

“GIMME THAT OLE TIME RELIGION”: TRADITIONALISM,
PROGRESSIVISM AND POPULAR MEDIA

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This thesis examines the role of Christianity in contemporary American culture using 1990s popular media as cultural artifacts. Building on theories of ideological analysis and hegemony, this project uncovers a balance between progressive and traditionalist ideologies in American culture with progressive ideologies most often superficially acknowledged and incorporated into dominant traditionalist Christian ideologies through hegemonic negotiation. An analysis of the popular Hollywood films The Last Temptation of Christ, Leap of Faith, Michael, City of Angels, Dogma and Keeping the Faith, illustrates this process by addressing Christian dominance in multicultural America, a backlash against feminism constructed through patriarchal and "family values" ideologies, and an integration of popular culture and traditionalist Christianity.

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CHAPTER 1

“GIMME THAT OLE TIME RELIGION”: TRADITIONALISM, PROGRESSIVISM AND POPULAR MEDIA

“Gimme That Ole Time Religion”¹ is the title of a well-known African-American spiritual whose expressive powers I am adapting in this thesis to indicate a nostalgic desire for traditional Christianity within an increasingly progressive United States culture. As the lyrics read, because that religion was “good for my grandmother,” “good for Paul and Silas” and “good for the Hebrew children,” it is, therefore, “good enough for me.” These lyrics, although they were written over a century ago, represent an attitude toward Christianity that still flourishes in contemporary American culture. The longing for traditional Christian ideologies is made manifest most notably through popular Hollywood films. Despite the fact that in many ways American culture is progressing, it simultaneously retains many of the traditional values which constitute the dominant ideology.

“Traditional” ideologies are identified through this project as those beliefs which many conservative and evangelical Christians promote that construct Christianity as the only “true” religion, uphold patriarchal beliefs in the inferiority of women and the superiority of the imagined nuclear family, and are expressed primarily through traditional organized Christianity. Simultaneously countering these “traditional”

ideologies in American culture are more “progressive” ones. This project specifies “progressive” ideologies as those which challenge traditional Christian ideologies by critiquing patriarchal authority, promoting the genuine tolerance and interaction of diverse beliefs, and embracing outlets other than churches for Christian expression that promote an active, personal religious experience rather than a passive, unquestioning one. In a discussion of religious progressivism James Davison Hunter argues that, “progressivist worldviews share the tendency to resymbolize historic faiths according to the prevailing assumptions of contemporary life.”² Progressive Christian ideologies challenge the traditional hierarchical structure of Christianity and attempt to construct an egalitarian religion in contemporary American culture. While progressive Christian ideologies are concerned with moving society forward toward pluralism by adapting Christianity to a contemporary culture, traditional ideologies seek to establish a “better society” through a nostalgic desire for the values of the past.

It is true that America is an increasingly diversifying nation, and it is this diversification that is challenging the hegemonic authority of Christianity and leading to cultural change. However, this evolution is a struggle which takes time. Through this struggle, elements of progressivism and traditionalism simultaneously exist in American culture. This project examines the struggle between traditionalism and progressivism in America specifically by analyzing the dominant Christian content of media representations in contemporary American culture. While clear signs of progressivism exist in American culture and Christianity, hegemonic negotiation upholds underlying ideological values that seem to reveal the supremacy of a fundamentally traditionalist culture.

Although Christianity is the religion of the overwhelming majority of Americans³, a vast number of other faiths as well as atheist and agnostic beliefs are also reflected in the national population. While the major focus of this thesis concerns Christian beliefs and the role of Christianity in American culture, it also addresses how these additional faiths interact with Christianity in American culture. The basis of this thesis is the view that while America is becoming more tolerant of non-Christians and differing faiths, a strong thread of traditional Christianity runs through American contemporary culture.

In writing this thesis I critique those traditional values of Christianity that have created a religion that upholds doctrine and unquestionable authority over the personal, genuine spiritual experience. I question those values that uphold gender, racial, religious/atheist and sexual prejudice over tolerance, love and acceptance. And I critique those values that uphold hypocritical, superficial belief over a genuine questioning of and struggle for faith. In addition, this project champions the progressive steps made in American contemporary culture. Although they are minute, they illustrate a slow evolution with the potential to guide the culture toward pluralism and equality.

Methodologies

The methodologies for this project deviate somewhat from those of traditional film studies projects by incorporating an interdisciplinary approach that integrates an analysis of contemporary religious studies with a broadly-conceived media studies. Each chapter is structured as an examination of cultural and religious trends in contemporary American society followed by film analyses that illustrate how these trends are at work in 1990s popular Hollywood films. Drawing from media theories derived from Cultural Studies and ideological analysis, I argue that the films analyzed are cultural artifacts which reveal meaning about American contemporary culture through their texts. Mimi

White argues in her article “Ideological Analysis and Television” that, “Because they [cultural artifacts] are created in socially and historically specific contexts, cultural artifacts are seen as expressing and promoting values, beliefs, and ideas in relation to the contexts in which they are produced, distributed, and received. Ideological analysis aims to understand how a cultural text specifically embodies and enacts particular ranges of values, beliefs, and ideas.”⁴ The cultural artifacts analyzed for this project were produced within the social and historical context of Hollywood in the 1990s in which the ideology of white patriarchal capitalism was dominant and Christianity, being the dominant religion in America, is a highly influential factor within this broader dominant ideology. However, while particular ideologies attain dominance in individual cultures, it is important to understand that ideologies are not fixed beliefs, but are permeable and evolve over time. White argues that, “It is also necessary to remember that ideology is not a fixed set of beliefs, but an arena of representational practice (and therefore a site of struggle and contestation).”⁵ Antonio Gramsci addresses the ideological struggle through his theory of hegemony which seeks to “explain the complex ways in which the dominant class maintains its control over society.”⁶ Since ideologies of the dominant class are permeable, hegemony may be negotiated. The ideological struggle that exists within culture leads to an eventual change in the dominant ideology. This evolution takes time and is difficult, but possible. The Christian ideologies in American culture are slowly progressing toward tolerance of differing faiths and lifestyles and toward allowing for gender and racial equality. However, this process is a struggle that is not easily attained. Christian ideologies in contemporary America are in a constant flux between

traditionalism and progressivism, and the films in this study illustrate this tension through hegemonic negotiation.

One of the key elements within Cultural Studies is the role of the spectator in responding to the ideological content of fiction. Stuart Hall addresses the importance of the spectator in analyzing film as a cultural artifact in his article “Encoding/Decoding” in which he argues that the spectator may decode texts according to three reading paradigms: dominant, negotiated, or oppositional.⁷ Throughout this project a negotiated reading of 1990s Hollywood popular film texts is provided which as Hall argues, “acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations while...it operates with exceptions to the rules.”⁸ Many of these texts appear to present a progressive attitude toward American Christianity (a dominant reading), however, they simultaneously uphold more traditional Christian values (a negotiated reading).

This chapter integrates media studies with theories of contemporary religion in American culture by building on the work of numerous sociologists and scholars of religion who argue that a transformation within mainstream Christianity has occurred over the past decades in American culture. The trends of this transformation include:

1. A decrease in the focus on doctrine and tradition and an increasing tolerance of other religions.
2. A strong critique of the religious institution which is replaced by the rise of the personal religious experience.
3. An increase in the role of women in the church.
4. The absorption of elements of popular culture into Christianity and vice versa.

Although the majority of these documented trends are specified to pertain to mainstream Christians, this project addresses the role of Christianity as a whole in America including an analysis of how conservative, evangelical, liberal, and mainstream

beliefs adhere to the trends of contemporary Christianity. In addition the interactions between Christian beliefs and non-Christian faiths, atheists and agnostics are also examined to illustrate the maintained dominance of contemporary Christianity in an increasingly diverse culture.

The thesis chapters are constructed around each of these documented trends and use popular Hollywood films as cultural indicators of how they are at work in American culture. The films analyzed in this project are The Last Temptation of Christ (1988), Leap of Faith (1992), Michael (1996), City of Angels (1998), Dogma (1999) and Keeping the Faith (2000). Each of these films holds interest for the manner in which its narratives and themes address contemporary religious trends and the debates surrounding them noted by scholars of religion. Many of these films emphasize the personal religious experience rather than communally organized Christianity by portraying characters who do not find faith/religion through traditional worship services, but who are changed through their individual experiences with religious figures. In all of these films, the lead character is a person who has either lost his or her faith in God or love, and through his or her experience with the religious figure (not through the institution) the faith is rekindled. They also reflect the debates surrounding the role of women in Christianity, the struggle for religious tolerance in American culture, and the blurring of popular culture and Christianity.

