a fine opportunity to influence society for the better.²⁸

Fortunately, the evidence included within the primary texts themselves, the films, is often convincing because it uses language, specific Bible references and situations that appear over and over again in what academics call the canon of Social Gospel literature, and in the evocative and melodramatic ways that Social Gospellers described God and man in educational and fundraising materials (see figures, page 226). The canon of the Social Gospel was developed in a series of popular books (see my note 3, above) that established a coherent theological foundation for the Social Gospel, while identifying three primary avenues of remediation: human interaction; corporate reform; and government action. Washington Gladden, Francis Peabody, Richard T. Ely and Walter Rauschenbusch all attempted to legitimize and define the Social Gospel by applying Jesus' conception of the "kingdom of God" to modern problems of poverty and injustice, and all believed the brotherhood of man could be deployed (albeit in different ways) to

²⁸ See Stamp, "Progressive Cinema," 141 -168. On Lois Weber and missionary zeal, see also Anthony Slide, *Lois Weber, The Director Who Lost Her Way in History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 41. The Griffith quote is in n.a. "Humanity's Language," *New York Times*, 18 May 1919.

bring it about in their time.²⁹ Their ideas, most prominently those of Ely and Rauschenbusch, recur in films. Ely was a disciple of Frederick Maurice, and an economist who sought in his work to bring about the kingdom of God through a coalition of church, state and science.³⁰ He was a popular lecturer on the Chautauqua circuit and he believed it was there that his work had the most influence on American life. Ely's foundational principles, as laid out in 1889's *Social Aspects of Christianity*, stated that man's obligations to his fellow man, established by Christ in the new covenant of Matthew 22, were more significant than any ecclesiastical duties.³¹ Ely's theology, based on the so-called "second commandment" to love one's neighbor as oneself, led to an insistence on an ethical foundation for institutionalized economic welfare efforts, an ideology which was often echoed in social problem films.

Also influential in the silent film era were the theologies of Ely's student, Baptist socialist and Social Gospel activist Walter Rauschenbusch. In 1886 Rauschenbusch, newly ordained and assigned to one of New York City's roughest districts, listened as a meeting of reform-minded voters at the Cooper Union was electrified by the call "Thy Kingdom Come!"³² For the rest of his life, Rauschenbusch would write and preach about the Social Gospel's foundation on the theology of the kingdom. In his interpretation,

²⁹ King, "Biblical Base," 60. Handy, *Social Gospel*, 10.

³⁰ For Ely's influence on the Men and Religion Forward Movement and the American Economic Association, see Bradley W. Bateman, "Make a Righteous Number: Social Surveys, the Men and Religion Forward Movement, and Quantification in American Economics," *History of Political Economy* 33 (2001), 57-85. Also of interest is Bradley W. Bateman and Ethan B. Kapstein, "Between God and the Market: The Religious Roots of the American Economic Association," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 13:4 (Fall 1999), 249-258.

³¹ Ely, *Social Aspects*, 5.

³² Dorrien, *Idealism, Realism and Reform*, 83.

ancient Israel had put herself out of favor with God by building a society similar to the one he saw around him in Hell's Kitchen, a world in which the rapacious rich pursued profit and idle amusement, heedless of the misery with which the great bulk of humanity scrambled to survive. Modern theologians recognize the kingdom as among the most distinctively "Christian" of all teachings attributed to Jesus—a philosophical ideal not identifiably Jewish or Greek in origin, which spurred his trial and execution before the Romans on charges of sedition.³³ More importantly for the purpose of this study, early twentieth-century liberal Protestants understood the kingdom as some liminal state or event, which had already occurred or was in the process of occurring, and they heard in "thy kingdom come," a potent impetus for societal reform. Rauschenbusch believed Jesus had pointed the way to reconciliation with God through organic growth of the kingdom, by healing the "social organism," as he described it. In his view, this could only be accomplished by following Christ's selfless model. "Instead of a society resting on coercion, exploitation, and inequality, Jesus desired to found a society resting on love, service, and equality," he explained.³⁴

In addition to the theologies of the kingdom, Social Gospel films also reference the considerable body of home missions material of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, primarily through melodramatic tales that were part and parcel of the home missions fundraising apparatus. As early as the 1870s, the idea of harnessing Christian ideals to social reform had emanated from mission circles, mainly in

³³ The kingdom is attributed to Jesus in Paul's letters (beginning around 50 CE) and the Gospel of Mark, the oldest of the four canonical Gospels, commonly dated to 63 CE. See Paul's interpretation in his first letter to the Corinthian community 4:24, "Then cometh the end, when [Jesus] shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power."(KJV)

³⁴ Rauschenbusch, *Social Crisis*, 59, 60, 70. Lyman Abbot also believed "very considerable social reconstruction is necessary before modern society can be truly called Christian." Campbell, *Darkness*, 43.

communications from young women missionaries, fundraising literature and formally published educational materials.³⁵ Working in missions in Boston medical dispensaries, chaotic immigrant waiting rooms in San Francisco, and dingy Chicago tenements where desperately poor mothers worked long hours to feed their children—missionaries had strong ideas about how unconstrained capitalism had become a de-civilizing force that degraded workers, jeopardized their health and eroded their respectable positions in society.³⁶ In their attempts to garner sympathy and contributions for their causes, home missions workers including (among many others) Frances Williard and Helen Campbell, published lengthy memoirs bolstered by sketches and photographs of the worlds they encountered.³⁷ They frankly described the plight of their constituencies in voluminous annual reports (circulated widely) of diverse home missions organizations, accompanied by lectures and frequent circulating letters providing updates and information.³⁸ They

³⁵ Dougherty, “Methodist Deaconesses,” 356-7. On the practical focus of the early Social Gospel, see Dorn, “*Sunday Afternoon*,” 249-50. See also Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, “For God and Home and Native Land: The W.C.T.U.’s Image of Woman in the Late Nineteenth Century,” in Richey, et al., *Perspectives*, 315, 317. Gifford notes that Frances Willard “was particularly skillful in couching her most radical thoughts in familiar language that would not alarm her audience.”

³⁶ On the pre-Civil war reform movements, see Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New York, 1976), introduction xiii, 153, 156; and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Religion and the Rise of the American City: The New York City Mission Movement 1812-70* (Ithaca, 1971). By 1868, the New York Tract Society had begun to offer bed and board to unfortunate men, 200. See also Smith-Rosenberg, *New York City*, 1, 199 on the understanding of links between health and poverty. For the secular side of missions, see Iso Roy Lubove, *The Professional Altruist; The Emergence of Social Work as a Career, 1880-1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), 10-11.

³⁷ A good example is Helen Campbell in *Darkness and Daylight: or, Lights and Shadows of New York Life. A Woman’s Pictorial Record of Gospel, Temperance, Mission, and Rescue Work* (Hartford, CT: 1900, reprinted 1969). Despite its tendentious photography and prose, the publisher’s preface went to great lengths to assure readers that every precaution was taken to present an un-retouched, realistic portrait of poverty in the city, page x. Lyman Abbott contributed the introductory essay that called for social reform.

³⁸ A good example is the Woman’s Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church (North), *Annual Reports to the Board of Managers* (Cincinnati, 1882 to 1915). The Methodists included many of the most prominent women reformers in their ranks (Williard, Elizabeth Lownes Rust and Septa Henry among them), and the machinery surrounding their endeavors was professionally audited, published and distributed to tens of thousands of Methodist households across America annually.

also supported and marketed educational pamphlets designed to inform potential donors of the work of alleviating social ills. In these materials, melodrama became the *lingua franca* of the Social Gospel.³⁹

Perhaps the most relevant contribution of the communications that accompanied the Social Gospel, however, was the well-recognized Social Gospel affinity with entertainment and mass media. Beginning in the 1880s, writers produced a body of literature that sought to advance the Social Gospel through fiction and drama, providing some story lines for directors but also the precedent in a critical audience segment that commercial entertainment, especially melodrama, was an appropriate vehicle for the transmission of Social Gospel ideas.⁴⁰ Like the late-Victorian era writers who were his natural antecedents, Griffith frequently used Social Gospel themes to elevate otherwise mawkish and prurient story lines into entertainment that would appeal to modern audiences—in much the same way that Harriet Beecher Stowe sixty years earlier used evangelical notions of perfectionism to turn an otherwise salacious story of female bondage and interracial lust into a call for social transformation. Social gospel nuances in films allowed filmmakers to place prospective audiences at a certain high-minded remove from subjects such as prostitution and crime, which might otherwise be of questionable

³⁹ The most popular educational materials were published by the Men and Religion Forward Movement.

⁴⁰ On Social Gospel fiction, see Erin A. Smith, “‘What Would Jesus Do?’: The Social Gospel and the Literary Marketplace,” *Book History* 10 (2007), 193-221; and “Melodrama, Popular Religion, and Literary Value: the Case of Harold Bell Wright,” *American Literary History* 17:2 (2005), 217-243. Popular Social Gospel novelists included writers as diverse as Lottie Blair Parker, Mrs. Humphrey Ward, Harold Bell Wright and Winston Churchill.

taste. And, by selectively referencing the kingdom of God, directors elevated everyday human suffering from the realm of the mundane to the divine.⁴¹

Griffith was the master of this form and, often with oblique Biblical references but sometimes quite explicitly, he imbued his films with a Social Gospel flavor, generally by casting the poor and outcast of society in stories ostentatiously referencing the Gospels. One of his earliest films exhibiting a more delicate Social Gospel touch is *THE REDMAN'S VIEW* (Biograph Company, 1909), which the director re-cast as a modern-day Exodus story. In it, Griffith criticized American treatment of the late nineteenth-century Indian tribes, specifically a band of displaced Kiowas repeatedly forced from their land by vicious white men wielding guns.⁴² Griffith's theme was familiar to American audiences from a wide array of Social Gospel sources, including Helen Hunt Jackson's 1881 exposé of U.S. Indian policies, *A Century of Dishonor*, and her immensely popular novelization of the plight of the California Indians, *Ramona*.⁴³ Although early twentieth-century American society tended to view the country's remaining Indians as degraded and defeated, from a Social Gospel perspective they merited compassion as members of the brotherhood of man, and were the object of considerable practical, home missions

⁴¹ Stamp, "Progressive Cinema," 146. Stamp notes that Weber often emphasized her evangelical roots and equated her films with missionary work.

⁴² Russell Merritt commenting in *D.W. Griffith—Years of Discovery 1909-1913* (Image Entertainment, 1993). As Merritt points out, Griffith would treat Indians more severely in the (otherwise) charming *THE BATTLE AT ELDERBUSH GULCH* (Biograph Company, 1913). On shifting attitudes toward Indians in silent films are Michael J. Riley, "Trapped in the History of Film: Racial Conflict and Allure in *THE VANISHING AMERICAN*," in Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor, eds. *Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film* (Lexington, Ken.: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 58-70; and Bowser, *Transformation of Cinema*, 173-7.

⁴³ Scott Simmon writes that *Ramona* was widely read and dramatized for decades after its publication—such that, in American popular culture, it was treated as a true story. See *Program Notes, Treasures III: Social Issues in American Film, 1900-1934*, San Francisco, Calif.: National Film Preservation Foundation, 2007), 126-127.

energy in the form of schools, health care services and industrial training.⁴⁴ Although Griffith rarely treated Indians sympathetically in his films (a virulent racism mars his own favorite of the Biograph era, *The BATTLE AT ELDERBRUSH GULCH*, 1914), *THE REDMAN'S VIEW* wove two popular Social Gospel themes through its tragic story line—the kidnapping and enslavement of a young woman by brutal men (always a prominent home missions concern); and the death of an elderly Indian man weakened by his forced march across a vast and forbidding landscape.⁴⁵ In *THE REDMAN'S VIEW*, the weakest and most vulnerable members of society pay dearly for the land lust of “The Conquerors,” as Griffith termed the white settlers—the young woman with her freedom and, possibly, virtue (Griffith is not clear as to her sexual fate), and the elderly father with his life.

Griffith's use of Social Gospel references also serve to elevate the film from simple melodrama by contrasting the Exodan promise of salvation, so powerful in Social Gospel theology (and liberal Protestantism more generally), with the reality faced by modern-day Indians. Moses was often depicted as the prototypical social organizer in Social Gospel literature, but while Moses' followers complained bitterly and shook their fists at God throughout their wilderness odyssey, Griffith's Indians proceed nobly, meeting the White Man's violence with stoic perseverance. Griffith also drew on Gospel imagery to reinforce society's callous disregard for its most vulnerable members, in this

⁴⁴ In the nineteenth century, the Woman's Home Missions Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church (North) funded homes in the New Mexico Territory and Alaska, to educate young Indian women.

⁴⁵ Christians of most denominations viewed protected young unattached women in the city to be a major need. Methodist missions established specifically to protect unattached young women from predatory men included the New York Immigrant Girls Home and industrial training schools for girls in most big cities. A number of missions also taught girls housekeeping in order to prepare them for work as domestic help. African-American women established a similar home to rescue young black women coming to the city for work; Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA 1905-1945* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).

case a young Indian woman and an elderly Indian man. In one of the film's more explicit Biblical references, the Kiowa leader, played by Owen Moore, asks humbly, "Where shall we rest our heads?"—linking the tribe's vulnerability and desperation with Joseph's search for shelter for the expectant Mary, forced by government edict to travel on the eve of her child's birth. Griffith ignored the solutions to Indian poverty proposed in home missions circles (mainly literacy and job training) in what would be for him a typically ambiguous ending: The white men decide to fulfill their destiny by killing the troublesome Kiowa and his sweetheart, and the Indian brave can do nothing to protect his lover but shield her face as the guns are leveled at her. Although one merciful white man eventually intervenes to prevent their immediate death, Griffith leaves the viewer with little solace—a sense the young couple has been freed only to wander endlessly in a world that has no place for them.

Another good example of Griffith's use of Social Gospel themes to embroider stories drawn from the popular presses is *A CORNER IN WHEAT* (Biograph Company, 1909). Finished just weeks after *A REDMAN'S VIEW*, with a cast list that reads like a who's who of early cinema: the film featured prominent roles for Linda Arvidson (Griffith's wife), Blanche Sweet, Jeanie Macpherson (in 1909 a lowly Biograph extra, but later Cecil B. DeMille's chief screenwriter), Henry Walthall (a popular silent-era romantic lead), Owen Moore (soon to become Mary Pickford's first husband) and Mack Sennett (later the producer of and actor in wildly popular Keystone cops comedies). Mainly through artful use of Biblical references on intertitles, Griffith wove Social Gospel concerns over access to food into a familiar tale of capitalist greed and worker exploitation. *A CORNER IN WHEAT* told two parallel stories, one of an unscrupulous

commodities speculator who arranges a corner on the wheat market, an illegal scheme in which he buys up supplies of wheat in the futures market and artificially raises the commodity's price. The second story arc traced the consequences of the speculator's actions as a farmer (somewhat illogically) faces falling demand for his now expensive product, a baker callously turns away a poor woman who cannot afford the rising cost of bread, and a charitable organization proves unable to provide assistance to those in need because of high food prices. Griffith artfully intercut this sad tale with shots of the lavish and dissolute lifestyles of those who profit from the speculator's perfidy, as stylish women parade about the wheat elevator, quaff champagne at parties, and gorge themselves on fine food. In an ironic plot twist (and a rare one, at a time when sick babies and the starving elderly commonly paid the ultimate price for society's evils, as did the Kiowa father of *THE REDMAN'S VIEW*), the speculator himself dies as a result of his greed—while showing the grain elevator to his fair admirers, he slips unseen and falls into the silo, where an avalanche of grain buries him.⁴⁶

As he often did, Griffith built his story from several well-known literary sources, including Frank Norris's novel of 1903, *The Pit*.⁴⁷ While historians have speculated at length about current events that could have influenced Griffith's script, none has observed that this story also has strong parallels with Walter Rauschenbusch's seminal essay on the roots of Jesus' theology published in 1907 as part of *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, in which the minister warned that social destabilization could accompany

⁴⁶ Olsson attributes the speculator's death to "metaphysics and melodrama, working in tandem," *ibid.*, 44.

⁴⁷ *A CORNER IN WHEAT* is one of Griffith's most analyzed early films. The best examination of the film and its cultural backdrop is Olsson, "Trading Places," 39-65.

the industrialization of food production.⁴⁸ Rauschenbusch could have been describing Griffith's world of modern commodities trading when he recounted the sins that had brought down God's wrath on ancient Israel—a civilization “based on commerce and mobile wealth” in which, Rauschenbusch hinted darkly, “capital controlled the food supply.”⁴⁹ When financial speculators controlled commodities, the urban poor were especially vulnerable to being “pushed over the precipice of want by any special emergency,” Rauschenbusch said. He then went on to decry the exploitative greed of the Israel's commercial class before the exile to Babylon: “Rich men built stone houses and summer villas, and feasted daily on meat and wine, which the poor man tasted perchance thrice a year.” Worse, like Griffith's speculator and his pampered friends, Rauschenbusch's wealthy paid for their lavish trappings by disregarding the fate of workers who made their luxuries possible. Griffith combined similar ideas with filmic conventions designed to link capitalist greed with the Social Gospel's interpretation of the psychology of hopeless poverty, as respectable, hardworking people are forced to the brink of starvation (and perhaps criminal activity) because of predatory business practices. Griffith had not yet begun to move his camera close enough to his actress's faces to capture subtle expressions, but the sagging shoulders of his farm wife as she learns the family's crop will not sell, and the fear and shame of the poor mother who cannot afford food for her hungry child, used a new filmic vernacular to tell a tale so recognizable from mission literature. Like *THE REDMAN'S VIEW* before it, *A CORNER IN*

⁴⁸ Rauschenbusch, *Social Crisis* (1907; reprinted New York: Wipf and Stock, 2003).

⁴⁹ Rauschenbusch, *Social Crisis*, 15.

WHEAT offered no pat solutions, closing instead on the mob's rising anger and growing bread lines, as the solitary farmer stubbornly plowed a new field.⁵⁰

In addition to the echoes of Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel screed, Griffith also reinforced the notion of the kingdom in *A CORNER IN WHEAT* through a series of intertitles that used Bible imagery to link the basic human need for sustenance with "loaves of bread" (figure on page 226). It was a powerful allusion: not only is communal consumption of bread part of the most holy sacrament in Christianity, but the story of Jesus feeding thousands of followers with an impossibly small number of bread loaves and fish was an oft-cited metaphor for the coming of the kingdom. By evoking a Savior who fed hungry crowds with limited resources, Griffith emphasized the evil of his wheat speculator, who literally takes bread from the mouths of starving children in order to enrich himself and his cronies. In another Gospel allusion, Griffith established the contrast between the exploitative rich and the helpless poor with an intertitle that read "The Chaff of the Wheat," one of his (possibly) ironic twists of Bible doctrine. In the Gospels, the chaff is an eschatological reference to the plight of sinners who will be burned like the dust on the wheat threshing floor on Judgment Day: in Griffith's hands it became an ironic foreshadowing of the speculator's gruesome fate.

