

## RELIGION AND 100 YEARS OF AUSTRALIAN FILMS

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It is becoming better known that the Salvation Army took a lead in producing films in Australia. From 1899, with *Soldiers of the Cross*, the Army made religious films and was available to do what now would be news and archival material. Religion and religious issues were, perhaps surprisingly, prominent at the beginning of the Australian film industry.

This paper emerges from a centenary of cinema project called *From Back Pews to Front Stalls: The Churches in 100 Years of Australian Cinema*.<sup>1</sup> Film critics from various churches were invited to look at how their particular church was represented in Australian feature films. This offered an opportunity to list as many of the relevant films as possible as well as offer a critique of the treatment of the church by filmmakers.

Researcher Peter Bentley, of the Uniting Church, wrote a thesis on religion in Australian films of the silent era, and gives an overview of films and themes in the context of Australian social history of the period.

The Anglican church was studied by George Fisher, film reviewer for the Archdiocese of Sydney's *Southern Cross*. He found that representation of Anglicans tended to rely on stereotypes and some mockery.

Stephen Godley, formerly of the ABC's Religion Department and himself an ordained priest of the Antiochian Orthodox church, wrote a note on the comparatively few films with Orthodox characters and references.

The Catholic church was significantly absent from Australian films until the mid-60s, but since then there have been quite a number of films exploring Catholic themes. The present author, who is director of the Australian Catholic Film Office, did the study of these films as well as the chapter on the Protestant and evangelical churches. While there is a lot of material under this general heading, there are not a great number of films for each of the churches, for example, the Presbyterian and the Methodist. However, there are many films about more pentecostal groups and films with lay preachers.

The Seventh Day Adventists have featured in two significant films, *Evil Angels* and *The Nostradamus Kid*. Daniel Renaud, of the Adventists' Avondale College, has given considerable attention to these two films and perceptions of the Adventists by the Australian public. Members of the Salvation Army are often sighted in the background in films. Brad Halse,

former editor of *The War Cry*, highlights films in which the Army has had more than a passing presence.

Finally, Jan Epstein, who has written for *The Melburnian* and for several Jewish papers and reviews, studies what is more of an absence of Jewish themes in Australian films than a presence - which contrasts with the American industry of recent decades.

'Religion' is a very broad heading. A useful distinction can be made between religion in its broadest sense (which includes world religions - which, like Aboriginal religion, do not yet feature in Australian films), and religion which is linked with churches.<sup>2</sup> Religion can also apply to 'spirituality' which may not be connected with any official religion or church but which is an acknowledgement of something or someone beyond us, and a way of life that has an integrity based on this spirituality. Australian films reflect each of these meanings of 'religion'.

Religion seems a legitimate subject for documentary or news reporting but it does not stand out as a theme for feature films. An exception is John Ruane's version of Tim Winton's novel, *That Eye the Sky*. Distributors were reluctant to release the film in 1995, declaring that Australian audiences were not interested. Perhaps they were right, because the film was not a commercial success.

However, one of the difficulties of interesting audiences in religion and the churches is the reputation of ministers of religion. They are often present for 'hatch, match and despatch' rituals. But they are often presented as figures of fun (*Dimboola*) or as stereotypes to be criticised. In Esben Storm's mystery-thriller *Deadly*, set in a country town with a large Aboriginal population, a young Aboriginal man is being buried. The clergyman at the graveside begins his words in a rhetorical tone and claims that while some might be angry at such a violent death in police custody, he is more calm and is not angry. He is interrupted by the young man's brother, who then speaks of him with warmth, sadness and regret. Those at the grave join with him in a song. The priest has to stand aside. He has misjudged the situation and is ultimately irrelevant.

Church and religion have been better explored in since the 1970s, thanks largely to Fred Schepisi. After making the short film *Priest* in 1973 (with a screenplay by Thomas Kennealy), he made his award-winning autobiographical film, *The Devil's Playground* (1976). Schepisi went to the Marist Brothers school at Kilmore, Victoria. While discipline was tough, 50s style, he admired the brothers and priests he met and decided to train as

a brother. In the famous shower block sequence where the boys shower in bathers, Tom Allen (the Schepisi alter ego) is reprimanded by Brother Francine - who later emerges as quite neurotic - for not wearing his bathers, and the boys receive an impassioned lecture about religious life, the vows of poverty and obedience and especially chastity, which is given a strongly puritanical interpretation. Later, Tom Allen leaves the school. Schepisi creates a picture of a culture that has had detrimental effect on its members and diminishes the church's credibility.

This kind of critique is not confined to the Catholic church. Some of the films about more evangelical groups make a link between religion and mental illness (for example, *Backsliding* and *Madness of Two*). Fundamentalist churches are also criticised. 'Mull' is the nickname of a 16 year old girl, Phoebe, in *St Kilda*. The title of the film is taken from this nickname. She has to take responsibility for her sister and brothers as their mother has Hodgkinson's disease and their father is a security guard, a reformed alcoholic and a born-again Christian who leaves notes for his children with quotations from Isaiah.

The teacher at the pentecostal assembly hall is a smiling enthusiast who leads hymn-singing. He also preaches literal hell-fire sermons on moral issues. He has a particularly fiery sermon against homosexuals: 'the good Lord couldn't have made it any plainer... there will be no homosexuals in Heaven.' Mull takes her younger brother and sister out of the service, the sequence showing the 3 children turning their back on the church.

It is easier, of course, for drama to show conflict rather than positive images. But there are implications for positive outlooks in some of the critiques. *Coral Island* is a short film for television, written by Nick Enright, with memories of his school years at the Sydney Jesuit college, Riverview. Successful former students in their thirties return for a reunion dinner. The guest speaker is the priest who trained them for public speaking and debating. His after dinner address is an open critique of their lives, their worldly careers and their disregard of the religious principles they were taught and their disregard for social justice. The implications of Fr Dunphy's speech are quite clear: it is an appeal for down to earth integrity.

Australian writers and directors often declare that, while they are not religious, they are spiritual people. They dramatise values and probe issues, often in a light, satiric and 'quirky' style. However, one of the best religious films of the 90s, which includes references to the Anglican and Baptist churches, focuses on a man who lived on the margins, a 'Balmain boy' who

scavenged for food and became an alcoholic and spent time in prison: Arthur Stace. The film, written and directed by Lawrence Johnston, who says he is not a Christian, is *Eternity*. Stace had a conversion experience in 1930 after attending a men's group in Sydney which offered food and company. He felt a sense of God coming as he walked along Parramatta Rd at night and stood under a Moreton Bay fig tree. Stirred by a Baptist minister who had preached on eternity, he embarked on a mission of writing the word 'eternity' on the footpaths of Sydney for several decades. Witnesses, most of whom do not share Stace's religious experience or beliefs, testify to the profound impact the life of this man had on them, and the testimony of the half million times he wrote 'eternity' for the people of Sydney to reflect on.

Australia is often referred to as a secular society, but Australians today often talk about spirituality and own up to having had religious experiences. Looking at one hundred years of film, we might think that it reflects a secular society, but especially with the twenty five year long renaissance of Australian film, it is clear that religious issues are important to Australians.

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#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Peter Malone, co-ordinator, *From Back Pews to Front Stalls: The Churches in 100 Years of Australian Cinema* (Chevalier Press, Sydney, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> See the entry 'Religion' in the forthcoming *Oxford Companion to Australian Film*, edited by Brian McFarlane and Scott Murray.