The influence of Christianity upon Hollywood films has been evident since the dawn of moviemaking. Films such as The Ten Commandments (1923) that appeared in the silent era led to an entire genre of Biblical epics in the 1950s and 1960s including: David and Bathsheba (1951), the remake of The Ten Commandments (1956), Ben-Hur

(1959) and The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965). Throughout the 1970s, Biblical epics began to fade and were replaced with more controversial portrayals of Jesus and Christianity through the musicals, Godspell (1973) and Jesus Christ Superstar (1973) and the Christian satire, Life of Brian (1979). In the 1980s blatant representations of Jesus seemed to become less frequent (with the notable exception of The Last Temptation of Christ [1988]), yet Christian-themed films such as The Mission (1986) and The Name of the Rose (1986) constructed symbolic Christ-figures through their narratives. A significant amount of scholarly work in the late 1980s and 1990s also began to take note of Christian themes and symbolism within films that appeared to be secular. Authors such as Margaret Ruth Miles, Clive Marsh, Gaye Ortiz, and Peter Malone address the symbolic Christ-figures in films such as E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial (1982) and Edward Scissorhands (1990) in addition to examining the Christian symbolism and the mes of Dead Poets Society (1989), The Karate Kid (1984) and Sling Blade (1997). It is also significant to note the versatility of Christian themes that appear across numerous film genres. Although the majority of the films mentioned thus far are dramas or comedies, it is important to note the clear Christian symbolism found within the horror genre through classical Hollywood films such as The Bride of Frankenstein (1935) as well as more modern films such as Carrie (1976).⁹

While this brief historical overview illustrates the strong influence of Christian themes and symbolism within Hollywood films, I mark the 1990s as a decade in which a clear intensification of blatantly Christian narratives and themes are found within Hollywood popular films. Not since the Biblical epics of the 1950s and 1960s have such a significant number of films with blatant Christian themes been so apparent within a

brief time period. This, of course, is partially indebted to the rising popularity of angel culture in the 1990s (which is further addressed in chapter three) and films produced within this climate. This cycle of 1990s films include: Defending Your Life (1991), The Rapture (1991), Leap of Faith (1992), Sister Act (1992), Sister Act 2: Back in the Habit (1993), Dead Man Walking (1995), Michael (1996), The Preacher's Wife (1996), Phenomenon (1996), The Apostle (1997), A Life Less Ordinary (1997), City of Angels (1998), What Dreams May Come (1998), Dogma (1999) and Keeping the Faith (2000).

In addition to this cycle of films, an intensification of Christian themes also became evident within other outlets of 1990s popular culture such as popular music and television. Areas such as the rising popularity of contemporary Christian music and “family-oriented” cable networks such as PAX-TV will be addressed in chapter two.

While the tenets of the Judeo-Christian worldview have also long structured mainstream U.S. popular Hollywood films, this cycle of 1990s Hollywood films exhibit an intensified and blatant Christian approach within their narratives and themes. Numerous films have promoted Judeo-Christian values such as good triumphing over evil by producing films marketed as “uplifting” and “powerful,” but this project focuses its analysis on the recent increase in exclusively Christian ideologies in popular Hollywood films of the 1990s. To help emphasize this Christian dominance, the films chosen for analysis contain overt religious figures rather than more symbolic religious representations. Many of the characters in these films are clearly denoted as either angels, clergy members, or God/Jesus. While it can be argued that almost every contemporary popular Hollywood film has Christian connotations on some level,¹⁰ the overt representations within these film texts allow for a denotative as well as connotative

Christian reading. I have chosen films with overt representations of religious figures rather than more abstract representations such as symbolic Christ-figures or afterlife romances¹¹ because overt representations provide a clear denotative reading of religious figures, and therefore allow the religious connotations to appear more clearly. For example, a film about an angel (a religious denotation) will provide clearer religious connotations than a film about an African-American prisoner with Christ-like characteristics (religious connotations).¹² Individual spectators may overlook the implicit content of The Green Mile, but they may not overlook the explicit content of Dogma. It is much easier for a spectator to interpret religious connotations when a film has clear religious denotations.

Each of these films was also released quite close to or within the same time period of the 1990s and produced within the Hollywood industry. The trends of contemporary Christianity documented by scholars of religion are not easily confined to a specific decade and are often applied to a broader time period such as the late twentieth century. However, Hollywood films are often categorized by their release date. Studying popular Hollywood films released in the 1990s allows for an analysis of how these broader contemporary Christian trends are at work within a particular decade.

This project focuses on popular Hollywood films because one of their primary goals is to appeal to a large audience; therefore, the ideologies reinforced by these films are those to which producers believe “the majority” will adhere. John Fiske argues that texts are made popular, “...when the various subcultures can activate sets of meanings and insert those meanings into their daily cultural experience.”¹³ Because Hollywood’s goal is to ensure the greatest possible financial success, films are produced to appeal to

the largest number of possible subgroups. In order to appeal to these subgroups, the producers must create ideological meanings that they feel the majority of spectators may apply to their lives. In addition to striving to appeal to the ideologies of the majority of moviegoers, Hollywood films are also marketed to a large audience. Although the majority of the films under discussion here were not extremely successful at the box office, their studio-driven marketing campaigns allowed for widespread recognition. The high-profile natures of these films make it possible for people to know the basic premises without ever seeing the films. For example, an American moviegoer is more likely to be familiar with City of Angels than with The Rapture (1991), a lower budget and smaller scale film about religious faith and the apocalypse directed by Michael Tolkin. Because Hollywood films are made to appeal to the ideologies of a wide audience and are widely publicized through their marketing campaigns, popular Hollywood films become appropriate representations for broad cultural analysis. While independent films can also contribute valuable information about Christianity in contemporary American culture, this project attempts to focus on the ideologies of a broad culture and films produced to appeal to that culture.

The two films chosen for this project that may not categorize neatly into popular Hollywood formulae are The Last Temptation of Christ and Dogma. Universal Studios financed The Last Temptation of Christ; however, it was originally intended to be released only as an art house film. The surrounding controversies increased its popularity allowing for its release in mainstream theaters.¹⁴ Similarly, the controversy surrounding Dogma caused its Hollywood backer (Disney) to withdraw financial support of the film, making it an independent production.¹⁵

Both of these films encountered extreme difficulty getting released. In addition to the numerous protests by Christians against The Last Temptation of Christ before and after its release, Campus Crusade leader Bill Bright went so far as to approach Universal Studios with an offer to buy the film to ensure that it would not be released. According to Bright in a letter written to Universal executive Lew Wasserman the money would be provided by “concerned individuals across America who will pool their resources in order to cover your [Universal’s] costs.”¹⁶ After the film’s purchase, it was to be destroyed in a public burning. Similarly, controversies surrounding Dogma spawned protests by Christian groups such as The American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family, and Property which distributed four million flyers to churches and religious groups that read, “Dogma mocks everything we hold sacred- God, the Church, Mass and Mary’s virginity. It condones what we condemn- murder, obscenity, violence, profanity, drugs, drunkenness and rebellion.”¹⁷ This same group also organized a 2,500 person protest at the film’s debut in the New York Film Festival to illustrate their disapproval of Dogma.¹⁸ Although there were many Christians who supported the release of both of these films, the strong organization and publicity of the protests convinced many Americans, who had not and would not see the films, of their “blasphemous anti-Christian” themes.

The controversies surrounding these films indicate the deviation of the films’ producers from attempting to appeal to the dominant ideologies of “the majority.” However, it is important to note that while both of these films may not fit into the categorization of the standard popular Hollywood film, they were both directed by prominent Hollywood directors, Martin Scorsese (LTOC) and Kevin Smith (Dogma).

Although it may be argued that Smith is not as prominent a director as Scorsese, his casting of recent Oscar winners Ben Affleck and Matt Damon (for best original screenplay, Good Will Hunting) and other high-profile film and popular music stars such as Chris Rock and Alanis Morissette certainly contributed to Dogma's Hollywood-like appearance. These films are included in the project to illustrate how contemporary Christian trends are at work in somewhat progressive, yet highly controversial films.