Another example of Griffith's ability to embellish narrative through Social Gospel references is in the quietly affecting *WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH OUR OLD?* (Biograph Company, 1911). Griffith used the film to put a human face on the plight of the elderly poor through the story of a skilled carpenter (an allusion to Jesus) who is forced out of his

⁵⁰ For an engrossing analysis of the bread prices and an actual corner of the wheat market in 1909, see Olsson's, "Trading Places." He notes that the machinations of the commodities market frequently elicited messianic rhetoric from contemporary commentators, 17.

workplace to make way for younger, stronger and, presumably, more productive men (figure on page 226). The old man's tools confiscated (compromising his future ability to work), his dignity in shreds, an intertitle informs us it is "impossible to obtain employment at his age." Coming home to find his sick wife searching in vain for food in an apartment cupboard, the old man goes out into the streets, intending in his desperation to rob a grocery store. As the wife collapses back in the dreary apartment, the man is arrested and dragged into night court where the intertitle explains that the judge finds his story "a familiar tale." These plot twists reflect popular home missions themes, including the basic human right to work at a fair wage, and the links between poverty, disease and crime.⁵¹ In addition, it bears some resemblance to Rauschenbush's very first article in a prominent Social Gospel publication (written some twenty years before Griffith ever directed a film). In it, a tailor spends so many hours each day slaving over his work bench that he is unable to leave to care for his sick daughter.⁵² As he works, her condition worsens, until eventually she dies. At this sad juncture, the worker is only able to go home "and sob over her corpse," so futile are his options.

Even before *BIRTH OF A NATION* closed shooting in October 1914, Griffith had begun work on the intimate melodrama he originally titled *THE WOMAN AND THE LAW*.⁵³ In it, the director returned to familiar social problems that he had explored at Biograph,

⁵¹ One commentator noted the close alliance between "physical weakness, poverty, and disease," in Tomkinson, Mrs. T.L. *Twenty Years History of the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1800-1900*. Cincinnati: Western Methodist Book Concern Press, 1903.

⁵² Dorrien, *Modernity*, 85. The article was published in 1887.

⁵³ Lennig, "The Mother and the Law," 404-430. Lennig concluded the original film, edited but never released and now lost, was shot in October and November of 1914. Griffith carried *THE WOMAN AND THE LAW* on Majestic Motion Picture Company's books as an account receivable in February 1915, indicating there was a finished print ready to be distributed. Reliance Pictures Balance sheet, Income Statement 28 Feb 1915, DWGP reel 2.

this time in a feature-length format. The core story examined the plight of a young woman whose husband has been wrongfully accused of murder; she manages to save him from hanging with a last minute reprieve carried to the prison by train and race car. Between January and May 1915, stung by the vitriol leveled at him for *BIRTH OF A NATION*, Griffith had begun to explore how he could re-shape the newly completed footage as part of a proposed epic feature on the impact of intolerance on history.⁵⁴ Old footage from *THE WOMAN AND THE LAW* was combined with three newly shot historical story lines to form *INTOLERANCE: OR LOVE'S STRUGGLE THROUGH THE AGES* (Wark Producing Company, 1916). In this new incarnation, the original, modern story featured wealthy mill boss Jenkins, who cuts his workers' pay to finance his and his sister's self-aggrandizing charitable works, thereby triggering a strike of the long-suffering workers, which he orders violently subdued. The "victims of the Jenkins' aspirations," a young woman called only "the Dear One," a young male factory worker known as "the Boy," and another daughter of a millworker dubbed "the Friendless One," look for work in "the Great City nearby," obviously New York. Predictably, the Boy is unable to find work and falls into a life of petty crime, while the Friendless One is forced by poverty and lack of family ties to throw herself on the mercy of a local crime boss. Only the Dear One, played by Mae Marsh, is able to maintain a veneer of respectability. Her elderly father works in brutal conditions at a factory while she sits in their grim tenement, dreaming of her lost garden at home in the mill town and admiring what she in her naivety sees as stylish women, strolling the street below. After the Boy and the Dear One meet and marry, the crime boss vengefully frames his former lackey for a crime he did not

⁵⁴ Ibid., 408.

commit—and the Boy is subsequently “intoleranced away for a term” to Sing Sing. While he serves his sentence, the meddling “vestal virgins of uplift” investigate the Dear One, now a single mother, for child endangerment and remove the beloved infant to an orphanage. Upon his release, the husband struggles to remain straight, while the crime boss displays too much interest in the Dear One for his mistress’s comfort—when the “musketeer” attempts to rape Mae Marsh’s character, his crazed mistress climbs out on the fire escape, reaches through the window and shoots him.⁵⁵ The husband is wrongfully convicted of the crime based on circumstantial evidence, and only a last minute confession by the conscience-stricken Friendless One (along with Mae Marsh’s ingenuity in hijacking a car) saves him from hanging.

The publicity material Griffith’s company prepared for both *INTOLERANCE* and the stand-alone film he released as *THE MOTHER AND THE LAW* offered its examination of social problems as a key selling point but soft-pedaled the religious themes that are so obvious in the films themselves.⁵⁶ While extolling the film’s “tragedy and exaltation, laughter and thrills, with realism that reaches almost to the breaking point,” one draft of a sample review for *MOTHER AND THE LAW* also promised that “existing social conditions receive a goodly share of attention at the hands of this master dramatist-producer.” Griffith also made some attempt to play up the “injustice of circumstantial evidence,” which not only convicts the Boy on trumped-up charges, but also convinces the charitable workers that the Dear One is cavorting with a strange man (in reality, a kindly married

⁵⁵ In this scene, all the viewer sees is the murderer’s sinister black-gloved hand emerging through the window curtains with the gun, a familiar Griffith trope, also used to effect in *ONE IS BUSINESS, THE OTHER CRIME* and *THE UNSEEN ENEMY* (both Biograph Company, 1912).

⁵⁶ The two reviews (n.d.) are in DWGP 5.

neighbor who offers moral support and childcare tips to the new mother). Judging her unfit, the frumpy, hostile reformers wrest the child from her arms, in one of the film's most affecting moments. In another version of the publicity material, Griffith explicitly appealed to "those men and women who frequently declare they have 'no use for moving pictures.'" "Far above its purely entertaining qualities (and it has a wealth of these) it is undoubtedly as great a preachment against certain social conditions, fake 'uplifters,' false charity workers and others who wear a mask to cover their real characters, as could possibly be conceived," the sample copy continued. Ad lines play up the pathos of the "faithful little mother" and the "manly American boy," while asking "are existing social conditions intolerant? Who shall answer?"

On the surface, *THE MOTHER AND THE LAW* had all the ingredients of first class melodrama—easy to for contemporary audiences to dismiss as improbably plotted (and they did); for most historians to ignore as inferior to subsequent features (and many continue to do so); and for film critics to deride, as was Griffith himself for many decades, as a quaint artifact of Victorian cinema.⁵⁷ But *THE MOTHER AND THE LAW* also shows how Griffith expanded his conception of a Social Gospel film from his early Biograph days, to a point at which he was approaching the peak of his artistic ability. After its inclusion in *INTOLERANCE*, Griffith in 1918 and 1919 shot additional footage and

⁵⁷ Even Lennig fails to recognize the film's theological underpinnings: "In *THE MOTHER AND THE LAW* we encounter not only Griffith the excited artist, honing his skills as a director and editor, but also Griffith, the political progressive and humanist, bravely grappling with the controversial social issues of the time," concluded Lennig. *Ibid.*, 426. Griffith was progressive in many aspects of his beliefs, but remained resolutely Christian to the end of his days. (cite from DWGP). A good contemporary review at the release of *INTOLERANCE* found that "in spite of its utter incoherence, the questionable taste of some of its scenes and the cheap banalities into which it sometimes lapses 'Intolerance' is an interesting story and picture." *New York Times*, 6 Sep 1916.

re-cut the core movie several times, finally to release it in September of 1919.⁵⁸ It is interesting to note that he apparently could not decide whether to include the death of the Dear One's child in the orphanage as part of the plot (as occurs in some cuts according to contemporary notes on the film), or to conclude with the joyous reunion of the little family (as surviving prints of *INTOLERANCE* and *MOTHER AND THE LAW* do).⁵⁹

The Social Gospel via Weber and Hart

Griffith in *THE MOTHER AND THE LAW* (and numerous others of his films) was by no means the only filmmaker to explore the plight of working girls with a Social Gospel flair. The film industry's migration to California had brought with it a husband and wife production team, which arrived at Universal Studios in 1912, where they contracted to make films under the Rex Film Company banner. Already a veteran actress and director on a par with Griffith (and a fellow Biograph alum), Lois Weber, first in partnership with husband, co-writer and co-director Phillipps Smalley, and, later, on her own, was an influential woman's voice in an industry that in the 1910s still imagined it offered a unique career opportunity in directing, scenario writing and film editing for the country's emerging ranks of working women.⁶⁰ Weber was among the very few women (along with

⁵⁸ Lennig, *Mother*, 425-26.

⁵⁹ Again, Lennig traces the baby's fate over the years, *Ibid.*, 425-26.

⁶⁰ Mahar, *Hollywood*, 133. Mahar contends the shift to a "business model of production" and task specialization beginning in 1915 sounded the death knell for women's ambitions behind the camera. Mark Garrett Cooper suggests it was the popularity of genre films with studios seeking to transfer the popularity of one particular film to others (mainly those featuring male-female detective teams and the examination of social problems) in the 1910s that created a temporarily hospitable environment for women to prosper at Universal Pictures; "Studio History Revisited: The Case of the Universal Women," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 25:1 (Jan. 2008), 15-36. A few tough-minded actresses (including Griffith's discovery, Mary Pickford, and Cecil B. DeMille's, Gloria Swanson) were able to play this role in a limited number of films.

Alice Guy-Blaché) who reached the exalted ranks of those who oversaw every aspect of a film project from conception to release. Her immediate background (like Griffith's and DeMille's) was on the stage—in her case a shadowy, and probably brief, stint as a piano player and dancer, which she likely exaggerated in order to burnish her credentials at a time when links to the traditional theater were much in vogue in Hollywood. But it was her even more obscure experience with a missionary group called the Church Army that seems to have strongly shaped her filmic vision. During the months Griffith was finishing his epic *INTOLERANCE*, Weber brought to the screen one of her finest films, *SHOES* (Bluebird Photoplays, 1916). According to most critics and historians who have seen the film (it is not currently available for viewing in the United States), *SHOES* is a production that shows off Weber's considerable skills at camera placement, lighting and plotting. Weber could sometimes go to awkward lengths to allegorize human behavior on film, as we shall see in a subsequent chapter on changing attitudes toward sin in silent movies. She did it in *SCANDAL* (Universal Film Manufacturing Company, 1915) and again in *THE HYPOCRITES* (Bosworth Inc., 1915). But she was also unafraid of the camera. As an actress in her own movies, she frequently filmed herself walking directly toward and past the camera, an effect that is widely copied today but was innovative—and considered a mark of her artistic spirit—in her time. She also emphasized the drama of various scenes by shooting from unexpected camera angles, as she does in a short film she made for Universal (*SUSPENSE*, 1913). In it, she plays a young mother left alone with her baby, who is being menaced by a robber at her house. By simply placing the camera under a set of open stairs leading up to the house, and shooting upward through the risers, she contrives to increase the feeling of menace as the villain ponders how to enter the house.

As with Griffith, Weber's social problem films have been widely studied but, despite her avowed affinity for home missions, historians have spent little time examining the Social Gospel influences in her work. Shelly Stamp does argue that Weber's treatment of the publicity for *SHOES*, which emphasized her own missionary roots, was a deliberate attempt on the filmmaker's part to remove the movie from the province of political action and cast it as a study of morality.⁶¹ As did Griffith with *A CORNER IN WHEAT* and *RAMONA*, Weber larded her publicity material and the film's opening frames with information designed to bolster her film's credentials as an uplifting exploration of a timely topic—the experience of working girls in the city. In the film, she references the work of Jane Addams (who wrote about poverty and prostitution in her 1914 book *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil*); the copyright materials she filed also credit writer Stella Wynne Herron's fictional account of a sales girl's attempt to obtain a new pair of shoes published in *Collier's* magazine in early 1916.⁶² Weber's script could also have been torn from the pages of almost any mission report, however, foregrounding a young girl's (eventually, losing) battle to resist the temptation to allow a young man to purchase a pair of stylish new shoes for her. Weber makes it clear that young Eva, under the sway of an admired female friend who does allow young men to “treat” her in exchange for dances and sexual favors, is right to resent both her father, who for unspecified reasons will not work to support his family, and the store that tempts her with its luxuries but doesn't pay her enough to satisfy her cravings. Griffith explored similar

⁶¹ Shelly Stamp, “Progressive Cinema,” 146.

⁶² Motion Picture Descriptions, LP 8408, 2 Jun 1916, Library of Congress.

territory with his Friendless One who has no recourse but to prostitute herself when she is forced from her small town home to the big city.

Another non-Griffith film, produced at the tail end of these films' popularity, provides an interesting contrast to *A CORNER IN WHEAT*, and illustrates the way that societal changes and the advance of film practice offered directors even more tools with which to examine social problems. *THE WHISTLE* (William S. Hart Productions, 1921) is a rare non-Western film produced by and starring William S. Hart, with scenario writing credits to actress May Wilmoth and novelist Olin Lyman, and a scenario adaptation credit to Hart's frequent collaborator, Lambert Hillyer, vaudevillian and journalist turned writer/director. As I explore in a subsequent chapter, Hart in the teens and twenties crafted for himself a brief but highly influential career as a star of Westerns that explored the notion of the reformed gunman as redeemer of an immoral society—a film trope that has achieved legendary status in movies and criticism across a century of work. By 1921, Hart had made dozens of silent Western gems, creating in the process a filmic persona that would serve as a model for Western heroes from Jimmy Stewart to Clint Eastwood. As his career began to sputter with the advent of the Jazz Age, Hart produced and starred in *THE WHISTLE*, a rambling movie that examined “the struggle eternal between Capital and Labor,” as Hart phrased it in an early treatment.⁶³ The film combines social problems such as poverty, industrial safety, children's work and the eight-hour day (all prominent Social Gospel causes) with the tragic tale of two people who lose their sons following industrial accidents—Robert Evans, a single, working father, and Henry Chapple, his wealthy employer.

⁶³ Motion Picture Descriptions, LP 16123, 11 Feb 1921, Library of Congress.

Like *A CORNER IN WHEAT, THE WHISTLE* drew on Social Gospel themes and used visual religious cues to tell the story of an industrialist's refusal to implement basic safety measures in his factories. In the movie's opening sequences, Evan's child is killed by a fan belt that breaks, whipping across the young boy's body in a scene of shocking ferocity. The Social Gospel is referenced in this stark depiction of the dangerous working conditions to which children were routinely subjected, the focus of repeated Social Gospel pleas for industrial reform beginning as early as the Social Creed of 1909. Hart also heightened the religious tone of the film with a characteristic crucifixion reference at the child's death. His body broken and lifeless, the child is draped across his Evans's lap (possibly a visual echo of the Piéta (figure on page 226), a famous statue of Christ's mother cradling her crucified son). The doctor, having examined the tiny form, announces that all hope is lost—but he can resuscitate (resurrect) the child for a brief time, if the father wishes an opportunity to say good-bye. Evans, tormented by the relentless pace of his own working existence, and devastated by his failure to convince the mill owner to repair the faulty equipment, tacitly acknowledges the futility of his son's short life. Bowing his head in resignation, he declines the offer, saying, "He's suffered enough." Later, blinded by grief, Hart's character is driven to kidnapping when the mill owner's refusal to implement reasonable working hours leaves an employee so fatigued that he falls asleep while manning a bridge crossing. As mill owner Chapple's pampered toddler is chauffeured home that evening, the car drives over the edge of the open bridge into raging waters below. Evans saves the child, but keeps him to raise as his own, a crime he will come to regret later when he learns that the supposed death of her child has ruined the health and sanity of the mill owner's wife.

Unlike Griffith's evil commodities broker in the *CORNER IN WHEAT*, who actually laughs as a fellow trader dies in the pits and is crushed by his frenetic colleagues (a scene markedly similar to one in the modern-day *TRADING PLACES*, Paramount Pictures, 1983), Chapple is a multi-dimensional character. His motivation for driving his workers so hard and postponing needed maintenance is revealed to be the result of his customers' aggressive production demands, not a greedy desire to flaunt his riches before sycophantic friends. When Evans is injured in a gunfight while trying to protect the child he is raising from hooligans, the mill owner takes him in, pays for his care and brings the child into his still grief-stricken household. "I want him to have the best care," Chapple tells the doctor, "no matter the cost." Yet, when Chapple offers to take Evans's son and raise him (still not aware the child is his own) the worker is unable to forgive—he rages at Chapple for his negligence, saying "You've had six years to make that place safe." Despite acknowledging before God his own sin, Evans insists they return the child to him, relenting only when he witnesses the boy's simple prayer for Chapple's wife, whose grief over losing the boy a second time has brought her close to death.

The Social Gospel in Popular Culture

While the Social Gospel by 1909 included a concrete list of potential private and public cures for society's ills, the message as mediated through the medium of silent films became more muddled.⁶⁴ The theology of the kingdom does not emerge full-blown in Griffith's films (or, indeed, in Weber's or Hart's), but the notion that American society

⁶⁴ The 1909 Social Creed of the Churches described on page 2 was expanded between 1912 and 1920 to include issues related to children and families, alcohol sales, and equal rights for women. Gorrell, "Social Creed and Methodism," 390-391.

had failed to fulfill its covenant of cooperation, mutual support and economic fairness was a prominent theme. Griffith clearly rejected the traditional, conservative evangelical notions of salvation—his films do not celebrate the ability of a revival conversion experience to reform a hardened criminal, or the importance of daily Bible study in the formation of a child’s moral foundation. They never imply that the end of the world is proximate, nor that humanity is steeped in sin from birth. Instead, Griffith’s films simply depict a world in which ordinary, decent human beings sometimes make poor choices based on fear, hunger or desperation; a world in which the petty thief, the prostitute, the dance hall girl, are often victims of a much bigger sin, the greed and overwhelming lust of the rich and powerful. In Griffith’s social problem films, the Social Gospel and the Kingdom of God becomes a sort of sensibility that allows him to examine these ideas in a way that is not cloying or didactic.

True, Social Gospellers believed the Church was the primary cultural mechanism capable of the “regeneration and reconstitution of social life...on a moral basis,” and Rauschenbusch rhapsodized about the reformed world that would follow:

“As we have seen, the industrial and commercial life to-day is dominated by principles antagonistic to the fundamental principles of Christianity, and it is so difficult to live a Christian life in the midst of it that few men even try. If production could be organized on a basis of cooperative fraternity; if distribution could at least approximately be determined by justice; if all men could be conscious that their labor contributed to the welfare of all and that their personal well-being was dependent on the prosperity of the Commonwealth; if predatory business and parasitic wealth ceased and all men lived only by their labor; if the luxury of unearned wealth no longer made us all feverish with covetousness and a simpler life became the fashion, if our time and strength were not used up either in getting a bare living or in amassing unusable wealth and we had more leisure for the higher pursuits of the mind and the soul—then there might be a chance to live such a life of gentleness and brotherly kindness and tranquility of heart as Jesus desired for men.”⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Rauschenbusch, *Social Crisis*, 143 (on the reform of society); 289, 291, (on the land tax and moderate incomes); 299 (work days and workloads); 305 (on poverty); 312, 324 (industrialism and the working class). The excerpt is at 340-341.

Although aligning industry along the line of Christianity seemed like a good start, clearly a good part of the Social Gospel agenda required state or federal intervention. Rauschenbusch advocated a more equitable distribution of the great wealth created by industrialism through a land tax on nonproductive real estate, for example, and he supported (unspecified) policies that would even out extremes of wealth and poverty by promoting moderate incomes for all people. Rauschenbusch also believed that a great deal of human misery could be alleviated by the imposition of shorter working days and lighter workloads. He advocated not only generous treatment of the destitute, but also inquiry into “who is unloading this burden of poverty and suffering...by underpaying, exhausting, and maiming the people.” Finally, Rauschenbusch believed the Church had allowed itself to be seduced by a gospel of greed and needed more firmly to align itself with the interests of the working poor against the harmful effects of unchecked competition and greed in business, by supporting union aims and activism.

Although Griffith, Weber and Hart were eloquent in their portrayal of the concerns of the Social Gospel movement, and they treated social problems with a Social Gospel sensibility, their films rarely advanced the movement’s reform agenda. Instead, Griffith’s films, for instance, tended only to underscore the inadequacy of voluntary private relief efforts normally expounded by conservatives. In *WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH OUR OLD?*, salvation of sorts arrives in human form, as a merciful judge, who, “moved by conscience” verifies the old man’s story, and sends him home with a basket of food and a doctor. Naturally, these efforts come too late to save the starving and sick wife. In a classic touch of Griffithian pathos, the man shakes off the sympathy of his belated would-be saviors, and the film ends with a close-up of him cradling his dead

wife's body against his chest. "Nothing for the Useful Citizen Wounded in the Battle of Life," the intertitle despairs. Hart's mill owner resists his foreman's calls for more reasonable working hours even when he loses his own son as a result of a worker's fatigue. In *THE MOTHER AND THE LAW* and *SHOES*, respectively, both Griffith and Weber prominently feature women who have been forced by economic necessity to throw themselves on the mercy of men who offer them gifts of clothing, meals and housing in return for unspecified sexual favors. Even the Dear One, Griffith's beloved heroine, avoids the same inevitable fate only because she resists the Boy's sexual overtures until he agrees to marry her. Even with the veneer of propriety conferred by married motherhood, she falls victim to heartless do-gooders who reflexively condemn her for her naivety and innocence, removing from her the child who represents for her and her errant husband the respectability of middle-class family life.

The reasons for Griffith's reluctance to carry the banner of reform activism may be explained partly by his sensitivity to the tastes and cultural norms of his immigrant and working class fans, who viewed reforms like saloon closing and prohibition as intrusive and demeaning. The types of reformers who would close the friendly local watering hole, or deprive a poor but well-meaning mother of her children, earn Griffith's sternest censure—he calls them the "vestal virgins of uplift" in *THE MOTHER AND THE LAW* and informs viewers that their failure to find a mate has forced them to turn their frustrated energies on the hapless poor. Other reform ideas may have risked alienating the bankers who financed his projects—many of whom could be expected to distrust government remedies for the hardships industrial labor imposed on workers and marginal populations. Instead, Griffith generally endorsed private, voluntary efforts to right

society's wrongs, and he was not alone in this. Weber, Hart and DeMille also appeared to favor private and market-based solutions to social problems—when they offered any solutions at all. These filmmaker's plots generally play up the unexpected beneficent act of a wealthy patron acting the role of *deus ex machina*—the altruistic and wealthy lover of Weber's *THE BLOT* (Lois Weber Productions Inc., 1921) for instance, who contrives to drop a \$20 bill in the drawing room of his beloved's genteelly impoverished family, or the rich husband who atones for selling his vote on a railroad bill by offering a job to the man who attempted to rob him in Griffith's *ONE IS BUSINESS*.⁶⁶ *THE WHISTLE* concludes when Evans, having sacrificed his own happiness to return the mill owner's child, extracts from his boss the acknowledgement that improving conditions at the mill is his responsibility. Although these sentiments echo Rauschenbusch's call for a higher moral tone in business, they fall far short of the Social Gospel mission to bring to the advantages—and protections—of middle-class American status: access to education, workplace protections and, most importantly, opportunities to work at a gainful wage.⁶⁷ One Methodist missionary summed it up: “With the religion of our Lord Jesus Christ in their hearts, the people must also be taught how to earn an honest livelihood.”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ One reviewer hoped the film would “possibly relieve a great poverty that has been inflicted by the American people upon a group of necessary individuals that have made supreme sacrifices in order that our children should not be neglected.” “‘The Blot,’ at Rialto, is Lois Weber Drama with Human Interest,” *The Atlanta Constitution* (9 October 1921, D9).

⁶⁷ Lubove identified the hallmarks of late-Victorian charity as so-called friendly visiting, community surveys, and dual service from a professional accompanied by a committed volunteer, *Altruist*, 1-13. For a contemporary view, see Lyman Abbott's call for cooperation between official (to combat crime and improve living conditions) and volunteer (to improve moral character) forces in charity, in Campbell, *Darkness*, 48-49; see the description of personal missions on 51-52. The secular variant was the settlement house, a movement that interested many deaconesses, Dougherty, “Deaconesses,” in Richey, et al., *Perspectives*, 362.

⁶⁸ Elizabeth Lownes Rust, corresponding secretary and founder of the Society Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, *Annual Report to the Board of Managers* 12 (Cincinnati, 1893), 44.

After World War I, social problem films became less and less popular. Weber seems to have sensed a change in the wind, and there is a shift in her rhetoric in magazine interviews that indicates she recognized audiences did not care for the kind of in-your-face “preachment” she and Griffith had explored so profitably in the 1910s. But at that point in her career, with funding beginning to concentrate in the hands of five or six powerful studios, it was too late for Weber to change course and adapt—Griffith and Hart faced the same abrupt decline in demand for their films. But before their careers sputtered out entirely, these directors continued to explore powerful theological notions about Jesus’ ministry in a series of films that examined the life of Christ through various fictional characters. Just as these filmmakers felt free to present a vision of modern life that was consonant with the values of the Social Gospel, they also used fictional saviors to depict the attributes of the human Jesus as presented in mediating theology.

Chapter four: The Atoning Sacrifice

Near the end of a surviving fragment of *QUEEN KELLY* (Gloria Swanson Pictures, unreleased) shot in 1929, convent schoolgirl Patricia Kelly (played by Swanson) has found shelter from a storm at the palace of mad Queen Regina V and her fiancé Wolfram. In the face of his determined seduction, Kelly's school-girl crush has developed into a stronger passion, one that scares and fills her with guilt. When the queen catches the lovers in intimate conversation, she chases Kelly from the palace into the cold, dark Scandinavian night. The expulsion was intended to be the beginning of an odyssey of degradation and redemption, as Kelly survives violence, rape and torture working in an African brothel before Wolfram's queen dies and he is able to rescue his lover. But with four hours of finished footage shot (about one-third of the movie), Swanson summarily fired director Erich Von Stroheim. The actress and producer later claimed she had been unaware of Von Stroheim's intentions for completing the film, and only belated realized it would never pass muster with the censors as he envisaged it.¹

Whatever the real reason for her decision, Swanson's property languished as synchronized sound began to take hold, and the Depression and World War II sent directors and audiences in other directions: much of the movie is lost to history.² The

¹ Janine Basinger, *Silent Stars* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 231. Swanson feared the censor's office even though the late nineteen-twenties were the "Hays Office's" most liberal years; Kevin Brownlow, *Behind the Mask of Innocence; Sex, Violence, Prejudice, Crime: Films of Social Conscience in the Silent Era* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 23. Most commentators agree that the threat of censorship was only one of Swanson's many reasons for abandoning the project. It is unlikely she was unfamiliar with the script, and she certainly knew that von Stroheim was notorious in Hollywood for risqué material and lengthy running times. Her real reasons for terminating the project were probably financial.

² Basinger, *Silent Stars*, 232.

shocking scene remains, however, in which the jealousy-crazed Queen tracks helpless Kelly down a long palace corridor, through heavy black doors, and into the snow. The scantily clad Queen brandishes a whip, with which she strikes the defenseless girl, clothed in a blindingly white, virginal nightgown. It is an excruciating sight, which climaxes as Kelly stands for one moment in the hallway, assuming a cruciform stance, her arms outstretched and head bowed. In this moment it is clear the innocent girl has taken upon herself the guilt of Wolfram's dual betrayal—of his fiancé, but also of the young girl he has charmed, then left in the clutches of a madwoman.

In addition to the historical representations of Christ's life and death in Biblical epics, and the examination of a Social Gospel based on his teachings, filmmakers often drew on elements of Christ's life as a template for melodrama, imagining a hero, like Kelly, who emerges from the community to offer a path to salvation, toiling usually in obscurity, distrusted by hypocritical elites of society, nearly destroyed by them, then resurrected in some fashion to bring redemption. Silent films offer a unique example of mass media as transmitters of theology because of the nexus between the inception of the film industry and the advent of liberal theology. A number of popular film tropes were conceived precisely at the moment many Protestant churches were struggling to reinterpret orthodox Christology in light of the rejection of original sin, a time when the Christian understanding of Christ's life and death was in flux. For the great majority of early twentieth-century Christians, the traditions of orthodoxy, first established at the church Council of Nicea in 325, likely remained the nearest approximation of truth. The Creed in 1900 described Christ as God's only son, "incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary," a man fully human and fully divine, who "for us men and for our

salvation came down from heaven.” The Creed continued with the salient details of Christ’s passion and death: He “was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again....”³

The Christian iconography and fictionalized representations of Christ that appeared in silent films tended to follow closely many of the basic conceptions of Jesus’ life and death. Christ characters in silent films often display a state of grace that is comparable to Jesus’ sinless nature. Sometimes they are “others,” after World War I frequently Asians, who appear whole and blameless, in a time and in a place where their message of charity and benevolence cannot be understood because of the willful blindness and prejudice of the communities to which they minister. Other figures are literally born again, emerging from a sinful past converted to a life of Christian righteousness, such as William S. Hart’s many former gunmen, but their redemptive work remains incomplete because they remain trapped in a community that cannot, or will not, recognize their newfound moral authority. These characters closely echo the Markan Christ, a prophet rejected in his own town.⁴ Filmic Christ figures are generally kind-hearted and good-natured yet, by the very nature of their purity, they tend to bring tension into the imperfect worlds around them. One of Hart’s reformed gunmen acts as a goad on an evil saloon owner, who becomes ever more devious in his attempts to break down the protective shield the salvific character has erected around a new Christian community in the town. Finally, as did Jesus in the temple, these Christ figures often

³ Taken from the Anglican Communion’s *Book of Common Prayer*, 1662 version.

⁴ Mark 6: 1-6. “And Jesus said unto them, A prophet is not without honor, save in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house. ⁵And he could there do no mighty work, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folk, and healed them. And he marvelled because of their unbelief. (ASV)

have a violent confrontation with the authorities who persecute them, and suffer the betrayal of a close associate, a Judas.

Despite the overall adherence to orthodox Christology, however, these films also show evidence of controversies that emerged in American religious thought toward the end of the nineteenth century. Two books of the middle nineteenth century had, each in their own ways, stimulated a late-century flowering of Christological scholarship aimed at reinterpreting the Gospel story through the lens of historical criticism.⁵ David Friedrich Strauss's *The Life of Christ, Critically Examined* (available after 1846 in the young George Eliot's English translation) and Ernest Rénan's *Life of Jesus* (available in English after 1864) sought to place Jesus within the context of first century Judaism, while deconstructing the mythological aspects of his life (the Virgin birth, the miracles, the bodily resurrection).⁶ Their analyses lead both scholars, Hegelians firmly under the sway of German Biblical criticism, to reject Christ's divine nature. In the immediate aftermath of their work, American evangelicals were harshly critical. Henry Ward Beecher, eldest son of the prominent Beecher clan and quickly rising to national fame as the minister of First Congregational Church in Brooklyn, New York, fired off a counterattack in his 1871 *Life of Jesus, The Christ*. In it, Beecher conceded that the work of critics such as Strauss and Rénan had value for scholars, but warned that they were not "the best for

⁵ Works influential in this analysis include William Hutchinson, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977); Mark S. Massa, "Mediating Modernism." *Harvard Theological Review* 814 (1988): 413-430; Daniel L. Pals, *The Victorian "Lives" Of Jesus* (San Antonio, Tex.: Trinity University Press, 1982); Ference Morton Szasz, *The Divided Mind of Protestant America, 1880-1930* (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1982); Peter J. Thuesen, *In Discordance with the Scriptures: American Protestant Battles Over Translating The Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁶ David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Christ, Critically Examined*, trans. Marian Evans (London: Chapman Bros., 1846); Ernest Rénan, *The Life of Jesus*, trans. Charles E. Wilbour (New York: Carleton, 1864).

general reading” because they were “likely to lead plain people from certainty into doubt, and to leave them there.”⁷ Resurrecting the human Jesus to “call back the mind from speculative and imaginative efforts in spiritual directions,” was all well and good, but Beecher warned that historical criticism could damage the edifice of belief. “The genius of the Gospels has been crucified to a theory of Christ’s humanity,” he grumbled.⁸

Beecher’s concerns proved groundless and, thirty years later, the historical Jesus became something of a publishing dynamo, with literally dozens of books issued by presses popular and academic, many aimed at lay audiences.⁹ Not surprisingly, most of these authors, who based their work on the accepted literature of Protestant liberal theology, found in Jesus’ life the confirmation of their modernist world view. Nearly all the Jesus biographies of the early twentieth century sought to re-cast the Savior from what clerics viewed as a passive and feminized creature of nineteenth-century romanticism, crafting of this unlikely clay a masculine, powerful figure of authority.¹⁰ Yet, this Christ was less divine than human, common themes being his humble but manly work as a carpenter; his affinity for the natural world (signaling purity to the late-

⁷ Henry Ward Beecher, *The Life of Jesus, The Christ* (New York: J.B. Ford & Company, 1871), preface.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁹ Influential contemporary theological works include (among many others): Shailer Mathews, *Social Teaching of Jesus: An Essay in Christian Sociology* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1897); Charles Monroe Sheldon, *In His Steps: “What Would Jesus Do?”* (New York: Hurst & Co., 1897); Rush Rhees, *The Life of Jesus of Nazareth: A Study* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1900); William E. Barton, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Story of His Life and the Scenes of His Ministry* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1903); Francis Greenwood Peabody, *Jesus Christ and the Christian Character: An Examination of the Teaching of Jesus in its Relation to Some of the Moral Problems of Personal Life* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1905); Ernest DeWitt Burton and Shailer Mathews, *The Life of Christ; an Aid to Historical Study and a Condensed Commentary on the Gospels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1909); Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Manhood of the Master* (New York: Association Press, 1914); Giovanni Papini, *Life of Christ*, trans. Dorothy Canfield Fraser (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1923).

¹⁰ Peabody, *Jesus Christ*, 40. As Peabody described him, Jesus exhibited “a calmness and mastery, a force and restraint... which dominated the scene.”

Victorian mind); and his unflinching courage before the religious authorities who doubted him—similar, one might infer, to the persecutions visited on the liberal elite by their doctrinally confused denominations.¹¹ Two popular books, by Baptist Shailer Mathews of the University of Chicago Divinity School and by Francis Peabody, a Unitarian ethicist at Harvard University, discovered in Jesus’ work and teaching a template for social change. As we have seen in the work of their most prominent adherent, Walter Rauschenbush, Social Gospel ideas had a big impact on social problem films of the silent era. Peabody’s earlier work was the theological center of Charles M. Sheldon’s 1897 publication, which taught a century of Christians to ask themselves “What would Jesus do?” (still commonly abbreviated as “WWJD” in evangelical circles, some sixty years after Sheldon’s death), the fictionalized exploration of Jesus’ response to pressing questions of the modern world.

Christian Imagery in Film

As theologians Christopher Deacy and Gaye Ortiz make clear, the existence of simple Christian imagery and symbols do not necessarily confer upon films such as *QUEEN KELLY* theological significance—but even a cursory familiarity with silent film practice reveals that directors often used intertextual references to Christian iconography and Christian art as plot devices and in character development.¹² One of the most familiar devices is the insertion of the image of a bare cross (often outlined against a rocky

¹¹ The finest example is Fosdick’s, *Manhood of the Master*.

¹² Christopher Deacy and Gaye Williams Ortiz, *Theology and Film; Challenging the Sacred/Secular Divide* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), see especially 5-6; see also Mark G. Toulouse and James O. Duke, eds., *Sources of Christian Theology in America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999).

landscape or pounding surf) into a scene, by intercutting (sometimes repeatedly) between a character and the cross. Directors also placed crosses prominently in background scenery. Not always a popular device—one reviewer complained that Thomas Ince’s movie *THE DISCIPLE*, starring William S. Hart, was “was grotesquely disfigured at one point by a flash of Calvary, with the scriptural words of forgiveness neatly printed on the sky above the crest of the hill,”—it was nonetheless a symbol most Americans understood very well.¹³ In early twentieth-century religious thought, the cross of Jesus conjured strong feelings in Christians—the burden of his final hours carried under the lash to the site of his ignominious execution, it signified not only Christ’s atoning sacrifice for mankind, but also foreshadowed his ultimate triumph over death. In the words of a popular hymn of the day, it was “the emblem of suffering and shame” and the place “where the dearest and best, for a world of lost sinners was slain.”¹⁴

In silent films, the image of the cross generally referenced a character, or a plot twist in which society cruelly persecuted someone of innocence and purity. In his 1910 adaptation of *RAMONA*, for instance, Griffith used various Christian icons as scenic elements designed to highlight the lead character’s blamelessness in disregarding her family’s disapproval to marry the man she loves. Helen Hunt Jackson’s half-Indian heroine was one of those film subjects that captured the American imagination first as immensely popular romantic literature, later a stage play, and, finally, a movie.¹⁵ It was also among those iconic myths of American popular culture, like Henry Wadsworth

¹³ “The Sable Lorcha,” n.a., *New York Times*, 18 Nov 1915.

¹⁴ Reference to *Old Rugged Cross*, written 1913.

¹⁵ Other examples of novels transferred to stage and screen include Lew Wallace’s *Ben-Hur* and L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz*.

Longfellow's 1855 poem *The Song of Hiawatha*, which was so realistic to audiences that it was considered historical fact in an era when America was re-inventing its Native American legacy.¹⁶ Griffith also enhanced the religious undertones in this tragedy of alienation and sacrifice by locating in a chapel the dramatic moment when the aristocratic girl Ramona falls in love with ill-fated Alessandro, a man whose fortune will be lost when marauders despoil his family town. When Ramona elects to disobey her parents and elope with her lover, Griffith features prominent images of Mary and the cross on the wall in the girl's bedroom, foreshadowing the sacrifices Ramona will make—of national identity (when she discovers she is of mixed race), of family status (when she marries Alessandro), and of her husband and their infant child to a greedy and hostile society that persecutes her for what she is.

A cross, newly erected on a makeshift chapel—and later in flames—is also a prominent scenic element of *HELL'S HINGES* (New York Motion Picture Corp., 1916), William S. Hart's fable of salvation, atonement and redemption set in the depraved West. But Hart also used figural shots of the cross, intercut with the dramatic action, to contrast the pure faith of a young woman with that of her brother Robert, the town's ineffectual new minister, whose prurient interest in the local saloon and its prostitutes is only too apparent. Hart portrayed the minister as a victim of his mother's clerical ambitions, a man fundamentally unsuited to the collar. Robert's church leaders foist him off on a new Western parish when his tendency toward flirtation becomes uncomfortable. In the new

¹⁶ Longfellow's story of Hiawatha, with its Christological overtones, was often billed as the "Indian Passion Play," see Alan Trachtenberg, *Shades of Hiawatha: Staging Indians, Making Americas, 1880-1930* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2004), 237. On the early 20th century fascination with all things Indian, see also Louis S. Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), especially the introductory essay.

town—called, ominously, Hell’s Hinges—Robert is immediately seduced by the prostitutes in the local saloon, and falls easy prey to the machinations of Silk Williams, a diabolical saloon owner (complete with a devilish goatee and black brocade jacket), who seeks to humiliate the newcomer before he can bring “civilization” to the town. Robert’s first sermon fails spectacularly. The town’s rowdies jeer and threaten, and Hart at this moment cuts prominently between shots of kindly Faith, who counters Robert’s despair by singing “Rock of Ages” in the rough chapel, and a shot of a woman kneeling in supplication before a cross set against a rocky shore. When the rowdies threaten to “dance” with Faith, the movie’s hero, lanky, laconic gunman Blaze Tracey, turns from her mesmerizing voice to warn the saloon owner, “there ain’t gonna be no more picking on the parson’s herd,” thus signaling to the town (and the audience) his conversion from derisive outlaw to protector of the “petticoat brigade.”