Lastly, I have chosen films that include non-traditional characterizations of religious figures. Each of the films differ from past overt representations of Christianity such as many of the Biblical epics of the 1950s and 1960s¹⁹ in that these contemporary films create representations of religious figures that do not adhere to traditional Christian images. Many of these films take the form of dramas and romances which tell stories that have no narrative Biblical base, while many others portray religious figures who do not adhere to traditional Christian behavior and engage in activities such as drinking alcohol, pre-marital sex and using foul language. Stanley Rothman, in his article, "Is God Really Dead in Beverly Hills?" takes note of Hollywood's decline in the production of traditional Biblical narratives arguing that they have been replaced by supernatural and contemporary science fiction films, such as the Star Wars trilogy (1977, 1980, 1983) and The Exorcist (1973), that critique traditional religion by presenting a darker side of spiritual belief, rather than upholding a positive representation of it. Rothman conducted a content analysis in which the religious themes of 159 of the top-grossing films between 1946 and 1990 were surveyed. According to Rothman, "...these trends [of his study] clearly demonstrate the decline of traditional depictions of God and religion, and a growing interest in movies that present supernatural events as demonic or extraterrestrial

...Hollywood has conjured up a predominantly nighmarish alternative to more traditional stories.²⁰

Although Rothman sees this trend away from the traditional Biblical narrative as a negative transition made by a secular Hollywood, I argue that many of the non-traditional representations in contemporary Hollywood films do not critique religion, but reinforce it. In addition to the supernatural and science fiction films which Rothman argues portray religion negatively, 1990s Hollywood has produced a number of non-traditional religious representations through dramas and comedies that uphold Christian values. Numerous films about angels, clergy members and God have produced non-traditional Christian representations which do not critique but reinforce a religious belief. For example, the non-traditional representations that are found in the angels in Michael and City of Angels construct an earthly existence as more appealing than a heavenly one; the casting and dialogue of Dogma challenges the patriarchal image of God the Father; and the evangelist in Leap of Faith is characterized as a “sinner” who manipulates revival attendees rather than as a genuine minister of God. These films illustrate how both traditional and progressive ideologies exist in American culture through their more progressive portrayals of characters who stray from traditionally Christian ideals while simultaneously reinforcing the existence of a Christian God. None of these films deny the existence of God; on the contrary, all of them promote it.

I must also specify that this project will focus primarily on Caucasian Christian trends. Although progress has been made for African-Americans since the civil rights movement, the two areas of this study, Christianity and film, have remained fairly segregated in contemporary culture. For the most part African-American and white

Christians worship in separate institutions. Even other minorities such as Asian Americans and Latino Americans largely participate in separate services from white Christians, many of which occur in the same institution on different schedules. It seems that American Christians of different nationalities can work and play together, but they still worship separately. American society is a racist one where people of different races may display a superficial tolerance of each other's differing beliefs, yet rarely do they attend the same religious services or worship together.

Hollywood, similarly, remains a racist entity which produces only a small portion of films by or for non-white people. With the exception of films such as The Green Mile (1999) and The Preacher's Wife (1996) very few African-American centered 1990s films apply to this project. Dogma specifically addresses the racist nature of religion and Hollywood through its characterization of the 13th apostle, Rufus, who argues he has been eliminated from the Bible because he is a black man. The film blatantly acknowledges the racist nature of American Christianity which assumes Jesus and the Apostles were white, while also illustrating the racism of Hollywood by casting Chris Rock, a comedian known for his race-based humor, as the only African-American lead in the film.

Although it is acknowledged that Christianity encompasses varying beliefs among its numerous followers and cannot be easily categorized into two distinct groups, I am attempting to make a broad distinction between "mainstream" and "conservative" Christians. Following the definition put forward by Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, I am defining mainstream Christians as, "the dominant, culturally established faiths held by the majority of Americans."²¹ As previously mentioned, for a variety of reasons including Hollywood racism and segregation within Christian churches, I am

referring to primarily white Christians. I am using “conservative” to refer to fundamentalist and evangelical Christians who uphold the traditional values of the New Right such as family values, prayer in school, and the right of an unborn child to life.

The films chosen for analysis in this project provide denotative, non-traditional religious representations which have spawned from 1990s Hollywood and follow the trends associated with contemporary Christianity in American culture. This set of films best illustrates the balance of traditionalism and progressivism in American contemporary culture.

The Role of Christianity in America

Religion in America is a complicated subject due to its numerous and diverse belief systems. As previously indicated, Christianity may constitute the most prevalent form of religious belief; however, it is certainly not the only faith practiced in America. In addition to the various religions in America, the Christian majority, itself, is quite diverse. This majority consists not only of denominational distinctions, but it is also categorized by varying degrees of belief. Categories of American Christians include liberal, moderate, conservative, fundamentalist and evangelical. However, under all of these differences, the one concept which unifies them all is a belief in the redemptive powers of Jesus Christ.

This unifying belief is particularly evident in American politics. Although America is a country founded on religious freedom and the separation of church and state, the influence of religion on American politics has become quite clear over the past few decades. This influence is clearly evident through such examples as the phrase, “In God we trust,” which appears on American currency; “One nation under God,” which is

spoken in The Pledge of Allegiance; and patriotic songs such as “The Star Spangled Banner,” “America the Beautiful”, and “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” which appear in contemporary Baptist and Methodist hymnals. Many American politicians are members of the clergy (Jesse Jackson, Martin Luther King Jr. and Pat Robertson), and those who are not clerics often use religious-inflected discourses such as “God Bless America” in asserting nationalist sentiment. Although much political rhetoric appears to include America’s diverse religions by avoiding specifically Christian discourses, chapter three addresses the underlying Christian ideologies which are reinforced in American politics.

One defining factor of contemporary Christianity has been the shift in categorical distinctions from religious denominations to ideological values. While Christians once labeled themselves exclusively along denominational lines such as Methodist and Catholic, today these lines are blurred and religious distinctions are often constructed around shared ideologies. These ideological battles are concerned with key issues such as “family values,” homosexuality and abortion, and have come to be known as the “culture wars.” Because these issues are so vibrant in American society they have surpassed the boundaries of religion and entered the political domain as well. Chapter four addresses the debate surrounding the culture wars in religious and secular society through its analysis of “family values” ideologies in popular Hollywood film. The combination of the culture wars debate and the diminished focus on denominational distinctions has contributed to the blurring of religion and politics in contemporary America, especially with the formation of the New Religious Right.

Although religion has always had a strong influence in America, the “emergence” of the New Religious Right fused religion and politics together creating a political group

which according to authors Cimino and Lattin will, "...remain an influential force in American politics."²² Although the ideologies of the New Right existed long before the 1970s and 1980s, in 1979 a group of conservative Christians headed by Rev. Jerry Falwell decided to organize these ideologies into a non-denominational rightist political group, The Moral Majority. The goal of this group was to gather evangelical Christians who, according to Falwell, were, "pro-life, pro-family, pro-moral, and pro-American ...to exert a significant influence on the spiritual and moral direction of our nation,"²³ and their participation in politics has had a striking influence on American culture. Although the Christian Coalition replaced the Moral Majority in the late 1980s, the influence of the New Right in American society has not wavered. According to a 1996 Gallup poll approximately 20% of the nation "supported the political views of the religious right," while a 2000 poll indicated that 24% of Americans "think of themselves as a part of the religious right."²⁴ This political group has focused its attention on promoting its views on issues such as family values, prayer in school and abortion.

Although the New Right does not represent an overwhelming majority of the country, it has had great success in promoting its ideals in the political as well as cultural realm. For instance, New Right ideologies have spilled over into popular Hollywood films through the inclusion of nostalgic themes in Hollywood films that celebrate the traditional family in American culture.²⁵ It has been argued that with the rise of the New Right in the 1980s America entered a neo-conservative era where nostalgia for the past, a desire to return to the simplicity of yesterday, is paramount. The theme of family values illustrates this nostalgia. While a small number of the films analyzed for this project present progressive Christian attitudes, the majority of the films illustrate nostalgic desire

for a simpler time when it is imagined that people, family and relationships (including relationships with God) were of utmost importance. This project will address how these films fit into a nostalgic, neo-conservative culture.

It is important to remember that a belief in God does not necessarily equal political conservatism. In addition to the New Right, numerous progressive religious groups are also active in politics; however, they often do not share the highly public recognition of the religious right. Outspoken conservative religious leaders such as Jerry Fallwell perpetuate the public recognition of the New Right by appearing regularly on mainstream news and talk programs such as CNN's "Crossfire" and ABC's "Politically Incorrect" to present a conservative ideological agenda. In addition, televangelist Pat Robertson uses his own television network not only to promote conservative Christian ideologies, but also to support political causes such as his 1988 Presidential campaign.²⁶ Although Christian beliefs are quite varied, the New Right appears to have found a secure position in contemporary American culture which is perpetuated by public recognition and reinforces the hegemonic authority of Christianity. Although a belief in God does not presume a conservative outlook on culture, it seems that the more progressive Christians in America are often overshadowed by the brands of conservative Christianity which promote intolerance and prejudice. A more progressive Christian outlook within America may allow for a change in American Christianity which is highly overdue.