Another intriguing placement of the cross (figure on page 227) is in Charlie Chaplin’s *THE KID* (Charles Chaplin Productions, 1921), a year in the making and one of the finest films of the silent era, certainly Chaplin’s best.¹⁷ *THE KID* opens with the shot of a pretty and fairly prosperous young woman leaving a charity hospital, an infant clutched to her breast. The hospital’s jail-like exterior, and the demeanor of the matronly nurse who discharges her, leave no question as to the young woman’s status. Clearly, the child is illegitimate. Actor Edna Purviance plays a Mary-like figure whose marital status

¹⁷ Said the *New York Times*, “Charlie Chaplin is himself again—at his best, in some ways better than his previous best, and also, it is to be regretted, at his worst, only not with so much of his worst as has spoiled some of his earlier pictures.” “The Screen,” n.a., *New York Times* (22 Jan 1921). The article references two scenes marred by “vulgarity, or coarseness,” without describing them. An article a month later again referenced the film’s touches of “vulgarity and witless horseplay” but agreed it “has many scenes of Chaplin and his company at their finest.” The author is unable to infer from the articles exactly which scenes were considered so offensive.

earns her the censure of society, and Chaplin used strong Christological imagery to generate affection and respect for this new mother. First an intertitle emphasizes her links to both Mary and the sinless Jesus, reporting with irony that her “sin was motherhood.” Next, as she wanders in growing panic, Chaplin cuts from shots of her walking in a park, to a static watercolor painting of Jesus dragging his cross up a hill. As the action then cuts to her lover casually consigning a last picture of her to the flames in his hearth, Chaplin informs us she is “Alone.” When at last the desperate mother leaves the baby in a car parked in front of mansion, hoping the wealthy residents will have mercy and care for her child, the meaning is clear. Purviance’s character has sacrificed her child for its own good, in hopes it will find a better home than she, with her limited means, can offer. Chaplin here used the pathos of the atoning sacrifice to heighten drama of the subsequent scene in which his character, in comically reluctant fashion, nonetheless rescues and adopts of the child. Not only does the Tramp redeem his own dissolute past by saving the “kid” from the wicked robbers who have stolen the car and tossed the infant on a garbage heap, but, in his newfound tenderness, he rears a boy whose pure love and joy transform a poor, hardscrabble community into a sort of heavenly fantasyland.

Sometimes cinematic crucifixion references are less explicit, but no less pointed. Similar to Gloria Swanson’s evocative stance in *QUEEN KELLY*, film directors also commonly placed actors in typical Christ-like poses in order to emphasize their character traits (tenderness, meekness, righteousness, and so forth) or to highlight or foreshadow a character’s persecution or torment by society. As with so many aspects of early film practice that copied forms established in other media (photography, literature and theatre), the distinctly Biblical poses were drawn from another popular visual medium—

mass-produced religious art, a category that included everything from cheaply printed ephemera such as postcards, to elaborately illustrated Bibles and sophisticated magic lantern shows.¹⁸ Charles Musser has pointed out that the precise moment of Christ's death, as he breathes his last breath, his head drops forward onto his chest and his body collapses against the cross, was one of the earliest moving images Americans viewed, especially in popular late nineteenth-century educational lectures on the Holy Land.¹⁹ Several European artists contributed work to the American craze for religious art, the most famous of which was Tissot. The Frenchman's monumental series of 365 paintings illustrating famous Biblical scenes featured many from Christ's life, including his baptism, his gathering of the children, the Sermon on the Mount, his confrontation in the Temple, his torture by the Romans, and, of course, the crucifixion and resurrection. Tissot's images were featured in travelling exhibitions of the paintings that circulated in the United States in the late 1890s, and in printed Bibles and ephemera.

By using the familiar stance of Christ hanging on the cross to equate (however obliquely) her character's suffering with his, Swanson also drew on other artistic antecedents, most prominently the popularity of nineteenth-century religious fiction, which often used the elements of high Christology (the life of selfless love and caring; the persecution by religious authorities; the willing sacrifice of an innocent life; the death

¹⁸ David Morgan, *Protestants and Pictures; Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), especially his chapter on "The Devotional Likeness of Christ," 265-304.

¹⁹ Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1990), 209. Magic lantern impresario John L. Stoddard achieved the effect by rapidly switching between two projectors.

and resurrection) as the template for a variety of plotlines.²⁰ The great model for this type of work was the pre-Civil War publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which both Tom and Eva (the child's full name, Evangeline, reveals her roots in Gospel imagery) are examples of characters whose goodness and self-sacrificing love lead them to suffering and deaths that purge their community of the sin of slavery. In QUEEN KELLY, the young woman's innocent and cheerful temperament, which so entrances the jaded Wolfram, and her suffering at the hands of her lover's fiancé, are thus imagined as part of a passion play in which she sacrifices not only her innocent love for Wolfram, but also her security and purity, to descend into a type of hell from which she would subsequently emerge whole and sound.

In a similar fashion, William S. Hart used powerful visual clues to emphasize the atoning sacrifice of several of his Western gunmen, generally by posing himself in the same way that Jesus was commonly illustrated as standing before his accusers after his arrest. The action is not as subtle as it sounds—in fact, veteran stage actors like Hart tended to use their bodies in a number of forcible ways to project emotion and advance plotting, a style of acting in wide evidence in early narrative films.²¹ Hart's pose also appeared to draw on artistic representations of Christ's stoic acceptance of the accusations against him, signaled by a demure stance, head tilted forward, arms hanging limply and wrists often tied. He is a blameless man who stands silently before his tormentors. For Christians, it is an central moment, a mark of the willing sacrifice of a

²⁰ Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 65, 69.

²¹ Musser, *Emergence of Cinema*, 3.

blameless life to redeem sinful mankind. Hart used a similar stark image to underscore the self-sacrifice his gunman makes in *THE BARGAIN* (New York Motion Picture Corp., 1914). In Hart's first big feature role, he played Jim Stokes, a sometime train robber who turns from a life of crime when he is rescued by a pious young woman following a heist that leaves him lost, wounded and wandering alone in the wilderness. Newly reformed, Stokes rides to town to return the stolen money, but is arrested before he can complete his task. Rather than fight the brutal mob that has assembled in town to hunt him down and hang him, Jim stands before them in the classic pose, head bowed, hands cuffed in front of him (see figure, page 218) He knows it is better to sacrifice his freedom than bring shame on his new wife by running from his crime.

Hart used this visual trope in a number of other films. As Budd Marr in *THE SILENT MAN* (Thomas H. Ince Corp., 1917), for instance, he stands in much the same way as he allows a young boy to turn him in to the sheriff for a crime he has not committed. Marr's noble act, as he gives up (at least temporarily) his good name, will reveal the identity of the town's real villain and cleanse the community of his corroding presence. In *BLUE BLAZES RAWDEN* (Wm. S. Hart Productions, 1918), Hart in the title role played Blue Blazes, a forester who shoots the evil saloon owner (dubbed "Ladyfingers" for his immoral treatment of women) who has cheated Blue Blazes at cards and then secretly disarmed the hero by removing the bullets from his gun. After Blue Blazes turns Ladyfingers' own gun back on him, he is tormented by his actions, especially once he meets the dead man's trusting and grief-stricken mother. He vows to shield her from knowledge of her son's depravity by hiding the details of Ladyfingers' death from her. Thus, when the town's prostitute betrays Blue Blazes by telling the dead man's brother

who killed him, the hero is forced to meet the boy's enraged accusation with silence, lest he reveal Ladyfingers' despicable actions. His head bowed, he stands before his accuser, not lifting a finger to defend himself. Even when mortally wounded by the son, Hart's character steadfastly refuses to retaliate, ordering his men to return the boy unharmed to his mother.

The Atoning Sacrifice in Silent Films

In her survey of his work, Diane Koszarski lists 67 films starring or directed by William S. Hart between 1914 and 1925, the great bulk of them Westerns.²² Despite his immense popularity and the availability of many of his works commercially and in film archives, Hart has received only cursory attention from film historians, many of whom dismiss him as a Victorian artifact in a rapidly modernizing Hollywood. Hart *was* a Victorian by birth, a Westerner by adoption (he was both born and buried in New York), and an old trouper of 49 when he arrived in Hollywood to make his first film, with his friend Thomas Ince at New York Motion Picture Company.²³ Like so many filmmakers and actors with similar pedigrees (Griffith, Chaplin and Weber, to name just a few),

²² Diane K. Koszarski, *The Complete Films of William S. Hart: A Pictorial Record* (New York: Dover Publications, 1980), contents page. Koszarski's essay on Hart is one of the less pejorative, pages ix to xxv. "His work," she notes, "especially in the teens, strengthened the dramatic value of the Western as a film genre, and at its zenith his stardom was equal to that of Chaplin, Pickford or Fairbanks."

²³ Koszarski, *Complete Films*, xii. For biographical details on Hart see also, William S. Hart, *My Life East and West* (1929; reprinted Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1994) and short biographical sketches in Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 279-281; and Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (1992; paperback edition, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 242-252.

Hart's career stagnated in the mid-1920s, and he produced little meaningful work after the advent of synchronized sound films in 1928. In his heyday, however, Hart was fortunate that his extraordinary face allowed him to evoke powerful emotions on film, without the staginess and exaggeration (to which he sometimes was prone) that doomed so many theatre stars to early retirement in Hollywood.²⁴ By the 1910s, American films were about faces and emotions and passions—the planes in Hart's deeply lined face and his expressive light eyes were immensely appealing to Western aficionados. For more than a decade, Hart found a lucrative niche making realistic, yet comfortably formulaic, Westerns. The character Hart typically played was often some variant of the reformed gunman, whose love for a good woman turns him from a life of violence to one of responsibility, from playing the (generally) good-natured outlaw to playing the hero. In fact, even in their natural state, Hart's outlaws were rarely truly evil, but were more properly viewed as reflections of the opportunism critical to survival on the lawless frontier.

Historians have correctly noted that Hart was instrumental in adapting the myth of the West to the medium of film, with his contrasts between vast, heartless expanses of landscape and the “types” that were believed to inhabit them—the saloon owners, gunmen and greenhorns, women of easy virtue and civilizing, pious women.²⁵ The existing scholarship acknowledges his predilection for religious topics, but ignores his

²⁴ A reviewer in 1915 praised his “screen technique, sincerity of effort, fullness of poise and restraint of emotion.” Britt Craig, “Behind the Screens,” *Atlanta Constitution*, (5 Dec 1915), C15. A Los Angeles Times review several years later spoke of “his subtlety in interpretation” and “discriminating keenness of insight.” Antony Anderson, “Films: ‘BLUE BLAZES RAWDEN.’ A Bill Hart Play with Both Punch and Humanity,” *Los Angeles Times* (1 Apr 1918), II8.

²⁵ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 243; Koszarski, *Complete Films*, xvii.

appropriation of sophisticated Christological themes of alienation, divine judgment, temptation, sin, atonement and redemption. This despite the fact that Hart nearly always included both explicit and oblique references to God and Christ in his films—and his characters often completed their own personal salvation through contact with the simple goodness of a righteous person, such as the new wife's no-nonsense preacher father in *THE BARGAIN*, or the adversary's saintly mother in *BLUE BLAZES RAWDEN*.

Hart's most complete and fully conceptualized Christology, however, was depicted in *HELL'S HINGES*, through the character of Blaze Tracey. *HELL'S HINGES* is probably Hart's best known film, thanks to its inclusion in a late-twentieth century compilation of "Treasures from the American Film Archives," accompanied by a sympathetic discussion of the film's merits by Scott Simmon. Richard Slotkin credits Hart with treating this potentially trite story line with "complexity, irony and resonance," an argument with which it would be difficult to disagree. On one level, the film served as a fine dissection of the liberal Protestant belief that conversion was best accomplished through kind example and not through Bible-thumping revival preaching. The film's preacher who, we are informed, did not feel the import of his own sermons, gives free rein to his lusts and the corruption of the "devil's den of iniquity" to which he finds himself assigned. It is no surprise when his sermons fall on deaf ears. His sister Faith, by contrast, with her simple, frank kindness, conquers not only the heart of the gunman, Blaze, who in her looks "for the first time on that which is good," but also the whole town of rowdies, who are first quieted, then moved to kneel before her, as she gently asks them to repent of their sins.

But Faith is not the savior of Hart's drama. Instead, the Christ figure is Blaze, whose conversion turns him from vowing to stop religion from gaining a foothold in Hell's Hinges to protecting the "petticoat brigade" that seeks to institute regular services and build a church. Blaze's story after his conversion displays several common Christological elements. Late in the story Blaze adopts a familiar feature of Jesus' ministry, telling a parable to explain to the town's skeptics that the preacher's spectacular moral failings are not the result of God's weakness, but rather the unfortunate result of Robert's own human inadequacy. "It was the thing [God] was dependin' on that was no good," Blaze concludes. The savior also faces down the town's evil elements in a violent encounter at the saloon (reminiscent of Jesus' challenge to the religious authorities in the Temple), and literally tips over the tables and lashes out at what he views as the enemies of the simple religion he has come to embrace. "Hell needs this town," he declares, before threatening to lock the doors and burn the saloon—and its inhabitants—to the ground. His rage at last spent, Blaze then turns from the violence that it unleashed. Grim, sorrowful, he unlocks the door and emerges from the fiery saloon, at one point standing haloed against the flames. His resurrection complete, Blaze buries the hapless minister and carries Faith away from Hell, asking God only to "let her be happy."

In the aftermath of D.W. Griffith's 1916 release of *INTOLERANCE*, that director turned from epic films to the intimate domestic dramas that had so defined his early career. In a string of successful features from 1918 to 1922, he produced what is arguably some of his finest work.²⁶ One fact that emerges from a review of Griffith's post World

²⁶ Although film critics often consider his short films to be the prime output of his career, Richard Koszarski believes that feature films offered Griffith the scope to explore characterization and plot more fully than he could in his shorter films of the Biograph era. Koszarski, *Evening's Entertainment*, 214.

War I films is his reliance on the delicate and winsome Lillian Gish as the premier object of his creative energy.²⁷ With Gish nearing twenty years of age, at the pinnacle of her beauty and with the romantic force of their relationship probably spent, Griffith in the late teens and early twenties crafted a series of dramatic roles for her that honed her skills—nearly to the breaking point. One of the finest was *BROKEN BLOSSOMS* (D.W. Griffith Inc., 1919), based on a play by Thomas Burke, which Griffith filmed in about three weeks at a cost of \$80,000. The story of a young woman who is rescued from her brutish step-father by a kindly Chinese man was recognized in its day for its “beauty and dramatic force,” and was widely studied and emulated among cinematographers and lighting engineers of the day.²⁸ The film includes horrifying scenes of the battered and terrorized Gish as she cowers in a closet, begging her deranged step-father through the door to spare her life.

In all its intensity and pathos, *BROKEN BLOSSOMS* is one of the most critically examined movies from the silent era, one of those rare films to be recognized for its genius at the time of its release and appreciated in subsequent decades. It also represents one of Griffith’s most fully realized conceptions of a Christ-like character, and an excellent example of the use of an outsider, in this case a Chinese storekeeper in a poor quarter of London, to demonstrate the power of charity and mercy in world dominated by

²⁷ From a young age, Griffith professed a preference for small women, blondes with full hair and adolescent frames; n.d. autobiographical reminiscences, DWGP 2. Kenneth S. Lynn, who made his mark on the historical profession by writing psychological studies of literary figures like Ernest Hemmingway, charges the middle-aged Griffith with sublimating his guilt over his relationship with the teenaged Gish in *BROKEN BLOSSOMS*’ violent, but submerged, sexuality. Lynn, “The Torment of D.W. Griffith,” *The American Scholar* (2001), especially 260-261.

²⁸ Thomson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 233. The *Los Angeles Times* lauded “the unfolding of genius,” at the film’s September 16, 1919 release. Grace Kingsley, “Crowds Applaud; Big Audience at ‘Broken Blossoms’ Premiere,” *Los Angeles Times*, 17 Sep 1919, III4.

cruelty and lust. Griffith introduced his Christ figure against the exotic backdrop of a Chinese port town. His Christ is the “Yellow Man,” dubbed “Chen” in Burke’s original script and played by Richard Barthelmess in the film.²⁹ The introduction establishes his likeness to the Gospel Christ by putting key Christian teachings in the Yellow Man’s mouth, particularly as brutish American sailors scuffle on the docks. “Do not give blows for blows,” he counsels them. “The Buddha says: What thou dost not want others to do to thee, do thou not to others.” In the script, the scene is even more Gospel-like, as the Yellow Man comforts an injured sailor and “binds his wounds,” references to the story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus’ parable of a kindly traveler who pays for the care of a wounded foreigner after two of the man’s own countrymen have ignored him.³⁰ This kind soul, an intertitle informs the audience, has determined to bring “the glorious message of peace to the barbarous Anglo-Saxons, sons of turmoil and strife,” a reference to the devastation of World War I. The contrast between this idyllic existence and subsequent scenes, where Griffith reveals the Yellow Man to be living amid the squalor and prejudice of a fictional urban city, is stark. Here, his neighbors “know him only as the chink storekeeper,” the intertitle says, and he is forced to listen as Christian missionaries enthuse about of their upcoming trip to convert the heathen in China.

The Yellow Man further reveals his kindness and mercy when little Lucy, played by Gish, staggers into his shop after being beaten by her step-father. Finding her

²⁹ Script, n.d., DWGP, 7:35.

³⁰ Ibid. The parable of the Good Samaritan is in Luke 10: 30-37, Jesus’s response to critics who ask him what a good neighbor is. He ends the story by asking his interlocutors: “Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto [the injured man] that fell among the thieves? And [Jesus] said, He that shewed mercy on him.” (KJV)

collapsed on the floor, Chen carries her up to his rooms where he nurses her back to health, “the first gentleness she has ever known.” As Lucy literally blossoms under Chen’s loving care, the Judas of the piece, another Chinese character known in the film only as “Evil Eye,” plots to betray them, telling the girl’s step-father where she is. While Chen shops for the playful trinkets Lucy loves, she becomes the first atoning sacrifice of the film, fighting for her life with her step-father, who accuses her of behaving improperly with Chen. Once he pulls her out of the closet where she sought to flee his wrath, Burrows brandishes a whip over her and Griffith mercifully cuts to black. When the scene reappears, Burrows slumps, exhausted, at the dinner table, while tiny Lucy lies lifeless on her bed. Chen’s subsequent murder of Burrows is the film’s second atonement, as the savior gives up his own peaceful humanity to avenge Lucy’s cruel death. Chen’s suicide is both tragic and nearly anti-climactic; Griffith is characteristically ambiguous about the power of these human sacrifices to purge society of evil and race hatred. In the play, Burke lingers over Chen’s death prayer, as the Christ-figure commends his own “broken” soul to Buddha and White Blossom’s (as he calls Lucy) to the divine mercy of “Christus,” the lord of her soul, a scene Griffith left out of the film.