Secularization Theory

Despite the increasing influence of the New Right in contemporary American culture, many conservative/evangelical Christians argue that America is secularizing. While statistical evidence and cultural indicators may refute this claim, the secularization

theory remains a highly debated issue. According to a 1999 Gallup poll, 86% of Americans believe in God while another 8% believe in a universal or higher power. Combined, this creates 94% of Americans who believe in some sort of higher power, leaving only 5% who describe themselves as atheist and 1% who claim to be undecided.²⁷ According to Robert Putnam in his book, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community, America is one of the most religious countries existing today. He quotes religious scholar Seymour Martin Lipset who argues that, “the United States has been the most God-believing and religion-adhering, fundamentalist, and religiously traditional country in Christendom...where more religions have been born...than in any other society.”²⁸

Despite these statistics, many religious scholars have argued that American society is becoming secularized as religious participation and religious belief decline. Evangelical Christians have long targeted popular culture as a major contributor to the secularization of America. Whether in the form of Elvis shaking his hips, or Hollywood producing films “glorifying” sex and violence, popular culture has become a scapegoat for the decline of Christian values in American culture. In his book The Last Temptation of Hollywood, evangelical Christian Larry Poland claims that the release of The Last Temptation of Christ was a sign of “leftist” filmmakers in Hollywood who were succeeding in secularizing American culture. “It [The Last Temptation of Christ] is a symbol of a new era of Christ-smearing and Christian bashing in our culture—an era that is here to stay unless decent, moral people everywhere get off their duffs, take action, and speak up.”²⁹

Through this thesis I dispute the evangelical theory of secularization and argue that America is not secularizing, but that religion in America is merely changing and adapting to contemporary culture. In a discussion of mainstream Christianity, Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney in American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future, argue that religion in America is not a fixed belief system, but is instead pluralistic and constantly evolving.³⁰ As these changes occur, Christianity appears to be promoting a progressive movement toward gender equality, tolerance, and individual expression. However, a closer examination of these trends reveals that a non-changing traditional Christian belief is apparent in American culture. Although Christian trends may be shifting, underlying values and beliefs are remaining constant. While Gallup polls may support these superficial trends, an in depth analysis of popular films of the 1990s allows for more substantial analysis of the recent shape of overall traditional, conservative Christian belief. Some of these films, such as Dogma, take a more progressive attitude toward Christianity; however, all of them reinforce the existence and power of a Christian God. I examine popular Hollywood films of the 1990s as cultural artifacts arguing that they illustrate the paradoxical nature of a culture that is simultaneously progressive and traditional.

The films analyzed for this project were highly influenced by cultural factors such as the televangelist scandals that were a defining factor in the recent change in American culture that critiques the authority of Christian churches and celebrates the individual experience. By focusing on the individual religious experience of the characters, these films do not reflect a secularizing culture, but a culture that despite the transformation of Christian expression, reveals a strong belief in God. The nation is, overall, an extremely

religious one whose Christian beliefs are not declining but are transforming and increasing within a changing culture.

Cultural Factors

This thesis addresses how popular Hollywood films about Christianity reveal contemporary religious trends by exploring them through the cultural milieu of 1990s America and examining cultural reasons for why American mainstream Christians seem to be following the trends. While each chapter addresses specific cultural factors in American society, two defining cultural factors of the late 1980s must be noted which sparked a shift in the direction of religious films of the 1990s- the televangelist scandals and the release of The Last Temptation of Christ (1988). The televangelist scandals paved the way for the critique of religious institutions and religious leaders. While the televangelist broadcasts were not popular television programs, it is evident that the scandals permeated American culture. The media coverage of the Bakker, Roberts, and Swaggart financial and sexual scandals allowed America to witness the hypocritical downfall of public religious leaders who formerly preached against the ‘sins’ they had committed. These scandals contributed to a turning point in American Christianity that led to a distrust of religious institutions and authorities. While the scandals hurt the individual careers of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, and Oral Roberts, the televangelist ministry regrouped and has managed to remain a vivid outlet for evangelical Christianity. Despite the resurgence of televangelism, the impact of the scandals is still felt, causing many Christians to question their institutional leaders and focus on the individual religious experience. Chapter two addresses the impact of the scandals on popular Hollywood films through its analysis of Leap of Faith.

The Last Temptation of Christ was released into this environment in which televangelist Christianity was being widely discredited. This film was one of the first to reflect the reevaluation of traditional Christian beliefs by sparking a new cycle in popular Hollywood films which portrayed religious figures in non-traditional manners rather than through more traditional, Biblically-based representations. As was previously mentioned, the film generated a huge controversy surrounding its release that consisted of numerous protests by evangelical Christians. Although the film clearly stated that it was a fictional account based on the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis, the portrayal of Jesus as a 'sinful' human who suffered great temptation and struggled with his identity as the son of God outraged many Christians. However, the controversial portrayal of Jesus throughout the majority of the film is replaced in its resolution by a portrayal that upholds traditional Christian ideologies. The film creates a 'sacrilegious' Jesus who denies his divine will, yet this denial is in the form of a fantasy sequence, or more appropriately a hallucination produced by the extreme physical pain he endures while being crucified. During this sequence Jesus is guided off the cross by Satan in the form of a young girl and encounters his last temptation. He chooses, with her guidance, to deny his divine will and live the life of a human. He marries, has children, and grows old. However, while on his deathbed the apostles visit him and convince him that the young girl who has guided him through this human life is Satan. With this knowledge Satan disappears and an abrupt shot of Jesus appears back on the cross as if the previous sequence never occurred. Despite this controversial hallucination sequence, the resolution of the film reinstates the traditional representation of Jesus' crucifixion. One of the most religiously controversial films of all time fails to offer a full critique of traditional Christianity and instead

constructs a resolution which reinforces the traditional Christian narrative. This film is symptomatic of the hegemonic role of Christianity in American culture illustrating that even one of the most subversive mainstream films reinstates the authority of Christianity. Many popular Hollywood films of the 1990s, although most were not as controversial as The Last Temptation of Christ, often mirrored the film by offering a slight critique of traditional Christian values while reinforcing those same ideologies in the resolution. This film, along with the discourses of the televangelist scandals were contributing factors to creating a culture in which superficially subversive ideologies reinstated genuine traditional beliefs.

Chapter Synopses

Chapter two addresses the shift in Christian expression from traditional church attendance to popular culture outlets. A noted decline in attendance of mainstream Christian churches has been counteracted with an increase of Christian themes and values within popular culture as well as an intensified focus on the personal religious experience rather than a communal one. This chapter posits that the transformation of Christian expression towards popular culture has provided a post-modernized outlet by which dominant Christian ideologies maintain hegemony in contemporary American society.

The beginning of the chapter details historical and contemporary cultural factors that have contributed to the decline in church attendance. The chapter continues by addressing the integration of popular culture and Christianity in contemporary post-modern society and distinguishing two categories: the reappropriation of popular culture by Christianity and the incorporation of Christian themes into secular popular culture. This portion of the chapter addresses the role of Christianity in broader media outlets

including television, music, and film while the additional chapters focus attention primarily on film texts. The last section of this chapter analyzes how the cultural trends previously addressed are reflected in Leap of Faith and Dogma. Each of these films illustrates the heightened integration of popular culture and Christianity and promotes the personal religious experience while offering a critique of organized Christianity. Although many Christians have decried the influence of popular culture in the past, it now provides one of the most efficient outlets to reach Americans. This chapter addresses how popular culture outlets present an increasingly broad Christian mode of address in contemporary American culture.

Chapter three takes note of a paradox in American culture between the growing multicultural demographics of American society and the homogeneous culture which is imagined through popular media. A 1999 Gallup poll revealed that 75% of Americans that adhere to a specific religion believed that other religions, besides their own, offer a true path to God while 20% believed their religion was the only way and 5% professed no opinion.³¹ The fact that 75% of Americans claim acceptance of other religions appears to illustrate an increasingly tolerant society; however, the films analyzed in this chapter do not reflect a pluralist society but instead reinforce exclusively Christian ideologies. This chapter argues that while many Christians in American culture appear to be progressing toward a pluralist attitude, this tolerance may be more “performative” than genuine. The perceived acceptance of American religious diversity is labeled “performative” because many Americans perform a politically correct, acceptance of minority cultures and beliefs while genuinely believing in the superiority of Christianity in American culture.

This chapter begins by providing social indicators of an increasing multicultural society such as the increase in interfaith marriages and the recent trend of “spiritual” over doctrinal rhetoric, but gradually reveals the superficial acceptance of diversity which contributes to Christian hegemony. Many of these visible cultural changes in American society promote religious tolerance as an ideal; however, a genuine pluralist belief in American culture is not so evident. It seems that learning about and acknowledging the beliefs of non-Christian religions has allowed America to publicly perform pluralist attitudes while simultaneously holding the traditional belief that Christianity is the best, if not the only, way to God.

The final section of the chapter notes the performative pluralism of Keeping the Faith and City of Angels. Each of these films presents superficial pluralist ideologies under which the reinforcement of Christian ideologies hides. On the surface the films seem to promote a religiously tolerant America, however, a closer analysis of the films’ ideologies upholds Christian hegemony.