While powerful, *BROKEN BLOSSOMS* was not Gish’s first appearance as a sacrificial victim in Griffith’s work. As early as the Biograph years, Griffith had exploited her raw talent—and his emotional power over her—in roles that focused on Christ-like suffering, most notably in *THE MOTHERING HEART* (Biograph Company, 1913). In what Griffith justifiably believed was one of the finest roles of her career, Gish played a young, neglected wife and mother who works endlessly to make a home for her husband, only to watch as he abandons her and their child to seek out the company of

loose women at the local dance hall. Gish suffers not only the husband's caddish attempts to turn her into the type of woman he desires, by dressing her suggestively and forcing her to join in his unseemly entertainments, but also the death of her beloved infant. The movie even includes a violent confrontation, this time in a rose garden—a scene still acknowledged by critics for its emotional force—though Gish faces down not those in authority over her, but her own grief and the bitter cruelty of fate.³¹

But it was not until 1920, and the release of his adaptation of Lottie Blair Parker's play, *WAY DOWN EAST* (D.W. Griffith Inc., 1920), that Griffith fully imagined Gish in the role of savior who performs an atoning sacrifice that purifies her community. The film was one of United Artists few profitable releases, Griffith's second most profitable film and, like *BROKEN BLOSSOMS*, immediately recognized in the industry as a work of technical genius.³² United Artists pulled out all the stops in promoting "Griffith's Magnificent Elaboration" of the play, with a full color souvenir book featuring still photos of various scenes and an artist's pastoral renderings of the assembled cast.³³ Griffith having moved his entire production company back to Mamaroneck, New York, *WAY DOWN EAST* was shot in upstate New York in the spring of 1920. The story revolves around the trials of Anna Moore as a blameless woman whose kindness and loyalty will transform the household of Squire Bartlett, and earn the love of his eldest son, David. Before redemption comes suffering, however, and Anna Moore endures loss and treachery in spades. First a lover will betray her into an illicit liaison and the child of

³¹ On Gish's performance, see Bowser, *Transformation*, 102.

³² Koszarski, *Evening's Entertainment*, 184. Bordwell, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 289, 291-2.

³³ Warshaw Collection of Business Americana (WCBA), National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Business Ephemera; Motion Pictures 1:1 (22).

their union will die; as she attempts to re-build her life, a malicious gossip will reveal her secrets and threaten her peace and newfound security; and, finally, even her beloved David will recoil from the shame of her past, turning away at the moment his father condemns her. Only when she faces imminent death, floating unconscious on an ice floe toward a water fall, does David react heroically, jumping from floe to floe across the river to drag her to safety—a scene that sounds more ridiculous than it appears, thanks to the painstaking realism with which Griffith shot it.³⁴

Griffith used Gospel imagery and story elements to establish Anna Moore as a redeeming figure in the lives of the Bartletts and their community, most prominently in the sequences following her abandonment by the treacherous roué Lennox Sanderson. Still attempting to maintain the fiction she is married, Anna moves to a boarding house, where the owner and servants torment her with questions about her missing husband. “Maternity—Woman’s Gethsemane,” an intertitle intones, as the child is born. After listening to the landlady’s warning that the dying baby will never see God unless she is first baptized, Anna “in the dreadful hours of the night...performs the sacred rite,” sprinkling her child with water. When morning finds her clutching the dead child’s hand, her persecution has only begun. The village gossips continue to whisper, and eventually she is forced out of the boarding house and into the streets, “the age-old cross on her back.” Now purged of her sin (however inadvertently), Anna is transformed into a salvific figure who seeks honest work in the Bartlett home, a sort of heavenly bucolic

³⁴ The scene is reminiscent of Eliza Harris’s dramatic escape from slavery across the frozen Ohio River in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. As usual, Griffith spared neither expense nor effort in filming the river sequences, which left Gish exhausted and frozen on the ice. The scenes earned him a stern letter from the Quebec Railway, Light, Heat & Power Company threatening to hold him financially responsible for any damage caused by dynamiting required to create the ice floes. W. J. Lynch to D.W. Griffith, 20 Apr 1920, DWGP 1:5.

place, where the kindly Mrs. Bartlett warns her suspicious husband with words from Scripture: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one the least of these—ye have done it unto me!”³⁵ When Anna’s unwed state has been confirmed to Mr. Bartlett, the young woman faces her accusers with righteous anger, challenging the moral authority of those who would blame her in her innocence, but ignore the greater evil of Sanderson’s cruel deception. Her temple scene completed, Anna staggers out into the night and near death, only to be resurrected at the hands of the redeemed David and welcomed back into the Bartlett home and community.

Two other films of the 1920s deserve mention for sophisticated renderings of Christ-like figures. The first is another depiction of Christ as a woman in the title role of *MISS LULU BETT* (Famous Players-Lasky Corp., 1922), one of the few surviving films directed by William de Mille. When his younger sibling headed to Hollywood in 1913, the elder de Mille voiced his severe displeasure—he believed Cecil was trading a promising career in the highest dramatic form for an uncertain shot at the lowest. As the successful son of a prominent theatre booking and talent agent, de Mille could not understand his brother’s infatuation with the gaudiness of film. But within a year of Cecil’s departure, the elder brother followed suit, landing at the same studio as Cecil. There, William worked on his brother’s films, but also directed a number of his own dramas, which were well-received in Hollywood and popular with audiences. Cecil and

³⁵ Matthew 25:40 (KJV). God’s answer on Judgment Day to those who ask what they have done to deserve salvation. “Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed thee? or thirsty, and gave thee drink? When saw we thee a stranger, and took thee in? or naked, and clothed thee? Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?”

William closely resembled each other, with a faintly patrician air, an ironic verbal facility that lent their interviews a certain delicate wit, and a highly developed religious sensibility. As part of the team of researchers and writers who brought to life Cecil's two great Biblical epics of the 1920s, William was often a sharp critic of some of his brother's more outlandish notions (he objected quite firmly to the love affair between Judas and Mary Magdalene in *KING OF KINGS*), as well as a keen observer of American film tastes. In later years, William spoke disparagingly of the tendency in the 1920s to overwhelm a good story line with pointless technological flourishes such as a soft focus or bizarre camera placement.³⁶ In a 1922 book on film directing, author Peter Milne commented, "Mr. De Mille specializes in stories containing the true and dramatic psychological development of character. The artificial melodramatics and blatant heroics he subdues to unnoticeable effect or more often eliminates entirely. His arc of emotional experience is filled, it is more than obvious, with all the sensitive lines imaginable. In fact Mr. De Mille is one of the few artistic directors in the field today, though perhaps his name has not been as highly publicized as have those of lesser lights."³⁷

Film historian Richard Koszarski includes William de Mille among the few silent directors who stepped outside the boundaries of traditional film melodrama to show "a vision of life more complex and multi-dimensional," and *MISS LULU BETT* is probably the film he references in making that statement.³⁸ It is a charming domestic drama, tempered by a wry irony that rescues it from pedestrian moralizing. The film opens with

³⁶ Quoted from a 1939 interview, in Bordwell, Staiger and Thomson, *Hollywood Cinema*, 96.

³⁷ Peter Milne, *Motion Picture Directing* (New York: New York Institute of Photography, 1922), 41. [Click here](#) for the Google Books edition.

³⁸ R. Koszarski, *Evening's Entertainment*, 182. He mentions also King Vidor and Erich Von Stroheim.

an extended pan that reveals a typical middle-class American home. To know a household, the intertitle suggests, simply examine the dining area. The Deacon establishment is prosperous and neat, a place where the husband expects a flurry of activity when his meal is late, and his flighty wife fusses over his small comforts. But the camera soon exposes what the cheerful façade obscures. Mrs. Deacon's mother is forced by poverty to live with the family, and her (one suspects) naturally contrary and sour disposition is exacerbated by Mr. Deacon's insulting taunts. Worse yet, the Deacon's eldest daughter Diana is a thoroughly modern girl, who is dreaming of travel and excitement far from the confines of home. As the family is finally seated around the table, the point is clear: Mr. and Mrs. Deacon are oblivious to the fault lines about to open beneath their feet.

When a wilted server emerges from the kitchen with the meal, the true moral center of the household is revealed to be Mrs. Deacon's sister, the long-suffering Lulu, whose endless hours of selfless labor maintain the family's public veneer of stability. When Mr. Deacon's shady, but charming, brother Ninian returns home after 20 years of travel in parts distant and exotic, it's no surprise that, despite her initial qualms, Lulu agrees to accept the validity of the marriage they enter as part of a parlor game. Leaving behind Mr. Deacon's contempt and the colorless drudgery of her daily existence, Lulu blossoms under the loving consideration of her new husband. When he divulges the existence of a past wife—quite possibly still living—Lulu is mortified, but forced to save her virtue by returning to the home she so hated.

At this point, the film takes an turn from the somewhat light-hearted Cinderella story it appears to be, to explore the darker heart of family life by coloring Lulu's story

with Christological themes of self-sacrifice, challenges to hypocritical authority figures, and eventual redemption. Trapping her now in a household that was visibly disintegrating without her attentions, Mr. Deacon forces his disgraced sister-in-law to sacrifice not only her newfound love, but also her freedom and her good name, in order to protect the Deacon family from a series of potential scandals and missteps. First he returns her to hard labor as the family's housekeeper, then forbids her to make known in the community Ninian's perfidy, to protect his children from the disgrace that would ensue. Instead, Lulu is forced to tell others that Ninian has set her aside after a brief marriage—and listen to the whispers and petty cruelties of her neighbors, who conclude she was an unworthy wife. Then, when Lulu talks Diana out of a disastrous plan to elope with her sweetheart, Lulu is compelled to pretend it was she herself who sought to run away with the local school-teacher to protect Diana from the torments her father would heap on her head should he discover the thwarted plot. But when Mr. Deacon questions Lulu's morality, it is the last straw: she confronts her in-laws with their vicious mistreatment of her in a violent confrontation in the kitchen, her pristine domain. Lulu throws crockery about the room, strikes Mr. Deacon, and chides the family for exploiting her vulnerability to maintain both their home and their reputation (figure on page 200). Lulu then storms out of the house to a resurrection that is pure Jazz Age modern: she establishes herself as an independent woman working as a cook in town, and then (and only then) marries her school teacher.

In the year after *LULU BETT'S* release, another director used the notion of an Asian Jesus figure to tell a story of sacrifice and atonement that virtually parallels the Gospel, in the acclaimed film *SHADOWS* (Preferred Pictures Corp., 1922), starring Lon

Chaney. Director Tom Forman signaled his intention to re-tell the Christ story in the film's opening frames, with an intertitle that informs audiences: "To every people, in every age, there comes a measure of God to man—through man." The "measure of God" in SHADOWS is Yen Sin, a Chinese cook, washed up on the beach in the little fishing village of Urkey after a violent storm rids the town of the local lout Daniel and widows his wife Sympathy—"a better woman never lived." As the film progresses, Yen Sin reveals himself to be the film's moral core, a man who, through kindness and good example will teach the town about true Christian charity, while rescuing the comely heroine from a plot to destroy her reputation and her new marriage. SHADOWS includes a striking number of explicit Gospel story references. Yen Sin is greeted on the beach by the town's mayor, portrayed as a Pharisee, who positions himself flamboyantly at the front of the assembled crowd, and prays ostentatiously. His hypocrisy is underscored not only by his religious intolerance, as he orders Yen Sin to either join the assembled faithful or leave the town, but also when he visibly lusts after the new widow (figure on page 200). Having determined to remain in the town, plying his trade as a laundryman, Chaney's gentle character soon "converts" one of the young hooligans who torment him, simply by offering the boy kindness and lychee nuts. When a young minister comes to town, and soon marries Sympathy, Yen Sin becomes the couple's friend, proffering tea and domestic comfort on his houseboat. His network of laundrymen will be instrumental in unraveling the mayor's evil plot, which has convinced the newlywed bride that her former husband lives, and her marriage is invalid. The film is punctuated by a number of ironic asides that contrast Yen Sin's perceived "heathen" soul, with the callous indifference and ignorance of the townspeople who persist in trying to convert this

“measure of God” despite his obvious moral superiority. The minister had come to town “heartsore because he had not been called to the ‘Field’ of the Far East;” not realizing until the final scenes that Yen Sin represents a purer faith than any the minister could ever summon.

Atonement in Pop Culture

Obviously, the fact that movies are fundamentally a commercial endeavor—stories filmed to appeal to mass audiences and generate profits—obscures any examination of Christological nuance in films. In addition, the role of the director in film creation, still hotly debated after some 50 years of critical scholarship, adds a further layer of complication.³⁹ This chapter intersects with both of these discussions. First, I join theologians Christopher Deacy, Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz in their attempt to lay a foundation for critical examination of theology in film by providing helpful markers of authentic transmission of theology.⁴⁰ In Deacy’s words,

“Clearly, it is not the case that all film protagonists are ‘Christ-like’ simply by virtue of being intrinsically human in nature, and performing acts that accord with various tenets of Christ’s life and work. Rather, for the film protagonist to be in any fundamental sense Christ-like, and to be capable of imparting the possibility of redemption, there must be a specific confrontation with evil and suffering, and with the

³⁹ Virginia Wright Wexman, ed., *Film and Authorship* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2003). See especially Wexman’s introductory essay on the history of *auteur* theory, 1-18.

⁴⁰ Deacy and Ortiz, *Theology and Film*, especially 5-6; Christopher Deacy, *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001); Clive Marsh and Ortiz, eds., *Explorations in Theology and Film* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), especially Marsh’s examination of the role of theology in culture, 21-34.

human propensity towards sin (author's emph.)—the absolute and non-negotiable prerequisite of redemption in the Christian tradition.”⁴¹

Silent era Christologies offer a number of challenges to Deacy's orthodox vision of faith, most prominently by shifting the theological focus from the inherent evil of mankind and the inevitability of human suffering—both of which liberal Protestants of the silent era believed sprang from societal imbalances, not from divine design—instead focusing on the theme of an “atoning sacrifice,” which not only purifies the Jesus figure of his or her own sins, but also redeems “the Other,” variously an ethnic group, a lover, a child, a family or an entire community. In addition, this examination of specific directors and specific films, while foregrounding the role of the *auteur* in selecting stories and crafting films, still accepts the resulting movies as texts, with the power to convey messages beyond the abilities (or, perhaps) the intentions of their directors to disseminate them.⁴²

The filmic Christ figures of the silent era concentrate on “low Christology” or the human Christ who brings God's word to the world. Filmic Christ characters are never supernatural, for example, they do not arrive in the clouds to save mankind, and they do not perform magical or superhuman acts. In addition, silent films tend to draw on two or three gospel stories that were particularly significant to the late Victorian Jesus biographers, especially the so-called “cleansing of the temple,” where Jesus reacts against the crude commercialization of one of Judaism's holiest sites. William Barton had found

⁴¹ Deacy, *Screen Christologies*, 96.

⁴² Deacy, *Screen Christologies*, 77. Robert Banks in an essay on George Stevens' 1952 Western classic, *Shane* notes that, despite the 1949 novel's many Biblical references, author Jack Schaefer professed no intention to create a Christological story. “I doubt if there is much Christian influence in my book, even sneaking in out of the cellar of my mind,” he said. Banks points out that Stevens made critical changes to the novel's story to emphasize the Christological implications. Robert Banks, “The Drama of Salvation in George Stevens's *Shane*,” in Clive and Ortiz, *Explorations*, 61.

in this story a great metaphor for “the temple of God in the human soul,” and the importance of living the spirit of God’s laws.⁴³ In this spirit, silent films based on Christological themes frequently feature a violent confrontation between the salvific figure and the same misguided or evil-spirited forces they seek to save through their goodness and self-sacrifice, reminiscent of Jesus’ confrontation in the Temple. In *HELL’S HINGES* the confrontation happens when Blaze Tracey threatens to burn down the town’s saloon—and most of its inhabitants—after the wayward minister has died. In *LULU BETT*, it happens when the longsuffering Lulu is wrongly accused of inappropriate behavior in the kitchen of the house she has tended so lovingly. Finally, in keeping with the liberal Protestant emphasis on the *life* of Christ, filmic saviors also rarely die, but instead suffer torments so great (for instance, the death of a child) that their agonies approximate death. They are often “resurrected” either into a great unknowable future (sometimes represented by expansive landscape shots) or into the safe confines of family and community life (often through marriage).

One of the most popular elements of silent films based on Christological themes, however, is the dominance of an atoning sacrifice to the story line, typically one performed by the savior-figure. This atoning sacrifice offers the savior a dramatic way to teach his or her community about righteousness, while at the same time offering the lost souls a path to virtuous living in the manner of Jesus’ simple life of compassion and service. Interestingly, sometimes the “sacrifice” acts to purge society of evil. As I have stated above, some atoning sacrifices are in the form of the loss of a loved one, most

⁴³ William E. Barton, Theodore G. Soares and Sidney Strong, *The Week of Our Lord’s Passion* (New York: 1907), 90-93.

typically the death of a baby as happens to Lillian Gish's characters in *THE MOTHERING HEART* and *WAY DOWN EAST*. Sometimes the sacrifice is the savior's good name, as happens to Lulu Bett and to Blue Blazes Rawden. Both of these characters allow their own reputation to be sullied in order to protect their communities from another's sordid deeds. Finally, and most interestingly, sometimes the atoning sacrifice finds the savior surrendering their own righteousness to perform an act of vengeance or violence to purge the community of evil. Each of these themes, in its own way, offers the theologian a window into continued ambivalence within popular culture toward the Christian notion of substitutionary atonement.

Chapter five: Sin in the Silent Film Era

Around the time D.W. Griffith released his 1923 film *THE WHITE ROSE* (D.W. Griffith Inc.), he tasked his publicity department with collecting newspaper stories about errant clergy.¹ Griffith was touchy about attempts to censor his films, as were most other early 20th century directors, and he often countered charges of prurience with background material to “prove” that situations in his movies were drawn from real life. Cecil B. DeMille also employed this strategy in 1928 when he assembled numerous affidavits from reform school workers to legitimize the scenes of torture and sexual bondage in his film on teenagers in prison, *THE GODLESS GIRL* (Cecil B. DeMille Productions, 1929).² Griffith certainly knew that *THE WHITE ROSE* was bound to attract criticism with its story of a young seminary student named Joseph who forms a liaison with a “jazz baby,” Teazie. Without realizing Teazie is pregnant, Joseph abandons her to bear the child alone, while he prepares to wed his high-society girlfriend, Marie.³ Griffith prepared to bolster his film’s chances with Progressive-minded censors by collecting scrapbook pages of evidence that his plot was no more scandalous than typical fare readers could expect to see in a local newspaper. Griffith found ministers engaging in everything from love triangles (“Rector’s Wife Sues; Society is Uneasy,” read a headline in the May 1922 *Philadelphia North American*), to larceny (“Priest Says He Must Have Been Under Hypnotic Spell,” said a Richmond newspaper in July 1923), and homicide (“Preacher Will Be Tried for Murder,” ran a Lockport, New York headline in June 1922). Curiously

¹ The articles were collected in one of Griffith’s scrapbooks, consisting of about 12 pages of clippings.

² CBDMA VIII:292 (1).

³ Not to be confused with Griffith’s 1910 Biograph Company film, *WHITE ROSES*, about the misadventures of a hapless young hotel worker who undertakes a flower delivery.

enough, Chicago's notoriously conservative board of censors initially approved *THE WHITE ROSE* for public exhibition, and the police department, which oversaw enforcement of decency statutes, released a permit for its opening at the Orpheum Theatre.⁴ But Griffith's fears proved prescient after a group of ministers pressured the Chicago's mayor to block the movie's opening, and exhibitors were forced to appeal to the courts, which quickly enjoined the city from preventing exhibition of *THE WHITE ROSE*. "The film has run for a week now without interruption and has been doing splendidly," the *New York Telegraph* noted. In fact, despite the sexually charged subject matter, most of the film's publicity focused on actress Mae Marsh's return to the screen after a multi-year absence and on Griffith's return from films of epic scope to the personal, intimate world of human relationships.⁵

THE WHITE ROSE, Griffith's expectations for it, and its actual reception in 1923 neatly illustrate the change in attitudes toward sin that separated Americans raised at the tail-end of the Victorian era (such as the aging director) from their modern grand-children of the so-called "Jazz Age." At the same time, it demonstrates quite clearly why filmmakers like Griffith, once considered a genius of the form, watched their films and their careers slide into irrelevance in the post-World War I period. Although Griffith anticipated he was making a daring film with a modern tone—and certainly some Chicago clergy obviously agreed with him—most critics found it "rather worn and thin

⁴ "It is one of the peculiarities of this center of art [Chicago] that pictures can be shown only under police supervision," a New York newspaper commented drily. From DWGP, reel 31, clipping from the *New York Telegraph*, 14 Oct 1923.

⁵ From DWGP, reel 31, see clippings from *The Saginaw News Courier*, 28 May 1923 and the *Los Angeles Express* 4 Sep 1923. "Spectacular effects have been avoided, its is said, in this picture," commented the *New York Times* in its "Picture Plays and People Column" on 13 May 23.

and much drawn-out,” as the *New York Times* reported.⁶ The reviewer scoffed at scenes in which the new cash girl is baffled by a co-worker’s suggestion she display her garters in short skirts (presumably to increase tips), and derided Griffith’s portrayal of the minister, whose “perpetual expression of gloom” as a seminarian, turns to full-fledged “melancholia” upon his ordination. While Griffith expected that audiences would be shocked by the young man’s sexual indiscretion, critics instead found cynical the minister’s initial distaste for the girl as he watches her harmless flirting at the hotel (he only falls for her once he glimpses her in a more pastoral and “pure” setting), and construed as moral impotence his world-weary attitude towards the poor and destitute he encounters in his daily life. Furthermore, the absurdity of a young woman, staggering through a stormy night, facing rebuff after rebuff from “heartless, adamant creatures” who condemn her as a single mother, were clearly ridiculous to many who saw the film. The tidy ending, so consistent with dictates of melodrama, struck them as puerile: the *Times*’ reviewer commented ironically “As one might gather, Joseph weds Teazie, and Marie discovers her love for the boy she despised because he had written a book entitled, ‘Life Through a Grocer’s Shop Window.’”

Despite its tepid reception, the articles about *THE WHITE ROSE*, especially the *New York Telegraph* review, also highlight cinema’s role in recasting conceptions of sin in the critical two decades before the advent of films with synchronized soundtracks: first of all, a review of film content reveals that directors leveraged the broad audience demand for films with frank content to expand the range of behavior that was considered

⁶ “The Minister and the Cash-Girl,” *New York Times*, 23 May 1923. “Although there is suspense galore and sob scenes aplenty, it is not a picture of great strength,” the anonymous reviewer opined. The reviewer also questioned the taste of Griffith’s decision to cast a white woman in black face, in the role of “a buxom, good-natured negress.”

acceptable in polite society, often bolstering their cause with endorsements from willing and sympathetic clergy. In this, directors frequently took advantage of the widespread liberal and Progressive belief that exposing bad behavior on film offered an opportunity to surface issues—in this case, an examination of a minister’s sexual sin and subsequent redemption—in ways that would not promote bad behavior, but, rather, might actually temper unseemly desires. Reporter Virginia Dale offered evidence of this in two oblique references to clerical approbation of the film. “Rev. Dr. Boynton of the Vigilant Committee,” she reassured readers, was “said to have approved ‘The White Rose....’” It is unclear from Dale’s wording whether Boynton spoke directly with her, but it is far more likely that Griffith or a group of exhibitors provided the reference in pre-publicity material. Having reassured her readers that at least one cleric had found the film acceptable, she concluded by hinting that its salacious-sounding content was, in fact, rather mundane. The film was “much liked, it is said, by Dr. Baker of the divinity school of the University of Chicago,” she wrote.⁷ Never mind that Chicago hardly represented orthodoxy: its seminary provided a nurturing environment for some of the most doctrinally unconventional theologians of its era. The citation of academic credentials signaled that the film was not simply displaying sexy material to titillate and entice viewers (though it undoubtedly was); Dr. Baker’s bland endorsement implied the film was harmless enough to entertain no less than a seminary professor.

In addition, there is evidence in the film and its marketing material that Griffith was attempting in *THE WHITE ROSE*, if not to break out of the bounds of classic melodrama, then at least to stretch them a bit, in his portrayals of Joseph, Marie and

⁷ Op Cit, *NY Telegraph*, 14 Oct 1923.

Teazie. First there is Griffith's characteristically sly Biblical reference to Joseph and Mary, in which this man of God marries not his blameless fiancée, Marie, but the blameless Teazie who bears not the child of another, but the minister's own son. Second is the director's attempt to create in Teazie, played by one of Griffith's favorite actresses, Mae Marsh, a modern young woman of innocent high spirits, who mimics her friend's provocative clothing and gestures "while being straight as a string," as one of her defenders later describes her. Marsh does her level best with the material given her, but Griffith was more successful in contrasting her innocent fun with the sour Joseph's obvious disgust at her deportment. Despite the *Telegraph's* arch tone, it is apparent in the film that Griffith means viewers to find fault with Joseph's initial indifference to Teazie's charms, making his successful seduction of her later that night all the more cruel. As Teazie wanders ever more frantically through a classic Griffithian landscape of heartless landladies and dismissive potential employers, Joseph advances blithely toward marriage to the society girl who loves him, casually indifferent to the suffering around him and cravenly agreeing to stifle what few scruples he possesses to advance to a bigger church.⁸ Despite the clunky material, Griffith again reveals his affinity for abstract liberal Protestant conceptions of evil, by casting as sinners the townspeople who continually persecute Teazie for her sexual misbehavior and granting his heroine redemption in the form of conventional marriage and motherhood. In addition, he subjects the young minister to a thoroughgoing penitence and redemption. "I have been preaching to you

⁸ Griffith was then engaged in a romantic relationship with the actress playing the society girl, Carol Dempster. Mae Marsh had worked for Griffith for more than 10 years, and was in the early twenties attempting to re-launch her career after marriage and the birth of her children.

about sin,” says the newly contrite Joseph to his congregation, “and I am the biggest sinner among you.”

The Early Twentieth Century and Sin

Any discussion of the theology of sin in early twentieth century movies must begin with foundational assumptions about what differentiates sin from common bad behavior in a movie. Clearly, human behaviors as enumerated in the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20, and the actions of a virtuous person coping with the ramifications of them, formed the basis of many early film plots.⁹ Yet when a pair of unsavory-looking tramps stalks Blanche Sweet’s gutsy telegraph operator, left alone at an isolated rail terminal in D.W. Griffith’s masterpiece of suspense, *THE LONEDALE OPERATOR* (Biograph Co., 1911), the primal motivations for their behavior are not at issue. Rather, audiences are invited to enjoy the engaging ways that Sweet will thwart her attackers, first with modern technologies like the telegraph and automobile and, finally, her own ingenuity. The film does not examine the roots of the tramps’ bad behavior or any broad source of the evil in humanity. Their bad behavior is not sin, so much as a convenient plot device designed to raise dramatic tension, which will be resolved in ways presumably satisfying to the audience. Usually, in the movies, a thief is just a thief, and this chapter will not address this kind of activity. The chapter will also ignore certain films that did dramatize the sinfulness of oppressive social conditions, examined more fully in chapter three. In the world view of the social problem film, petty crime was not necessarily sin—instead these

⁹ Kevin Brownlow, *Behind the Mask of Innocence; Sex, Violence, Prejudice, Crime: Films of Social Conscience in the Silent Era* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), prefatory comments xvi. Cite Ten Commandments references. See also Janet Staiger, *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 83.

films made the case that class tensions and society's culpability in trapping the poor in lives of fear and desperation was the true root of evil. Finally, this chapter will also leave aside the tremendously popular (with audiences, if not censors) comedies of the silent era, which tended to celebrate bad behavior of all sorts.

Leaving aside these categories of bad behavior, a significant number of silent era films did specifically tackle the question of sin. Silent filmmakers created their films against the backdrop of an ongoing twentieth century abstraction of sin from an inborn propensity toward evil, to a natural—but avoidable—result of free will. Although silent films might have been expected to compare and contrast competing views of the source of evil, prominent evangelical themes of sin and damnation are remarkably muted in silent films. Instead, the imprint of early twentieth-century liberal theology is easily discerned, as silent films generally reject original sin as the wellspring of evil and the fundamental root of human estrangement from God; and instead emphasize human free will as the locus of sin and the avoidable cause of human alienation from both the Creator and fellowship of mankind. This chapter will examine the theology of sin conveyed in characterizations and settings meant explicitly to foreground religious context of human misbehavior, for instance by placing a figure of religious authority in a compromising position, as William Hart did to great effect in *HELL'S HINGES*; or by emphasizing the sinful behavior of a community of religious people, as Lois Weber did in *THE HYPOCRITES*.

The early twentieth century liberal Christian conception of sin that shapes so many silent films like these can be traced to the theological musings of Frederick

Robertson, whose work had appeared widely in America only after his death in 1853.¹⁰ Robertson and his followers rejected the evangelical notion that proof of salvation consisted in the absence of sin—in other words, they doubted that a natural proclivity to obey the Ten Commandments (and a host of ancillary rules including sexual abstinence before marriage and temperance in consumption of alcohol) constituted evidence a person's soul had been saved. Under the twin influences of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Frederick Maurice, Robertson had developed his influential summation of mediating theology centered on Christ's humanity and the brotherhood of mankind. Instead of measuring a person's adherence to the concrete laws, they measured a person's behavior in the context of Christ's New Covenant, looking at sin abstractly. Perhaps Robertson's most influential principle was to define sin as humankind's inability to recognize its status as children of God. In mid-century American religious culture, one of the most important implications of Robertson's stance (and, for that matter, all of liberal theology) was its negation of the doctrine of original sin, itself the result of fourth-century bishop Augustine of Hippo's reading of parts of Paul's Letter to the Romans. Fired by the likes of Schleiermacher, Maurice and Robertson, Horace Bushnell in 1858 delivered a blistering attack on original sin in which he contended that if evil was an essential component of the human condition, a trait inherited from the first man, then it would not be voluntary but, instead, imposed by God—an impossibility if God is the author of all good.¹¹ Bushnell also rejected the notion of an omnipotent God who used misery and evil

¹⁰ William R. Hutchinson, *The Modernist Impulse In American Protestantism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977), 83. The first U.S. publication of Robertson's work was in *Lectures and Addresses on Social Topics by the Late Frederick Robertson* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1859).

¹¹ Horace Bushnell, *Nature and the Supernatural as Together Constituting the One System of God* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1858), 9, 91-93.

as an opportunity to engineer positive human outcomes, concluding “the reason of God’s empire excludes, at a certain point, the absolute dominion of force.” For Bushnell, sin was the simple result of man’s God-given freedom to make bad choices and mistakes.¹²

Along with its rejection of original sin, liberal theology also asserted the importance of historical criticism of the Bible to an understanding of the true nature of God’s injunctions against sin, often described in religious educational materials as the “spirit of the law” versus the “letter of the law.” Twenty-five years after Robertson groundbreaking work appeared in the United States, the first generation of liberal faculty at key seminaries in Boston, New York and Chicago began to apply the principles of critical theory and mediating theology to the notion of sin in a flood of textbooks and Bible study guides that would influence decades of American Protestant thought.¹³ For most of these theologians, Christian orthodoxy had become a stifling obstacle to understanding the Word of God made immanent in human history through the person of Jesus Christ. The key to recovering the true faith was a thorough critical re-reading of the Gospels in their purest form. These theologians emphasized Christ’s prophetic words, in which he charged his enemies with disregarding the spirit of the Law by a foolish adherence to its many temporal complexities. A decade before Charles August Briggs faced heresy charges in 1883, he made this point in his influential introduction to historical criticism, *Biblical Study*. Likewise, Newman Smyth’s *Reality of Faith*

¹² Ibid., 101.

¹³ See especially Newman Smyth, *The Reality of Faith*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1884), preface v; Charles Augustus Briggs, *Biblical Study, Its principals, Methods and History: Together with a Catalogue of Books of Reference* (1883; 4th ed. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1891), 317-318; Rush Rhees, *The Life of Jesus of Nazareth: A Study* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1900), 62; Lyman Abbott, *The Life and Literature of the Ancient Hebrews* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1901), vi.

applauded among modern Christians “a strong and growing desire to escape from the artificial, the mechanical, and the formal, and to find the natural, the living, and the real in Christian faith and practice.” At the dawn of the twentieth century, Rush Rhees suggested Christians reject “barren rites” and a “religion of ceremony” to embrace a faith, like Mary’s, built on “sincere love for God and childlike trust in his mercy.”

By the turn of the new century, studying the spirit of the law was one of the key tenets of the liberal gospel preached by the kinds of popular clergy who allied themselves with Hollywood in its attempts to stifle censorship and promote what the broader Progressive community considered uplifting film content. Congregationalist Lyman Abbott, for instance, a Progressive stalwart and editor of the influential modernist Christian magazine, *The Outlook*, lauded the power of Bible study “to destroy the faith in the letter [of the Law] which killeth and to promote that faith in the Spirit which maketh alive....” The twin notions that the doctrine of original sin was nothing but a human contrivance and sin itself the simple, inevitable result of human weakness, brought with them certain revisions to the orthodox understanding of sin as an indelible stain on humanity made redeemable only by the blood sacrifice of God’s own son.¹⁴ Instead, if “man’s natural constitution was made for goodness,” as Methodist Milton Terry wrote in 1902, then sin was a force that “brought all manner of moral disorder” into the lives of men. William Barton suggested the cure for the disorder was the New Covenant, as promised by Jesus in the so-called Golden rule, which encapsulated the spirit of the

¹⁴ Milton S. Terry, *The New and Living Way; An Orderly Arrangement and Exposition to the Doctrines of Christian Experience According to the Scriptures* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1902), 16; William E. Barton, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Story of His Life and the Scenes of His Ministry* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1903), 390, 393. Cook, Ezra Albert. *Christian Faith for Men of Today* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1913), 104, 107.

various commandments of the Old Testament in the simple injunction to his followers to love their fellow man. In 1913, Ezra Cook offered a fairly tidy summation of the implications for human behavior. First, sin was not an inherited state, it was committed within bounds of “the freedom of choice and action” granted to each person by God; and, most importantly, sin “lies entirely in the motive; no action considered by itself is sinful.”

Historians have examined comedy, melodrama and domestic drama in the light of early twentieth century attitudes toward “bad” behavior, but few have attempted to evaluate how films treat sin.¹⁵ It is my contention that the most prominent silent film directors shied away from condemning a number of human behaviors commonly associated with sin in early twentieth century culture, including what I will call innocent extra-marital sexuality (which, depending on the circumstances, could encompass everything from naïve flirtation to sex—even parenthood—outside the bounds of marriage); inoffensive socializing between the sexes (for instance, at a dance or other events in the public sphere); and, perhaps most surprising, consumption of alcohol within the confines of certain acceptable venues—even sometimes at a tavern, but more often a tea room or outdoor beer garden. By portraying extramarital sex and socializing as outside the bounds of traditional evil or sin, directors may have helped to push the boundaries of polite manners to include activities that were already becoming more common in private conduct and public discourse. Instead, silent films portray other categories of behavior as sinful, including some criminal activities (especially gambling and violent assault), and what I call uncharitable behavior of society against the outsider or weaker members, namely jealousy, gossip and hypocrisy.

¹⁵ See especially Brownlow’s *Behind the Mask of Innocence*, and Staiger’s *Bad Women*.

Naughty but Nice: When Sin *Wasn't* Evil

Ironically, the post-modern critical discourse surrounding film viewership, which centers on the so-called “male gaze” and oppressed female sexuality, may actually have obscured our understanding of the ways simplistic silent-era plot devices, with their stereotypical characterizations and careful innuendo, contributed to what several historians have identified as a massive shift in twentieth-century attitudes toward female sexuality.¹⁶ Griffith and DeMille provide good, contrasting examples of the treatment of female sexuality.¹⁷ Neither man was a prude: both directors carried on discreet (but widely acknowledged) extra-marital affairs during the course of long marriages, although Griffith appears to have had minimal contact with his first wife, actress Linda Arvidsson, after the initial decade of their marriage. Like other early filmmakers, they relied on sex as one of their most potent audience draws, usually with oblique references, sometimes explicitly, but nearly always in some form or another.¹⁸ Whether they were influenced by the strong maternal figures that dominated their youths, or the headstrong young women with whom they formed attachments in adulthood, both men treated women and sexuality fairly leniently in a society that sometimes seemed obsessed with controlling young women’s sexual desires and activities.¹⁹ Leaving aside the vamps and the country girls

¹⁶ Staiger, *Bad Women*, 53, 78-81; see also Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 56-57.

¹⁷ In her memoir, Griffith’s first wife Linda Arvidsson claimed the young director advised her to keep their wedded state quiet, ostensibly to advance her career as an ingénue at Biograph. Ten years later, Griffith disavowed all knowledge of her whereabouts or financial state to the federal tax authorities, although he remained married to her until 1936, when he re-married briefly, to Evelyn Baldwin, a woman young enough to be his daughter. The tax return dated 24 Mar 1915 is at DWGP 1:2.

¹⁸ Brownlow, *Mask of Innocence*, 20; see also discussion on 29.

¹⁹ On female attitudes toward sexuality and the moral crusade, see Patricia R. Hill, *The World Their Household: The American Woman’s Foreign Mission Movement and Cultural Transformation, 1870-1920*

forced through urban poverty into prostitution, which I cover in chapter three, women in their films openly desire men, often “bad” men, and they sometimes pay dearly when their desires are fulfilled, through unwanted pregnancies, poverty, or from blackmail. But it is worth noting that they rarely pay with their lives for their desires, as did so many fictionalized heroines of the late nineteenth century.

THE NEW YORK HAT (Biograph Company, 1912) provides an early example of Griffith’s view of sex and sin. In this two-reel comedy, Griffith used parallel editing to highlight the blameless sexuality of his country heroine, played by Mary Pickford, who finds herself the unexpected recipient of an ardently longed for and sophisticated piece of headgear, a fashionable, big-city hat. In her will, the girl’s mother has left money for the local minister to purchase anonymously for her daughter some piece of “finery,” to enliven her austere life. Griffith neatly contrasts the purity of the girl’s pleasure in the gift with the scorn of the town’s matrons (called “pious meddlers”) who shun her (figure on page 201), first for her plainness and poverty, then for her presumed immodesty in accepting the minister’s lavish gift. But it is her father’s sadistic cruelty as he accuses his daughter of impropriety, rips the beloved hat to pieces, and stalks to the church to confront the minister, which is particularly telling, highlighting as it does the sin of the father’s perverted desire to control his daughter’s budding sexuality with the minister’s simple kindness, and the purity of his subsequent marriage offer.²⁰ Griffith would use this

(Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1985), 25. On general attitudes toward sex, Timothy Guilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York, 1994), 277. For the perspective of a social workers and missionaries, see Allen F. Davis, *American Heroine: The Life and Legend of Jane Addams* (Chicago, 1973 reprinted 2000); and Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York’s Black Y.W.C.A., 1905-1945* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 28, 77.

²⁰ Footnote of Scott Simmons commentary on the film.

plot contrivance again in *INTOLERANCE* (and *THE MOTHER AND THE LAW*), when her father's rage at the Dear One seems all out of proportion to the chaste kiss she bestows on her beau after an evening out. Earlier in that film, Griffith demonstrated that, although her desire for the Boy is clearly growing, the Dear One has her sexuality appropriately under control—the kiss is all she will allow him until he promises marriage. While the Dear One's father berates her into praying for forgiveness for her supposed “sin,” Griffith makes the incongruity clear by cutting to scenes of the Friendless One, forced by cruel circumstance into a life of prostitution. The father's condemnation of his Dear One's flirtation and desire is not only unjust, but his inappropriate desire to control her risks leaving her to the Friendless One's fate when he later dies of overwork.