Chapter four examines the role of feminism in secular and Christian society arguing that due to strong patriarchal bias the feminist advances in Christianity fall short of the advances they have made in secular America. This chapter addresses the small gender advances made in Christianity spurred from feminist theology including a gradual shift toward the acceptability of female ordination. Although small, the advances of the feminist movement and feminist theology have contributed to a backlash which has become evident through “family values” ideologies and gender exclusivist Christian groups such as the Promise Keepers that long for traditional values of male headship and female inferiority. This chapter examines the role of women in Dogma, Leap of Faith,

Keeping the Faith and City of Angels by taking note of a shift in the manner in which patriarchal ideologies are reinforced in popular Hollywood films. Patriarchal authority is no longer imposed upon women but is constructed as a choice which these women make for true happiness. This choice, however, always reinforces patriarchal ideologies.

While Keeping the Faith, City of Angels, and Leap of Faith promote more traditional ideologies of female subordination and “family values” as the best choices for women in contemporary society, Dogma attempts to challenge the patriarchal ideologies of Christianity and secular society through its construction of a female protagonist who finds happiness outside of the confines of heterosexual coupling and its gender [de]-construction of God.

Although more progressive ideologies of women within Christianity are illustrated through Dogma, the additional films analyzed uphold the traditional patriarchal representations of women constructed through female choice. The struggle between these progressive and traditional representations reveals hegemonic negotiation of women’s role in Christianity within American culture. The majority of these films illustrate that while there are increasing signs of superficial gender equality within Christianity, traditional representations of women remain paramount. This chapter uses popular films of the 1990s to illustrate women’s struggle for equality within religious and secular patriarchal society.

Conclusion

These chapters argue that while many scholars believe that America is becoming a secular nation, there are distinct signs that as Christianity adapts to contemporary society, it simultaneously promotes an increasingly traditional influence in American culture. This is evident through a performative pluralism that masks Christian

dominance, through the struggle for gender equality that remains in Christian and secular society and through the increasing interplay between Christianity and popular culture.

Many popular Hollywood films of the 1990s clearly reflect the paradoxical nature of contemporary American culture which promotes conservative Christian values disguised behind superficially progressive attitudes. While some of these films, such as Dogma, address Christianity in a more genuinely progressive manner, the majority of popular Hollywood films strongly reinforce traditional conservative Christian values. As Christianity adapts to an ever-changing society, unchanging traditional values remain constant under a façade of progressivism.

¹ “Gimme That Ole Time Religion” was first published in 1867 in “Slave Songs of the United States” by A. Simpson & Company, eds. William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware and Lucy McKim Garrison.

² James Davison Hunter, Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America (New York: Basicbooks, 1991) 44-45. As Hunter notes, the term “progressive” is somewhat problematic due to its vast uses in American culture. He defines the term as “somewhat imprecise, but suggestive” due to its associations with the political movement in the United States from approximately 1890-1916 and the debatable positive connotations that it carries. Despite these imperfections, it remains the most appropriate term to oppose “traditional” through this study of Christianity in contemporary society.

³ According to a 2001 analysis of Gallup polls throughout the 1990s, the number of Americans who label themselves as Christian remained consistent at approximately 80-85 percent. This information was accessed on October 9, 2001 and found at www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr010413.asp.

⁴ Mimi White, “Ideological Analysis and Television,” Channels of Discourse, Reassembled, ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992) 163.

⁵ White 179.

⁶ Quoted in White 167.

⁷ Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” Media Studies: A Reader, eds. Paul Marris and Sue Thornham (New York: New York University Press, 2000) 57-61.

⁸ Hall 60.

⁹ Through this segment I have constructed an overview of the historical evolution of films with Christian themes which is quite brief and, therefore, limited. The purpose of this section is not to provide a complete index of Christian-themed films, but to offer a framework in which to place the 1990s films that are analyzed in this project. For a more in-depth historical discussion see the following works: Peter Malone’s Movie Christs and AntiChrists, Margaret Ruth Miles’ Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies and Explorations of Theology and Film: Movies and Meaning edited by Clive Marsh and Gaye Ortiz.

¹⁰ For a complete analysis of Christian themes and readings of numerous popular Hollywood releases see the website www.hollywoodjesus.com.

¹¹ There have been a variety of popular Hollywood films in the 1990s that have created more symbolic representations of Christian themes. For example, the image of the Christ-figure is clear in films such as The Green Mile (1999) and Phenomenon (1996). The afterlife romance formula has also become popularized through films such as Ghost (1990), Defending Your Life (1991) and What Dreams May Come (1998).

¹² i.e. The Green Mile.

¹³ John Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and Television," Channels of Discourse, Reassembled, ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992) 319.

¹⁴ Larry W. Poland, The Last Temptation of Hollywood (Highland, California: Mastermedia International, Inc., 1998) 208.

¹⁵ Peggy McGlone, "They'd Rather Not Have Smith Keeping The Faith," The Star-Ledger 7 November 1999 [Newspaper Online]; available from http://www.nj.com/spotlight/smith/faith_side.html; Internet; accessed 3 April 2001.

¹⁶ Quoted in Poland 122.

¹⁷ Author Unknown, "Demonstrators Dog Dogma," CNN Shobiz [newspaper online] available from <http://cgi.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/news/9910/05/showbuzz/>; Internet; accessed 1 April 2001.

¹⁸ McGlone 1.

¹⁹ As earlier noted, such biblical epics include The Greatest Story Ever Told (1965), Ben-Hur (1959) and The Ten Commandments (1956). Although I am distinguishing these epics from the frequently non-traditional representation of 1990s religious figures, it is important to note that not all Hollywood films about Christianity (including some of the Biblical epics) prior to the 1990s produced traditional representations. Michael Singer's article, "Cinema Savior" provides a clear description of the filmic representation of Jesus throughout Hollywood. Michael Singer, "Cinema Savior," Film Comment 24 (September/October 1988): 44-49.

²⁰ Stanley Rothman, "Is God Really Dead in Beverly Hills? Religion and the Movies," The American Scholar (Spring 1996): 272.

²¹ Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future (London: Rutgers University Press, 1987) 6.

²² Richard Cimino and Don Lattin, Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998) 135.

²³ William Martin, With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America (New York: Broadway Brooks, 1996) 201.

²⁴ This figure was taken from a 2000 poll by the Gallup Organization found at www.gallup.com.

²⁵ Robert C. Allen provides a discussion of Hollywood and the 'family film' in, Robert C. Allen, "Home Alone Together: Hollywood and the 'family film,'" Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies, eds. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (London: BFI, 1999).

²⁶ John Taylor, "Pat Robertson's God, Inc.," The New Christian Right: Political and Social Issues, eds. Melvin I. Urofsky and Martha May (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996).

²⁷ This information was taken from a 1999 Gallup poll taken from www.gallup.com.

²⁸ Robert D. Putnam, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) 65.

²⁹ Poland 288.

³⁰ Roof and McKinney 6.

³¹ This information was taken from a 1999 Gallup poll located at www.gallup.com.

CHAPTER 2

THE TRANSFORMATION OF CHRISTIAN PRACTICE: FROM CHURCHES TO POPULAR CULTURE

Christianity in late twentieth century America was characterized by a transformation of religious practice from more traditional to more progressive modes of expression. Scholars have observed a noticeable shift in religious practice from traditional church attendance to an increasing existence of Christian themes and teachings in more progressive forms of popular culture. This chapter examines cultural factors contributing to the decline in church attendance while also analyzing how Christianity has infiltrated popular culture artifacts. In contemporary American society religious expression is now no longer confined to religious institutions, but increasingly plays through what were once considered primarily secular outlets. As America has evolved into a post-modern society characterized by its high dependence on media, popular culture forms have become increasingly successful, whether intentionally or not, in performing roles that were once primarily held by churches. Despite the decline in the authority of traditional organized Christian practice, traditional Christian ideologies have for the most part remained dominant. With technological advances and increasingly hectic lifestyles, Americans have entered an era characterized by its fast-paced nature, and popular culture channels have become effective outlets through which Christian themes and values may reach wider audiences who are Christian, non-Christian and non-

religious. This recent transformation of Christian expression has provided a post-modernized way for dominant Christian ideologies to maintain hegemony in contemporary post-modern America as the authority of traditional churches fades.

The Rise of the Personal Experience

As the transformation in religious expression has occurred and attendance in Christian churches has declined, an increased emphasis has been placed upon the value of the personal religious experience by many Christians. Scholars have argued that as Christianity and the culture as a whole have become more individualistic, communal experiences such as church attendance have declined and greater focus has been placed upon active personal religious experiences and authority. Many, but not all, forms of organized Christianity are associated with an unquestioned authority of religious doctrine and leaders which contributes to a more passive religious experience received through weekly services. In contrast, the personal religious experience emphasizes a more active role of the individual in their own spiritual development that often takes place outside of church institutions. Many Christians are no longer as dependent on churches or clergy leadership as they are on their own personal experience with God.

Closely related to the increasing importance placed upon the personal experience is the rising popularity in the 1990s in focusing on the spirituality of religion rather than specific doctrines. Many Christians, who are often referred to as “seekers,” have begun to focus on their own individual spiritual development by integrating different religious practices rather than adhering exclusively to any one doctrine. The spiritual “seeker’s” approach often leads to a greater tolerance and genuine interaction between diverse

religions. The popularity of a “spiritualization” of Christianity in America is analyzed in greater detail in chapter three.

Amanda Porterfield argues in The Transformation of American Religion: The Story of a Late Twentieth Century Awakening that the late twentieth century saw a “transformation to a post-Protestant culture” characterized by “a remarkable decline in the authority Protestant people and institutions claim in the large culture, the success of many external challenges to their hegemony, and their relinquishment, to some extent at least, of the unselfconscious presumption to cultural authority that characterized them in the 50s and early 60s.”¹ This transformation was due in part to growing multiculturalism in the United States which allowed for greater interaction between diverse religions (this diversity will be addressed in chapter three) as well as the decline in the authority of Christian institutions and a focus on personal religious experiences which may be expressed through various outlets. According to Porterfield, “The conviction that religious truth is a fundamentally personal phenomenon, leads to increasingly diverse forms of religious practice and social engagement and to greater tolerance for religious difference.”² While Protestant hegemony may have been “challenged” in everyday American life, an analysis of the recent infiltration and influence of Christianity in popular culture causes me to question Porterfield’s argument supporting the waning of Christian dominance. However, her assertion of the increased role of the personal religious experience and tolerance for religious difference is key to the study of contemporary Christianity in America. This chapter examines Hollywood films that have taken note of the trend toward the personal experience through their portrayals of

characters who [re]gain faith in God through a personal experience rather than through a communal one.

The Decline in Church Attendance

The decline in church attendance has been noted by scholars of religion specifically starting in the 1960s. This historical context paved the way for the contemporary decline in communal religious practice. Wade Clark Roof, in his book A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation, argues that many mainstream Christian Baby boomers (a generation born between 1946 and 1964 that according to Roof represent roughly one third of America's population) abandoned their churches in the 1960s because they disapproved of their churches' lack of involvement in the civil rights movement.³ In addition to the 1960s church abandonment of mainstream Christians, an increase in the academic study of religion became prevalent in colleges and universities at that same time.⁴ No longer did people have to attend church to learn about Christianity, now it, along with other world religions, could be studied in an academic environment. According to Porterfield, the academic study of religion opened doors for new modes of religious practice and promoted the importance of personalized religion. She writes, "The academic study of religion contributed to the transformation of American religion in several ways. Introductory courses in religious studies stimulated many American college students to sample, reflect on, and experiment with new forms of belief and ritual practice."⁵ Religious studies courses also promoted the personal religious experience and contributed to the trend toward decline in church attendance. Porterfield argues that, "while early exponents of religious studies did not neglect the institutional embodiments of religion, neither did they associate the

fundamental essence of religion with either the ideal concept of 'church' or the institutional reality. The absence of a strong doctrine of the church in Protestant theology led instead to an emphasis on the essential importance of personal experience in religious life."⁶ More than ever it was becoming acceptable for mainstream Christians to believe in God without participating in organized religion.

Similarly, the Catholic Church was drastically altered with the changes of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. These changes illustrated that as the personal experience outside of organized religion was gaining force, the Catholic church was also taking note of this trend and attempting to reconstruct itself in a manner suitable to the personal experience. The role of the individual in churches became almost as important as the role of the clergy: "Vatican II redefined the church as 'the people of God,' and the people in the pews began to assert themselves as parish leaders and decision makers."⁷

This rise of the laity remains a strong element in contemporary Catholic churches.

According to Cimino and Lattin in Shopping for Faith: American Spirituality in the New Millennium, "Laypeople now ascend to the highest positions in religious denominations, to leadership positions once reserved for people with "Rev." in front of their names."⁸

Amanda Porterfield provides statistical evidence of this shift toward the inclusion of the laity that remains vital in the 1990s. She states:

Between 1990 and 1998 the number of priests in the United States decreased from 58,621 to 47,582. At the same time the number of Catholics in the United States increased from 49.6 million to 61.5 million. This precipitous decline in the percentage of priests in the Catholic population may have reflected the lessening of priestly status brought on by the Church's postcouncil emphasis on the importance of lay people.⁹

Although the Second Vatican Council made numerous progressive changes to Catholic dogma, it simultaneously created tension in the church that led to the withdrawal of many Catholics from their congregations. One of the most politically charged issues of the 1960s was the development of the birth control pill, and the refusal of Catholic leadership to accept it. Roof argues that, “For many Catholic women the pill or its equivalent was their first rebellion against the church, and it meant that their attitude toward the authority of the church on other issues would never be quite the same again.”¹⁰ These historically significant changes of the Second Vatican Council were the stepping stones for this noted transformation of Catholicism and other forms of Christianity in contemporary American culture.

In Looking for God in the Suburbs: The Religion of the American Dream and Its Critics 1945-1965, James Hudnut-Beumler provides an additional contributing factor for the historical decline in church attendance. Writing about the 1950s and early 1960s, he argues that many Americans who regularly attended churches often chose a place of worship based on social preference rather than theological beliefs.¹¹ Basing membership decisions on social criteria rather than on religious belief created congregations that were more concerned with the social superficialities of life rather than congregations that were interested in genuine worship. Those Christians searching for a genuine religious experience in churches were often forced to explore other options for religious expression.

The socialization of churches in the 1950s and 1960s that Hudnut-Beumler discusses has increased in contemporary culture. Although social dimensions of religion have long been a part of Christian worship, it appears that in contemporary America the

role of churches has shifted from worship to socialization. Where churches were once primarily places of worship where members also happened to socialize together, they now appear to be primarily places of socialization where members may happen to worship together. Many contemporary churches have become elaborate social institutions containing basketball courts, swimming pools and even softball fields and offering free classes in such things as aerobics and dance instruction. The trend toward building these “megachurches” as elaborate recreation centers is symptomatic of churches and congregants that prioritize socialization over genuine worship. It is a strong possibility that many people choose church membership for the recreational benefits rather than the religious experience. Churches are no longer so much institutions of worship as institutions of social interaction, and membership decisions are often constructed around which church has the better recreation facilities rather than which church offers a genuine religious experience. Diana Eck in her book, Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras argues, “No religion is without ugliness, perversion and destruction, for religious traditions especially religious institutions are not dropped from heaven, but are our human creations as we struggle to respond to our sense of the Transcendent.”¹² It is these human creations which many Christians have begun to question in searching for a genuine, personal faith. The 1960s were an era in which many Christians questioned the authority of churches and their leaders and often reacted by severing their ties.

Although Roof notes various reasons for boomers’ withdrawal from churches, he also argues that as boomers matured and began families of their own, their attendance began to increase. Despite the boomers' return, church attendance as a whole has still

decreased in contemporary America. According to Robert Putnam, “Church membership declined 10% from the 1960s to the 1990s, with the majority of the slump marked in the second half of this period, from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s.”¹³ He argues that the decline in religious participation mirrors the decline in secular organizations such as the PTA, Rotary club and political organizations. An increasingly fast-paced culture creates people who are inclined to declare membership and support financially rather than by taking the time to attend meetings or services. The 1960s began a trend that remains evident in contemporary American culture. Current America has also experienced cultural shifts which, in conjunction with these historical factors, have contributed to the decline in church attendance.