In scenes like this, and from his earliest public and private statements, Griffith made clear his scorn for the putative keepers of morality, who would condemn women for their sexual choices. In 1907, he drafted a heated response to a *Washington Herald* reviewer who branded a film called *THE FOOL AND THE GIRL* immoral. In a tactic that would become common with him, Griffith used a Gospel allusion to liken the “alleged critic's” reaction to that of “another scene enacted many hundreds of years ago,” specifically a crowd's intention to stone to death a woman convicted of adultery.²¹ In the Biblical account Jesus saves the woman's life by telling the crowd that only those blameless of sin should initiate her punishment. Griffith suggested that the critic “would have held the largest boulder to cast at the unfortunate woman.” More significantly, Griffith clearly implied that society was hypocritical to censure women who relied on sexuality to obtain favors. His female character was not “absolutely vicious” he

²¹ DWGP, reel 2, unsigned draft letter dated 3 Oct 1907.

continued, and certainly no worse than the “greatest men of the day who obtain money by trickery and watered stocks.”

While Griffith surrounded himself with ethereal-but-plucky blondes like Mae Marsh and Lillian Gish, DeMille preferred his leading ladies dark-haired, bright-eyed, and sassy, with Gloria Swanson the classic type.²² But like Griffith, DeMille was not afraid of strong-willed and independent women. And DeMille was even more liberal in his treatment of sexuality than Griffith. DeMille’s filmic creations often sin, but it is not in seeking sex, sexual freedom or fulfillment that they do so. In two of his famous divorce comedies of the Armistice era, *DON’T CHANGE YOUR HUSBAND* (Jesse L. Lasky Picture Company, 1918; directed by Jeanie Macpherson) and *WHY CHANGE YOUR WIFE?* (Famous Players-Lasky, 1920; directed by William de Mille), the sexual misadventures of DeMille’s lead characters are not born of deep-seated evil, but are more properly viewed as a misguided reaction to a husband’s crude provocation.²³ In the first film, Leila Porter’s dismay (as portrayed by Gloria Swanson) at her husband’s slovenly ways— in memorable scenes he offends her guests by crunching raw onions, rests his dirty shoes on the furniture and blows cigar smoke in her face—encourages her to accept the attentions of the thieving rake who will become her second husband. But DeMille makes clear that it is not her growing sexual interest in Schuyler Van Sutphen that brings about her downfall. Instead, it is James Porter’s loutish disregard for his wife’s finer sentiment that is the real sin of the movie, as becomes evident when the newly reformed James swoops in to rescue his former wife after Van Sutphen has run through her fortune and cheated on

²² In autobiographical notes dated around 1905(ca.), Griffith admitted that “blonds (sic) seem to have a fatal effect on me....” DWGP 1:2.

²³ *THE AFFAIRS OF ANATOLE* (Famous Players-Lasky Corp., 1921), plays on a similar theme.

her openly in society. True, DeMille made apparent that Leila's foolish attempt to better her marital circumstances only brought more trouble on her head—the movie's title says it all. But he never implied that the divorce itself, or her response to Van Sutphen's pursuit of her, was anything worse than understandable female weakness. In the later film, DeMille showed that his wives could also stray, and Swanson is brilliant as the frumpy Beth Gordon ("her only virtues are her vices," an intertitle comments), whose frigid ways drive her husband into the arms of a willing shopgirl. Although a stolen (but chaste) evening with the girl fills him with remorse, Beth is not satisfied by Robert's promises of future fidelity and she demands that he leave. The next morning he complies, as "merciless virtue proves stronger than love—and wrecks a home." DeMille apportions the blame in an intertitle of Robert's farewell to Beth: "All you talk about is the virtues I haven't got and the faults I have. Well—I married a woman, not a governess!" he says. "I want to live in a home, not in a convent! I want a sweetheart, not a judge!"²⁴

Probably no silent film represents the liberal understanding of sin more explicitly, however, than the second half of DeMille's 1923 *TEN COMMANDMENTS*, which dissolves onto the screen from a tableau-like shot of the bodies of the slaughtered Israelites intertwined with the Golden Calf they sought to worship. The scene shifts to a homely urban setting where an old-fashioned, bespectacled mother reads the Exodus passage aloud to her modern-looking sons. Richard Dix played John McTavish, who smokes a pipe placidly, while his brother Dan, acted by Rod LaRocque, squirms. Mother McTavish

²⁴ The intertitles, written by MacPherson, may have hit close to home for DeMille. He remained married to his wife, Constance, throughout their lives, and installed his two most prominent lovers in separate households, attempting to keep the women at arm's length from one another. DeMille's personal financial records contain ample evidence he paid living expenses for Julie Faye and Jeannie MacPherson, and many other women I was unable to identify, for examples, see his personal check registers in CBDMA Series II, 46; 17. Also check registers in boxes 150 and 154.

scolds her irreverent younger off-spring, who informs her “All that’s the bunk, Mother! The Ten Commandments were all right for a lot of dead ones—but that sort of stuff was buried with Queen Victoria!” Dan then fashions an impromptu altar (figure on page 201) from his cigarette and a gold coin on a chain, and teases his aghast mother by praying for the “nice gold eagle [to] hatch lots of little eagles, and bring them all to Papa!” His cavalier attitude earns him a rebuff from his overly pious mother, and he is forced out of the household. After wooing the girl his brother loves, Dan recklessly seeks wealth and fame, only to find that an Asian woman with whom he has contracted an illicit liaison has infected him with a deadly disease (an allusion to the Biblical account of Miriam’s leprosy).²⁵ His overwhelming greed, which leads him to cut corners in the construction of a cathedral, eventually leads to his mother’s death as she is caught beneath the rubble when the poorly constructed church collapses around her.

Dan was a villain, but a surprisingly likeable one, and DeMille used scenes between the brothers and Mrs. McTavish to make a number of subtle points about the nature of sin—and religiosity.²⁶ His original source material appears to be a note from an interested fan, who suggested DeMille make a film that would show the “professional reformer the error and danger of his ways” by revealing the “sorry (sic) and heart aches that follow” when “innocent pleasures” are forbidden.²⁷ “To keep shouting thou shalt not (sic) is the quickest way to make men and women, boys and girls, want to do those very

²⁵ Numbers 12:1-16. Miriam is stricken with leprosy after she and her brother Aaron, out of spite at Moses’s marriage to a foreign woman (“a Cushite”). Tell the prophet’s followers that they also have directly received God’s revelation.

²⁶ 4 Dec 1923, notations on release script. See also “Synopsis of The Ten Commandments,” CBDMA, XVII:1262 (2).

²⁷ Notes from n.d. letter to DeMille from N.A. Strong, CBDMA VII:242 (8).

things,” the writer contended. DeMille echoed these ideas in the opening scene at the cigarette altar, when the director took great pains to show that Mrs. McTavish’s dogmatism only succeeds in deepening her son’s cynicism. In case viewers have missed the obvious contrast between the prune-faced mother in drab, old-fashioned clothing and the debonair young son with the charming smile, DeMille at key points cut to the older son, handsome-but-sober John. Even the protagonist, John, is clearly amused by his brother’s antics and advises his mother that her attitude will only alienate Dan. Through her incessant moralizing, she is turning “the Cross into a whip,” he warns. Later, when Dan wants to dance to jazz records with the bohemian girl who has caught both brothers’ eye, Mother McTavish physically brandishes her Bible like a weapon, threatening to leave the house rather than watch this sinful behavior occurring under her roof. But John demonstrates his understanding both of the letter and the spirit of the Bible: “Mother, there’s nothing anywhere in that Book, against having a little wholesome fun on Sunday,” he says.

Pious Meddlers

More than sex itself, many silent films examined how communities—families, congregations, neighbors—torment with envy and gossip those individuals among them (or at the periphery) who are wrongly suspected of sexual impropriety. It is true that these were often some of the silent film era’s more awkwardly melodramatic moments, in which stories relied on obvious caricatures and clumsy plotting to provoke what today’s critics deride as cheap emotional reactions from audiences. What is lost in this analysis, however, is the fact that many of these melodramas cast in the role of villain characters

representing some of early twentieth-century America's bastions of respectability and morality. Griffith, for instance, frequently highlighted the sinful nature of gossip by casting his tormenters as small-town church-goers, middle-aged women reformers (whom he typically scorned as "do-gooders") or overtly sanctimonious family members. *THE NEW YORK HAT* offered examples of these types of sinners: Not only does Mary Pickford's father sin by depriving her of the longed-for gift, but the prosperous church matrons initially are condescending to the young woman as she proudly parades about the church lawn wearing her magnificent creation. Once the "pious meddlers" learn their unmarried minister purchased the hat for his fetching young parishioner, they begin to eye her in a harsher light. Griffith saw in their actions the ultimate sin, as their censorious glances and ill-concealed innuendo serve to strip her of the joy she experienced in receiving the hat while, in her modesty and innocence, Pickford's character is unable to discern the jealousy that prompts their evil gossip. In *WAY DOWN EAST*, we have seen that Griffith's lead character is tricked into a fake marriage, bears a beloved child out of wedlock and watches it die throughout a wrenching night in a boarding house. The landlord who spreads the cruel gossip that Anna was not truly married is bad enough, she threatens the respectability and safety Anna has found with the Bartlett family. But the Bartlett *paterfamilias* is revealed to be the real sinner who, when he finds his suspicions about Anna confirmed, refuses to treat her with the Gospel charity his wife has counseled from the start, announcing self-righteously that "she ain't fit to be here," and literally turning her out into the cold.

Perhaps the most explicit and nuanced examinations of community sin, however, is in a pair of mid-teens films by Lois Weber, *THE HYPOCRITES* (Bosworth Inc., 1915)

and SCANDAL (Universal Film Manufacturing Company, 1915). From 1913 to 1927, Weber, erstwhile missionary, veteran of stage musicals and film industry pioneer, used her power and influence in the new Hollywood to craft a series of big budget allegorical films that proved popular with audiences for a time.²⁸ Weber often featured clergy in her films—and more positively than did her male peers, with their ubiquitous drunk and debauched types—and she had the gift, already rare in 1910s Hollywood, of creating fairly realistic visions of middle-class domesticity in America.²⁹ “Miss Weber writes of real people, not of exaggerated puppets, stretched out of all shape and realness in order to attain a theatrical end,” wrote an Atlanta reviewer in 1915. When facing the censors Weber had an advantage that male filmmakers lacked, namely her femininity, with its lingering Victorian association with home, security and morality. So when Weber proposed films on such subjects as prostitution (SHOES, Universal Film Manufacturing Company, 1916), birth control (WHERE ARE MY CHILDREN?, Universal Film Manufacturing Company, 1916) and abortion (THE HAND THAT ROCKS THE CRADLE, Universal Film Manufacturing Company, 1917), her financial backers agreed.³⁰ Weber

²⁸ Karen Ward Mahar, *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press), 2006. See especially women and uplift films, 89-90. Six years after her final silent release in 1927, Weber made one last picture in 1934.

²⁹ See also, “Phillips Smalley Talks ‘Pictures’,” *Motion Picture News* 9:2 (17 Jan 1914), 22. “For some time past Mrs. Smalley and myself have been producing feature pictures, which have based their ideal upon acting,” commented her husband and co-director Smalley, “not spectacular effects.” In a piece otherwise critical of her “simplified sermons,” the *New York Times* acknowledged her “knack of making moving pictures with the spark of life in them.” “The Screen,” *New York Times* (14 Nov 1921). The “real people” quotation is in an anonymously written review, “Phillips Smalley,” *Atlanta Constitution* (20 June 1915), 10

³⁰ The latter two films examine their subjects in the light of middle-class American values—not as measures of sin, and are thus inappropriate for this chapter. In addition, the prints currently available reflect considerable post-release modifications made by Universal and do not represent Weber’s original vision. The continuity for THE HAND THAT ROCKS THE CRADLE is reprinted in Lois Weber, “The Hand That Rocks The Cradle: The Original Continuity,” *Film History* 1:4 (1987), 343-366. SHOES is unavailable for viewing in the U.S. and is examined briefly in the preceding chapter on the social gospel themes in silent films.

used sex and even nudity to attract audiences, but like many of her contemporaries, she was careful to employ a number of melodramatic devices that allowed her to show extremely frank material without triggering the kind of hysterical censorship calls that made producers so nervous: she wrapped her stories in a chaste, educational tone; and she also ensured that her characters' outcomes reinforced standard morality.³¹

In 1915 Weber caused a minor stir when she featured a nude woman in the role of “the Naked Truth” in *THE HYPOCRITES*, an exploration of the impact of a community’s sin on a young minister, his followers and a hostile congregation. In the back story, an idealistic cleric charges his flock with hypocrisy, meeting only yawns and derision from the faithful. As the parishioners file out of the church, only a lone penitent and the church organist remain. The scene then cuts to Weber’s allegorization of the journey of faith, as various people attempt to follow the minister, now transformed into an angelic Gabriel, climb a steep mountainside in search of salvation. One by one, even the most eager followers stumble and abandon their pursuit. A second allegorical segment transforms Gabriel into a young monk, working on a hidden artwork that inspires ridicule and envy among his fellows. Here the organist has become a single nun who alone is able to see the simple beauty of Gabriel’s work. When the statue is finally revealed, the monk is reviled. “The people are shocked by the nakedness of truth,” Weber’s intertitle states. Gabriel becomes a martyr for his beliefs, stabbed in the side by the vicious crowd, with the blessing of a figure representing church leadership. Weber closes this fantastic series of

³¹ Staiger, *Bad Women*, 77; Brownlow, *Behind the Mask*, xvi; Bowser, *Transformation*, 45. Upon the 1916 release of her anti-abortion film *WHERE ARE MY CHILDREN?*, *The Atlanta Constitution*’s film column quoted a New York critic, who described, “the delicacy with which she handled such an extremely daring subject.” “‘Where Are My Children?’ Coming to the Georgian Theater,” *Atlanta Constitution* (12 Nov 1916), C2.

stories with several short vignettes depicting the impact of deceit in human life. In the first, a politician promises his followers honesty, but is revealed by Gabriel's mirror of truth to be a man overcome by many sins. Self-satisfied wealthy women congratulate themselves in their luxury, while an intertitle warns the "truth is welcome if clothed in our ideas." Next, a young man proposes to an innocent young woman. Though Gabriel reveals him to be a womanizer, gambler and drinker, the woman's lust for his wealth outweighs her knowledge of his shortcomings. Finally, a young child is shown on the verge of death, a doctor helpless to cure him, while Gabriel reveals his demise is the result of being overindulged by his parents.

Despite its generally preachy tone and the famous nude figure who leads the audience through this odyssey, Weber enjoyed widespread success with *HYPOCRITES*, probably because it included enough different visions of sin to please almost any believer.³² Her selection of hypocrisy as the centralizing theme allowed her to appeal to liberal Protestant distaste for Christians who flaunted their piety in public while giving full rein to their worst nature in private. After introducing her beleaguered hero, she inserted an intertitle that revealed her sympathy with the notion that true sin lies in the heart of man—not in his actions, but in his thoughts—by quoting John Milton: "Hypocrisy, the only evil that walks invisible, except to God alone." But she also adopted a comfortably Calvinist tone with her fallen seekers on the mountainside and the implication that few are able to meet the rigors demanded of the righteous. Her short

³² The *New York Times* recommended it upon its re-release, referring to it mildly as "an unusual picture first seen here...last winter," "Written on the Screen," *New York Times* (16 May 1915). In 1916, the paper noted the film "caused the mildest of flutters," continuing "There is nothing objectionable about the picture, which is indeed superior to the majority that have followed in the two years since it was made. It is at least intelligent." "Horse Race in a Film Play," *New York Times*, (21 Aug 1916).

vignettes were also inconsistent, as she first attacked the corrupt politician—a favorite Progressive-era target—but also condemned both the young woman who marries for money and the overly permissive parents, whose human weakness might earn more sympathetic treatment in a Griffith film, for instance. Largely silent about the film at the time of its release, local newspapers were nonetheless generally positive on *THE HYPOCRITES*, and on Weber, when she released her next film six months later.³³

Like *THE HYPOCRITES*, *SCANDAL* (Universal Film Manufacturing Co., 1915) was the type of sensational story that could only survive the pre-World War I moral environment in the guise of a film that “teaches a lesson and entertains at the same time,” as one newspaper framed it.³⁴ “The story is just what you are thinking it is,” the newspaper commented, continuing: “If the story is somewhat sordid, it may be argued for it that...this is a means to an end.” The movie recounted the plight of Daisy Dean (played by Weber), a secretary whose reputation is ruined by rumormongers when her kindly boss offers to drive her home after she falls and twists her ankle. After tongues begin wagging, Daisy is named as the co-respondent in her boss’s divorce, her fiancé abandons her and she is forced into marriage “with the first man who offered his protection,” her admiring neighbor, Robert. But Daisy’s woes have only begun because Robert, never entirely trusting after the scandal, neglects his young wife, who finds herself suddenly befriended by her former fiancé, now happily married to someone else. Daisy may have reconciled herself to her new life with Robert, but when she goes for an innocent car ride with her new friends, her husband’s sister is again on hand to misconstrue her actions,

³³ See for instance the reference to “the idealistic reputation of Lois Weber and Phillip Smalley,” in “Phillips Smalley,” *Atlanta Constitution* (20 Jun 1915), 10.

³⁴ *Atlanta Constitution*, “Scandal Opens at Forsyth Drawing Record Audiences,” 6 Jul 1915.

and Robert kills his putative rival in a jealous rage. After Robert is executed for his crime, Daisy considers suicide but finds herself comforted by her old boss, whose life has also been ruined by the cruelty of gossiping neighbors.

The film shows Weber at her best as actress and director, with car chases, dramatic suicidal gestures and a grotesque figure allegorizing scandal, which wanders through the scenes, slinging mud at all and sundry. Universal featured this unsightly figure prominently in its advertising to exhibitors, and *Motion Picture News* congratulated art director Dal Clawson on the effect it generated among audience members.³⁵ Not as overtly religious in concept as *THE HYPOCRITES*, *SCANDAL* nonetheless echoes several Gospel stories, including Christ's protection of the adulteress a crowd would kill, as well as his social acceptance of a woman he meets at a well, who is passing herself off as married.³⁶ Although Weber heightened the story's tension by reaffirming at every turn Daisy's purity and innocence, in true Victorian dramatic fashion she also managed to titillate and enthrall viewers by alluding through the gossiping sister to sexual misconduct that *could* have happened. Even with Daisy's rock-solid innocence established, Weber makes clear that the real sinners of the film are the businessmen who see their colleague driving about town with a pretty young woman, the sister whose envy of Daisy drives her to repeated malicious slanders, and even the husband, Robert, whose mad jealousy prevents him from trusting his wife and whose lack of charity forbids him from forgiving the sins of which he suspects her.

³⁵ Universal ran a two-page ad in *Motion Picture News* 11:25 (26 Jun 1915), 104-5; the article ran two weeks later in *MPN* 11:28 (17 Jul 1915), 129.

³⁶ The story of the woman at the well is in John 4:7-25. Jesus stops the stoning of an adulterous woman is in John 8:3-11.