Americans’ lives are continually becoming more and more hectic leaving less time for religious participation.¹⁴ CNN recently reported that Americans are working on average one week longer per year than a decade ago. Two-income families are much more common today than they have been in the past. With both parents working, it is increasingly difficult to find shared leisure time, much less the time to attend a worship service together. Conversely, the divorced family also adds to the difficulty of regular church attendance. In homes where parents have joint custody, traveling back and forth every other weekend may make active participation in one church difficult. Many divorced parents may not be active in a religious institution, and if they are may choose not to spend the brief time they have with their child in a church. In addition, although many churches now offer programs for divorced adults such as support groups or Sunday school classes, other churches still view divorce as a sin and are intolerant of divorced members in their congregations. Roof acknowledges the tensions “blended families,”

families characterized by divorce and remarriages, have created in religious participation. In an interview he conducted with a divorced Catholic woman she discusses the strain that church attendance can put on blended families: "Every other Saturday Sylvia [the daughter] comes home to me, and then on the opposite week she's with her dad until noon on Sunday. Well, it turns out, she goes off to Sunday school with this other woman and her children while my ex stays home."¹⁵

With difficulties such as these it is a possibility that some Christians choose to spend their little bit of free time worshiping in a manner that is most conducive to their personal religious beliefs. While for many people this may occur on Sunday mornings at a worship service, for many others it may occur on a Saturday evening on a lake, or a Tuesday afternoon volunteering at a soup kitchen. Twentieth century Protestant theologian Paul Tillich addresses this diverse religious expression that is not confined to traditional organized Christianity. He asserts that Christians should begin to think of religion not as distinct from but as connected to all compartments of life. By his reasoning Christians are just as likely to find a genuine religious experience through everyday activities such as social work, education, and progressive social causes as in church activities.¹⁶

It must be noted that because Christian beliefs are so diverse not all Christian churches have encountered a decline in attendance. In fact, unlike more mainstream churches that have suffered a decline in religious attendance, conservative congregational participation has increased over the past few decades. Following in the footsteps of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, changes within these conservative churches have also illustrated a desire for the focus on the personal experience. Cimino and Lattin

address the rise and power of the laity within the more conservative institutions arguing that the trust and leadership of the clergy has been replaced by lay leaders whose involvement and leadership in churches has greatly increased.¹⁷ The rise of the conservative megachurch in recent decades has also allowed for the increasing focus on the individual experience through its creation of small groups within the institution.¹⁸ Despite the differences in church participation of mainstream and conservative Christians, both groups have tended to focus on the importance of the individual whether doing so within the church or outside of it. Christian churches, whether they have been abandoned by mainstream Christians or reinvented by conservative Christians have encountered a critical change.

The Contemporary Integration of Christianity and Popular Culture

While it is true that many Christians no longer adhere to the authority of Christian churches and have responded by ceasing participation in their churches, the declining integrity of organized religion is not indicative of a secularizing culture. On the contrary, most statistical evidence refrains from linking the decline in church attendance and the rise of a personal experience with a decline in religious belief. Polls show that while mainstream Christian church attendance has decreased, a belief in God has remained constant over the past few decades at approximately 94%,¹⁹ illustrating that belief is not synonymous with church attendance or even necessarily Christianity for that matter. However, there is clear evidence of diversifying modes of specifically Christian expression specifically found through forms of popular culture. The decline in church attendance appears to have been simultaneously counteracted with a rising popularity for popular cultural artifacts containing Christian themes. In contemporary American culture,

popular culture and Christianity have become increasingly intertwined. Their relationship takes two forms: 1. The manner in which forms of popular culture (i.e. artifacts constructed by secular producers) incorporate Christian themes and 2. The manner in which Christianity (i.e. artifacts constructed by Christian producers or used by churches) has reappropriated popular culture.

Although I have distinguished two categories to represent the relationships between popular culture and Christianity, these distinctions may easily become blurred. This blurring is perhaps the more interesting point. In contemporary America the distinction between popular culture and Christianity is not always a clear one. There is now a strong crossover between the two. For example, contemporary Christian and pop music artists are no longer confined to two distinct genres of music as is illustrated by the crossing over of contemporary Christian artists such as Amy Grant and Michael W. Smith into the secular pop market. In the broadcast industry, evangelical leader and former head of the Moral Majority Jerry Falwell provides commentary on many mainstream cable news programs. Television programs such as “Seventh Heaven” use teen sex symbols of secular pop culture such as Barry Watson and Jessica Biel to promote Christian ideologies of abstinence and family values. Religion, which was once confined to the private sphere, has become an accepted topic in the public arena. This shift from the private to the public arena is due in large part to the technological advances of post-modernity. In a society that is highly dependent on the media for its information about the world, the blurring of Christianity and popular culture boundaries allows the opportunity for a Christian perspective to be broadcast nationally, even globally. The integration of Christianity and popular culture has provided a new outlet through which

Christianity may retain its hegemonic position within American culture. Although in many instances the line between secular popular culture outlets that incorporate Christian themes and Christian entities that reappropriate popular culture may become blurred, analyzing them as distinct categories clarifies how popular culture has transformed into a vital outlet for Christian themes and values for both Christian and secular producers.

Christian Incorporation of Popular Culture

Christians have taken note of the fact that popular media, especially television and film, can provide a successful new way to reach a wider audience thus maintaining Christian cultural dominance. Ironically, popular cultural artifacts such as rock music, Hollywood films, and television programs had long been criticized by Christians in the past as progressive entities that contributed to the downfall of Christianity and the rise of a secular world. However, within contemporary culture, they have evolved into outlets that provide a new mode of religious practice in contemporary society. While some may argue that a coupling of popular culture and Christianity constitutes a rise in secularization, I argue that the use of a progressive outlet creates a new way in which to promote traditional Christian ideologies to a post-modern American culture. According to Linda Kintz, “This new visibility [of conservative Christians] has been aided by an extraordinarily sophisticated network of electronic resources. The influence of the religious right might be described in paradoxical terms as a reaction against postmodernity that draws on post-modernity’s best resources.”²⁰

As I have suggested, Christian usage of popular culture can be examined in two ways: the way in which churches use popular culture and the way in which Christian producers have reappropriated popular culture and presented Christian values in a

progressive yet predominately secular media. Within many churches, Bible studies and Sunday school classes use popular films as contemporary texts through which to discuss Christian values and themes. Many worship services no longer echo of traditional hymns, but now also include contemporary Christian rock, rap, and hip-hop music.²¹ In addition, numerous churches have moved away from the traditional Sunday dress and promote a ‘come as you are’ atmosphere which has led to contemporary fashion trends such as religious piercing, tattoos, and gothic clothing within churches.²² However, as these services outwardly present a more progressive, non-traditional worship environment, their teachings and values remain quite traditional. Although the congregants may worship in a warehouse setting wearing gothic clothing and listening to rock music, they are promoting the same anti-abortion and pro-family values positions which are evident in most traditional conservative Christian churches. Despite the use of more progressive media within religious services, many of the values of traditional churches remain unchanged and largely uncontested in American culture.

Christian Producers and Contemporary Religious Television: PAX-TV and The Family Channel

Outside of the church structure, Christian producers have reappropriated predominantly secular popular culture mediums and created Christian television programs, films and networks which promote Christian values. Perhaps one of the most significant Christian practice transformations in the 1990s was the rise of religious programming on television. The 1990s saw a shift in religious programming from primarily televangelical programs such as Jim and Tammy Bakker’s “Praise the Lord” and local Sunday morning worship services to entire networks such as Pat Robertson’s Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) and Bill Paxson’s PAX-TV. Rather than solely

producing blatantly evangelical programs, these networks also produced more mainstream programs which covertly promoted Christian values. The Christian values in these programs may be considered covert because many of them avoid mentioning Jesus or God directly and address softer Christian themes such as family values instead. The covert nature of these programs make it possible for audiences to watch them for an extended period of time before realizing that they are viewing religious programming. This is a creative effort by many Christian producers to reach an audience that might otherwise avoid religious programming.

Razelle Frankl takes note of this shift in religious programming after the televangelist scandals of the late 1980s: “Not only is religious broadcasting (both evangelical and mainstream) taking new forms to retain its traditional audience, it also wants to grow by attracting new members. In part, religious broadcasters are becoming more commercial and more accessible to those who are not born-again Christians.”²³ To reach this wider audience, Christian networks have experimented with different genres and programming formats. This has been Pat Robertson’s strategy in creating CBN (Christian Broadcasting Network), the first Christian network. He has diversified his programming to include not only overt Christian programs such as “The 700 Club” but also material that “inserts religion into traditional and popular programming formats rather than adapting the medium to the religious message.”²⁴ By using traditional programming formats, Robertson has been successful in disguising Christian themes through what appears to first time viewers as secular programming. The “CBN News” program follows major network formats so closely that at first many viewers may have difficulty distinguishing it from the NBC, CBS, or ABC news until the commentator’s

delivery indicates a Christian bias. CBN also borrows from the traditional dramatic and situation comedy formats of secular television and incorporates covert Christian themes within the narratives. According to Frankl, “Pat Robertson has taken a unique path away from the televangelism of the 1980s. He has expanded his enterprises from ‘The 700 Club’ and CBN to include a major corporation, International Family Entertainment, Inc., which he and his son Tim acquired in 1990.”²⁵ Specifically through The Family Channel, Robertson’s program content, “evolved from a focus on saving souls to a focus on social and political concerns such as pro-life messages, abstinence from pre-marital sex, and attacks on homosexuals.”²⁶ CBN, similar to other religious networks of the 1990s such as PAX-TV, incorporated “family values” ideologies into programs that were marketed toward the entire family rather than adhering to the televangelical format previously established.