It is perhaps fitting that the last film discussed in this dissertation should be one of the final movies released during the silent era, DeMille's *THE GODLESS GIRL* (Cecil B. DeMille Productions, 1929). Despite its prurient title, salacious content, and the marketing budget accorded it by the continually supportive Jesse Lasky, then at Pathé Exchange (the film's distributor), *THE GODLESS GIRL* was not a big hit when it was released.³⁷ After relating the improbable plotline, one reviewer apologized, "I'm not scoffing, please understand. I'm just as strong for God as Mr. DeMille is." The film has been rescued for posterity largely thanks to its inclusion in one of the AFI's fine boxed sets of "Treasures of the American Film Archives," this one dedicated to social action films of the 1920s. *THE GODLESS GIRL* was one of the last films in which DeMille attempted to explore a higher cinematic vision before he turned to the big budget studio epics that would be his bread and butter for the next thirty years—and subsume what should be a reputation for directing some of the most cinematically arresting and dramatically challenging films of the 1910s and early 1920s. The film includes a number of stunning visual effects, including a creepy closeup of a young girl's spinning fall into a stairwell, and DeMille's contribution to the development of a film trope so common today, in the form of pastoral romantic interlude enjoyed by two characters forced to seek shelter while on the run from forces arrayed against them. DeMille's treatment of his young reform school escapees is awkwardly placed and disruptive to the story, but it is one that has become virtually a cinematic cliché. Despite its flaws, *THE GODLESS GIRL* nonetheless presented a fine coda to a long decade of filmic explorations of the nature of

³⁷ Mae Tinée (pseudonymous), "Here are two movies full of moral intent," *Chicago Tribune* (20 Mar 1929). DeMille was uncharacteristically disinterested in early sound efforts, and when his backers at Pathé asked him to prepare a synchronized soundtrack, he declined. Pathé re-released the film in 1929 with a soundtrack hurriedly composed in the studio and tacked onto the film.

sin and the relation of mankind to God. In it, DeMille contrasts what is ostensibly the greatest of sins—his heroine’s initial atheism—while exploring her right to express her opinions, with society’s greater sin in imprisoning her and her lover while subjecting them to punishments far exceeding in cruelty any crime she had committed.

DeMille was excessively concerned about *THE GODLESS GIRL*’s reception, but not because of its opening story line, which featured earnest young student Judy Craig’s attempts to convert her classmates, including a pathetic, but believing, friend, to atheism. Despite the negative light in which he cast Judy’s arguments, and the fact some observers believed Judy and her friends were punished for their “godlessness” by sentencing to the reform school, the director claimed no such intention. “A man has a perfect right to be an Atheist, if that is his belief. I did not want to get into an argument, in an endeavor to carp about it; to prove either that there was a God or there is not a God or that Atheism is all wrong: simply to show that it is wrong to try to force your belief on somebody else that doesn’t want it,” he told his crew³⁸ Although Judy’s anti-Christian rhetoric might have made it risky for DeMille to present her as the film’s protagonist, he rightly expected that his modern audiences would recognize that Judy’s conversion was a probable outcome of the play.³⁹ In fact in post-Scopes trial America when anti-atheist violence was at a high, more than one minister charged the director with ignoring the obvious fact that it was

³⁸ CBDMA, 293(8), “Verbatim Transcript of Expository and Descriptive ‘Reading’ by Mr. Cecil B. DeMille,” 29 Dec 1927, 80-81.

³⁹ DeMille grappled with Judy’s conversion, and even considered having Bob lose his faith first. Staff writer memo to DeMille, 2 Jan 1928 CBDMA 1253 (5). See also, the discussion in *ibid.*, n.d., n.a. notes.

typically atheists themselves who were endangered by their beliefs, not innocent bystanders or protesting Christians.⁴⁰

It was DeMille's graphic and sensational depiction of Judy and Bob's treatment at the state reform school, where they are sentenced for their role in Judy's friend's death that generated even more debate. For one thing, DeMille used the setting to explore scenes of violence and sadism that had rarely been seen on American screens. Even to today's jaded eyes, the specter of a young friend of Bob's being beaten senseless and dragged unconscious up a flight of stairs is shockingly realistic, as is a later scene in which Judy is handcuffed to an iron bed and left to die while the reform school is engulfed in flames. DeMille went to extreme lengths to present an authentic reform school experience—and the irony is that, despite the charges of sensationalism, he probably succeeded. His researcher Elizabeth MacGaffey collected dozens of signed affidavits from both reform school workers and convicts, including ones that described exactly the types of punishment he portrayed: beatings, electrocutions, and “the water cure,” as the Chicago newspaper put it.⁴¹

⁴⁰ CBDMA 293 (10), Lloyd C. Douglas sermon 28 Aug 1928 (ca.) “As a liberal, I am not very much obliged to the moving picture industry in problems of religion, and if they don't know any more about the religious problems of modern youth they would show better taste to keep out of the field,” Douglas noted. A 25 Sep 1928 letter from Rev. J.A. Schlichtling of Pasadena Mt. Olive Lutheran Church complained that atheism was hardly a big problem in American society. “The [riot] incident is overdrawn, is it not?” He goes on to point out that making martyrs of atheists just makes more atheists and is against the “basic principles of our government.”

⁴¹ CBDMA 282 (1), n.d. note from MacGaffey listing all affidavits. MacGaffey noted that a Ft. Grant Arizona inmate “states that girls are tied to rack while water hose is turned upon them....” Many of the documents are collected in CBDMA 292 (18).

DeMille's classic Victorian touches—a scene in which Judy and Bob clasp hands through an electrified chain link fence, burning crosses onto their palms, for instance, or her tearful conversion as Bob rescues both his lover and her tormenter from the hellish flames—could not quite convert *THE GODLESS GIRL* into the kind of tepid melodrama that Griffith and Weber had perfected a decade earlier. Instead, it presented DeMille's characteristically modern and liberal Protestant take on sin, in which her atheism is less an unpardonable sin against an omnipresent God, than a sad and misguided byproduct of her otherwise bright and intelligent high spirits. Judy's conversion, likewise, is not the result of an emotionally blinding moment at the hands of a charismatic preacher, but rather the protracted result of her contact with Bob's steadfast kindness and generosity amid the shocking cruelty and oppression of the reform school. And Judy and Bob's generosity in rescuing the prison guard who has so tormented them, along with their selfless efforts to rescue their fellow inmates, are consonant with liberal Protestant theology that concludes conversion is the result of contact with the righteous. "Snap into it, Bob," says Judy. "God gave us back our lives—we've got to pass it on!"

Conclusion

This study presents a number of questions for future scholarship. Certainly, Hollywood has in the past 80 years displayed an on-going fascination with religious themes and Biblical plotlines. The year 1927 marked a shift in classical Hollywood cinema, as changes in film stock and camera capability enabled the production companies to release films with a synchronized sound track on the reel. Audiences had long evinced an interest in films with sound, and exhibitors quickly began to purchase the equipment upgrades necessary to project sound in their movie theaters. What ensued was a five-year period in which production companies released a mixture of films, some silent (as work already in the pipeline was released), a few with sound overdubbed onto films shot to be silent (including *THE GODLESS GIRL*), others with limited audio tracks (mostly ambient sounds and some limited dialog), until, finally, the bulk of films released included full sound tracks. By 1932, silent films ceased to be released in any significant quantity. But although the form was subject to many technical advances at the close of the silent era, the liberal religious themes that had emerged in the first three decades of the twentieth century continued to dominate as film matured as an entertainment form.

For instance, to the extent that the industry as a whole exhibits any religious inclination at all, it continues to lean toward secular humanism, liberal Protestantism and Reformed Judaism, generating considerable distrust and antagonism from conservative evangelicals. Indeed, even the most American of films, those emanating from the big Hollywood studios, which might be expected for economic reasons to pander to the sizeable evangelical contingent in American society, rarely portray conservative religious of any stripe as anything other than malicious or ignorant. Like the silent-era directors,

modern filmmakers (and television writers) also seldom cast clerical figures in “righteous” roles. However, explicit religious themes in everyday dramas and comedies remain plentiful, including the use of Christian symbolism and iconography to denote certain characters’ redemptive or salvific roles, *BIG FISH* being just one potent example. This tendency is even more marked on the small screen, where character names are frequently a subtle clue into the show managers’ intentions, as in the currently popular show “*Lost*” (Bad Robot Productions, 2004 to 2010), which features a father and son duo, characters named Christian and Jack Shepherd, whom the show’s creators (who, incidentally, refer to their show and the considerable body of accompanying material as “the canon”) have indicated in interviews and through foreshadowing will be revealed as salvific figures.

In the genre of Biblical epic, filmmakers have continued throughout the past century to explore the meaning and theology of Jesus and Scripture, in films both allegorical and historical. The extreme breadth of subject matter and form of twentieth-century Biblical films forbids generalizations, but it is possible to discern in the latter part of the century a shift toward more historically based portrayals of the Gospel story than the first generation of directors felt safe presenting, even those who continued to have careers after the advent of sound. By the 1960s, gone were the Hollywood studio spectacles like William Wyler’s *BEN-HUR* (Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer, 1959) and DeMille’s second *TEN COMMANDMENTS* (Paramount Pictures Corp., 1956). Replacing these were several presentations of the Gospel as an allegory for the experience of the blameless oppressed in a brutal society, such as George Stevens’s *THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD* (George Stevens Productions, 1965). The 1960s also ushered in an era in which

historical and critical portrayals of Jesus began to appear with greater frequency. Both Norman Jewison's *JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR* (Universal Pictures, 1973) and Denys Arcand's *JÉSUS DE MONTRÉAL* (Centre National de la Cinématographie, et al, 1989) presented stories generally consonant with the findings of historical-criticism, although both of the directors' Christ figures remained safely European in appearance. The problem of presenting the historical Jesus continues to be complicated by the strikingly diverse portraits of Jesus contained in the four Gospels, and a reluctance on the part of any studio or director to tackle the sensitive questions of Jesus' paternity and birth. In its current state, liberal Protestantism accepts the notion of a "pre-Easter" and a "post-Easter" Jesus, acknowledging that some Gospel truths were likely fabricated after Jesus' death, but remain integral to the meaning of his life and death. In all the biographical pictures dedicated to him, however, only *JÉSUS DE MONTRÉAL* attempts to explore the historical-critical reality of the pre-Easter Jesus.

The Social Gospel as an organizing force in liberal Protestantism sank into oblivion after 1930—its ideology (if not its missions) subsumed, as were those of most privately based philanthropies, by the scope of need generated by the Great Depression. Ironically, just such a cataclysmic, greed-driven event, with the power to wipe out household wealth, throw huge numbers of Americans out of work and generate hunger and want on a scale that few had ever imagined, was precisely what Social Gospelers of the early century had believed was probable in a world of unconstrained capitalism. And a comparison of Griffith's images of society and agricultural collapse in *A CORNER IN WHEAT* reveals eerie similarities to the images of poverty and despair that appeared in every newspaper in America during the 1930s. Although most municipalities in America

deliver the vast bulk of their direct emergency food and refuge through networks of church pantries and shelters, diverse social problem films from the 1930s to the present day rarely envisage any role whatsoever for the Church in alleviating the misery of poverty. A good example is the quintessential Depression-era comedy, Gregory LaCava's *MY MAN GODFREY* (Universal Productions, 1936), which establishes early on that the only difference between a bum and a gentlemen is a job. LaCava presents a wholly secular and privately funded (through the sale of a purloined pearl necklace, no less!) solution to the problem of poverty: the privileged scion of a Boston family who is masquerading as a butler uses private investment to build and operate a ritzy restaurant on the site of the hobo camp where he lived while down on his luck. The restaurant not only pays living wages to those employed there, but also generates enough profit to provide housing for men forced by circumstance to live on the streets.

While the Social Gospel may have disappeared in social problem films, Christology remains both an active source of inspiration for a wide range of film directors as well as fruitful ground for scholarship. As stated earlier, it is in this aspect of theology that film criticism has begun to lay the groundwork that will be part of understanding the influence of filmic treatments of Christ's redemptive sacrifice have had on society, while separating out the dramatic meta-narrative of self-sacrifice which is so closely woven into it.

Finally, it would be difficult to state that liberal Protestantism itself, with its emphasis on Bible scholarship and service, has continued to have much impact on formal portrayals of sin in twentieth-century film. Only the rejection of original sin, which seems inherent to a certain conception of righteousness in film characters, appears

to have extended beyond the silent era. Of course, the origin of sin, the definition of it and the cure for it are, perhaps, the questions that create the biggest contention between liberal and conservative Americans. As such, sin may simply remain too sensitive for directors to address without risking alienating opposed audience segments. As the twentieth century advanced, certain Americans who would self-identify as liberal began to class as private matters certain behaviors that conservatives continued to view as evidence of as corporate sin—among them extramarital sexuality, family planning, nontraditional family formation, and so forth. The theologies on both sides of this divide are finely reasoned and well developed, although perhaps not well publicized by liberal Protestants whom conservatives often criticized for being morally lax. Perhaps these questions of sin and morality would benefit from more thorough public educational efforts by liberal theologians, but also creative treatment by commercial filmmakers.

Finally, my work appears to point toward a number of future research opportunities into the effectiveness of the transmission of nuanced theology in popular cultural forms. The sources presented here support the conclusion that directors included liberal Protestant theologies in silent films to appeal to a broad-based, middle-class Americans without alienating the immigrant and blue-collar ticket-buyers who formed the earliest audiences. The directors' archival materials and the interviews they granted indicate these views were consonant with their vision of faith. Ticket sales for the movies they created indicate that a broad audience segment enjoyed these movies and were not resistant to imbibing theologies in the popular entertainment for which they paid their hard-earned dollars. Liberal theology, with its themes of universal salvation, its acceptance of a pluralistic polity and, above all, its emphasis on divine immanence, was

general enough to appeal to a wide range of Christian and Jewish believers. Even those whose skepticism had driven them from the churches probably found these messages, devoid as they were of evangelical proselytizing, harmless enough to merit no more than mild lampooning in the critical press.

But although I have answered a number of questions about how directors wove theologies into their scenarios, and the sources upon which they built their theologies, this study leaves many problems unexplored. The first is the always sensitive question of audience reception, and how viewers of diverse religious inclinations absorbed theologies as mediated through popular culture. After all, the experience of lay theological education directly from the pulpit or seminary was mixed. The enthusiasm with which late nineteenth and very early twentieth century theologians proselytized the historical critical method to congregations soon wilted in the face of widespread resistance to the scholarly rigor they asked of everyday believers. A sophisticated understanding of Jesus' teachings as they were revealed against the backdrop of Roman culture required expert knowledge of the Bible itself, the history and politics of the Ancient World, as well as a thorough understanding of 200 years of early Christian polemic.

The early twentieth-century supporters of the historical-critical method hoped a shift in focus to the praxis of the Social Gospel, which could be conveniently presented in dramatic format, would appeal to parishioners who were reluctant to embark upon a lifetime of scholarly study to understand what Christ, after all, appeared to summarize neatly in the New Covenant. From the outset of the film industry, both religious leaders and filmmakers believed movies had the potential to be a critical new medium for the transmission of theology. What is not so clear is how the commercial dictates of film may

have distorted the messages these groups sought to convey. True, film is a rich visual and (since 1927) aural medium that is capable of communicating complex and highly nuanced stories. But above all else it is product of an industry dedicated to the generation of profit. As we have seen, even the most well-meaning directors were forced at times to simplify complex principles—or jettison challenging concepts—in order to maximize ticket sales. Given some of the criticism leveled at the liberal Protestant denominations, charges that they dilute the Christian message in order to pander to modern sensibilities, the question of how precisely how effectively theology is transmitted via popular cultural forms is important. The task also remains for scholars of popular religion to examine the ways that audience perceptions of God, mankind and salvation were shaped by filmic interpretation of religious themes.

Finally, while scholars have spent a great deal of energy at the turn of the twenty-first century to understand why conservative evangelicalism retains such a strong hold on American believers, film theologies of the silent and early sound era might help explain why mediating theology was such a powerful force in culture in the years 1874 to 1930. Further, conservative Christians place a great deal of blame on the content of popular entertainment for a perceived erosion in the power of traditional religion to order society in the twentieth century. A more thorough examination of the moral structures and religious themes in various popular film genres of the silent era might offer clues to whether or not filmic theology, which the directors who conceived of it certainly hoped would provide a fresh medium for the continued transmission of religion, in the long run proved detrimental to the preservation of an ancient faith in the modern world.

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 BEYOND THE ROCKS, 1922
 THE BIRTH OF A NATION, 1915
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 THE CRUSADES, 1935
 DEATH'S MARATHON, 1913
 THE DISCIPLE, 1915
 DON'T CHANGE YOUR HUSBAND, 1919
 ELEANOR'S CATCH, 1916
 FATTY & MABEL'S MARRIED LIFE, 1915
 FATTY'S FAITHFUL FIDO, 1915
 FATTY'S PLUCKY PUP, 1915
 FATTY'S RECKLESS FLING, 1915
 FEMALE OF THE SPECIES, 1912
 FOR HIS SON, 1912
 FROM THE MANGER TO THE CROSS, OR JESUS OF NAZARETH, 1913
 THE GIRL AND HER TRUST, 1912
 THE GODLESS GIRL, 1928
 THE GOLDEN CHANCE, 1915
 THE HAND THAT ROCKS THE CRADLE, 1917
 HELL'S HINGES, 1916
 HIS TRUST, 1911
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 THE HOUSE OF DARKNESS, 1913
 THE HOUSE WITH CLOSED SHUTTERS, 1910
 HOW MEN PROPOSE, 1913
 THE HYPOCRITES, 1915
 THE IDOL DANCER, 1920
 IN THE BORDER STATES, 1910
 INTOLERANCE: LOVE'S STRUGGLE THROUGHOUT THE AGES, 1916
 JOAN, THE WOMAN, 1916
 JUDITH OF BETHULIA, 1914
 THE KID, 1921
 THE KING OF KINGS, 1927
 THE LIFE AND PASSION OF JESUS CHRIST, 1902-05
 THE LONEDALE OPERATOR, 1911
 LOT IN SODOM, 1923
 LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM, 1897

MABEL'S WILFUL WAY, 1915
MALE AND FEMALE, 1919
MANSLAUGHTER, 1922
MISS LULU BETT, 1922
THE MOTHERING HEART, 1913
THE MUSKETEERS OF PIG ALLEY, 1912
THE NARROW ROAD, 1912
THE NEW YORK HAT, 1912
NUMBER PLEASE, 1920
OLD WIVES FOR NEW, 1918
ONE IS BUSINESS OTHER IS CRIME, 1912
ORPHANS OF THE STORM, 1921
THE PAINTED LADY, 1912
THE PASSION PLAY OF OBERAMMERGAU, 1898
THE PILLOW FIGHT, 1897
PIPPA PASSES, OR THE SONG OF CONSCIENCE, 1909
QUEEN KELLY, 1929
RAMONA, 1910
RECKLESS ROMEO, 1917
THE REDMAN'S VIEW, 1909
THE ROMANCE OF THE REDWOODS, 1917
THE ROUNDERS, 1914
SALOME, 1923
SCANDAL, 1915
SEALED ROOM, 1909
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SHOES, 1916
THE SILENT MAN, 1917
THE SQUAW MAN, 1914
SUNBEAM, 1912
SUSPENSE, 1913
THE TEN COMMANDMENTS, 1923
THAT LITTLE BAND OF GOLD, 1915
THOSE AWFUL HATS, 1909
TOO WISE WIVES, 1921
UNCHANGING SEA, 1910
AN UNSEEN ENEMY, 1912
THE VIRGINIAN, 1914
THE VOICE OF THE VIOLIN, 1909
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WAY DOWN EAST, 1920
WHAT SHALL WE DO WITH OUR OLD?, 1911
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WHERE ARE MY CHILDREN, 1916
THE WHISPERING CHORUS, 1918
THE WHISTLE, 1921
THE WHITE ROSE, 1923
WHO PAYS? EPI 12, TOIL & TYRANNY, 1915
WHY CHANGE YOUR WIFE, 1920
WISHED ON MABEL, 1915