PAX-TV was established in 1998 by “professed born-again Christian” Lowell White “Bud” Paxson and, like The Family Channel, is dedicated to producing morally uplifting family programming. Despite the fact that Paxson is a Christian, the network, unlike CBN, does not claim to be an exclusively Christian one, but instead Paxson argues that, “It’s a network that will use drama about life to strengthen family values while letting people know that God loves them.”²⁷ This type of rhetoric distinguishes these religious broadcasters from their televangelist predecessors by illustrating the shift away from blatant religious messages to softer approaches which encompass larger audiences. Following in CBN’s footsteps, PAX-TV avoids overtly evangelical programming and instead presents Christian family values through what were once primarily secular television formats. The channel’s mission is to, “serve a core audience of real, God-

fearing Americans who have otherwise been ‘forgotten’ by America’s ‘elite’ popular culture producers.”²⁸ PAX-TV labels itself as an “anti-network” that purposefully provides a wholesome alternative to the secular values inherent in programs broadcast on other networks.²⁹

Similar to CBN’s programming strategies, PAX-TV has also been successful in adopting traditional programming formats as well as bridging the gap between religious and secular programming. One of the ways in which PAX-TV attempts to integrate secular and religious programming is by re-broadcasting programs which have previously aired on secular networks. For example, PAX currently re-broadcasts the NBC evening newscast one half hour after it has aired on NBC and also has re-broadcast programs from other secular networks such as “Touched by an Angel”(CBS), “Diagnosis Murder” (CBS), “Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman” (CBS) and “Seventh Heaven” (WB). According to Paxson, programs re-broadcast from other networks must adhere to the “family-oriented” format of PAX-TV.³⁰ This programming strategy attempts to gain crossover audiences who stumble upon this secular programming and continue to watch succeeding programs which are constructed around Christian themes. In addition to re-broadcasting network programming, PAX also airs original programming such as “Flipper,” “Chicken Soup for the Soul,” and “It’s a Miracle.”

After its first season on basic cable PAX had a greater coverage range than Lifetime, Turner Network Television, or the USA Network.³¹ Its success is a clear sign to television producers that there is a large audience in America for this type of programming. PAX-TV’s success illustrates how Christian values have successfully found their way into mainstream television. Christian broadcasting is no longer

dominated by televangelist programs, but now reaches a much wider audience through cable channels such as PAX-TV and The Family Channel. Through Christian programming, aspects of popular culture have adopted the traditional roles of churches to seek out “lost” souls and proselytize Christian values. By emphasizing softer Christian values rather than doctrinal preaching, Christian broadcast outlets are able to reach wider audiences than televangelist formats or local churches thus establishing a new way in which to maintain Christian hegemonic authority.

Evangelical Film Producers and Hollywood

The late 1990s also witnessed surprisingly successful films produced by evangelical Christians such as The Omega Code (1999), Left Behind (2000), the teen romantic comedy, Extreme Days (2001) and Megiddo (2002), the sequel to The Omega Code. Similar to Christian television broadcasting, these films constitute an attempt to reach a wide, non-Christian and Christian audience by camouflaging Christian themes in a secular popular culture format. Not only are these films produced by evangelical Christians, but their marketing was dependent upon church grass roots organizations. Both The Omega Code and Extreme Days were distributed by Providence Entertainment, a private distribution company whose, “primary goal is to provide quality value-based motion pictures to the American families that are typically ignored by Hollywood.”³² This rhetoric, similar to that put forth by Christian television broadcaster Bill Paxson, constructs Hollywood as a liberal industry promoting anti-family ideologies to which Christian producers provide a much needed alternative. Left Behind, a film based on the best selling novels of evangelists Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, was produced by Cloud Ten Pictures which is also known for producing Christian films.

The success of these films is due primarily to the marketing and local promotion from churches that see them as a way to spread Christian values to people who may not attend church. According to a Washington Post review of Left Behind, churches such as Antioch Baptist Church in Fairfax Station, Virginia, gave \$3,000 to Cloud Ten Pictures to ensure the production of the film. In addition to providing financial backing for the film, churches also assisted in the marketing campaigns by passing out promotional fliers and purchasing local newspaper advertisements.³³ The Omega Code, which took in 2.4 million on its opening weekend and was funded by Trinity Broadcasting Network founder Paul Crouch, also had enormous support from churches for its marketing: “The Crouches are attributing the movie’s success to grass roots marketing, which included soliciting 2,000 volunteers to distribute flyers, put up posters and preach from the pulpit.”³⁴ These films are indicative of the reappropriation of popular culture through which evangelicals and fundamentalists are expanding their religious outlets beyond televangelism and traditional church revivals and incorporating film and television as successful outlets for spreading Christianity.

The purpose of these films as well as Christian programming is not only to reach a new audience, but also to provide Christian entertainment to those Christians who perceive themselves to have been “left behind,” forgotten, or ignored by secular popular culture. Recent years have seen the popularization of the perspective (created and articulated by Christians) that they belong to a small, overlooked sect of American culture which has been oppressed by a thriving secularization. It is this group of individuals who are determined to rise from their oppressed state and gain cultural power by restoring Christian morals and values in American culture. This fear of being “left

behind” by American post-modern culture has led to a reappropriation of post-modern technological advances which are used to articulate Christianity. What is ironic, of course, is that Christians are not an oppressed group, but are in fact the dominant religion in American society with approximately 80-85% of the country labeling themselves as Christian. This rhetoric of Christians as an oppressed group, creates a potent self image as “the underdog” who must fight the secular oppressor. This is an imagined identity which has ironically given dominant Christian ideologies even greater influence upon American culture through popular cultural outlets such as film and television. Because they define themselves as a “forgotten” portion of the country’s population, they simultaneously empower themselves to achieve greater dominance.

The Incorporation of Christian Themes into Secular Popular Culture

In addition to the embrace of popular culture within many Christian churches and by Christian producers, an increase in Christian themes is evident within popular culture artifacts produced by secular producers. Although the combination of Christianity and popular culture is not a new development,³⁵ an obvious increase has been evident within the past few years. This incorporation of Christian themes within secular pop culture is clearly apparent in the recording and radio industries, television and film.

Contemporary Christian music is the fastest growing musical genre today. While the genre used to fit neatly within one category (which was mainly pop), the industry is now seeing numerous genres within contemporary Christian music such as metal, rap, hip-hop, and country. Secular record labels such as BMG, EMI, and Virgin are taking notice of the profitable Christian market and signing Christian bands to their label.³⁶

In addition to the increased popularity of overtly Christian bands, secular bands such as Creed and Lifehouse blatantly claim that while their music does not overtly mention God or Jesus, it is based on Christian values. Cimino and Lattin quote New York Times author Guy Garcia who wrote that U2, Snoop Doggy Dogg, and Peter Gabriel “express a spiritual yearning that harks back, consciously or not, to rock’s gospel roots and a generational groping for more eternal values. Not since the peace and love era of the 1960s, when spiritual transcendence was celebrated by the likes of Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and Joni Mitchell, have religious themes been so conspicuously prevalent in pop.”³⁷ In addition, individual Christian songs have been marketed to secular audiences. For example the popular love song, “I Need You [like water, breath and rain],” performed by LeAnn Rimes was derived from the soundtrack for CBS’ Jesus miniseries (1999). It was not intended to be a secular love song, but a song about God. Music videos have similarly provided an outlet which allows lyrically secular songs to include visually Christian themes. For example, the visuals in the video for The Pretenders’ “I’ll Stand By You,” include a symbolic baptism in a bathtub and Christ-like stigmata through a close-up of two hands. Although lyrically this song appears to be a secular love song, the religious iconography implies that the song is about Christianity.

The rise in popularity of Christian music has also created a rise in Christian music festivals. Following the success of secular concert series such as Lollapalooza and Lilith Fair, Christian summer rock concerts have also toured the country promoting Christian values and morals. A recent Newsweek article addresses the rise of these Christian concerts: “The largely evangelical industry has created its own parallel world anyway, a place where popular art and culture are filtered through a conservative Christian lens and

infused with messages of faith.’³⁸ The music industry clearly illustrates how Christianity incorporates popular culture (by reappropriating rock music) as well as how popular culture incorporates Christianity (by crafting videos that endow secular songs with religious implications).

Secular Television Programs and Christian Ideologies

Christian themes have also found their way into popular culture through secular television programs. One of the most interesting uses of Christianity is the annual reading of the Biblical Christmas story on the NBC soap opera “Days of Our Lives.” Despite the program’s constant portrayal of activities that are normally considered non-Christian such as adultery, pre-marital sex and murder, it annually devotes a portion of the series to illustrate that the characters on the program are Christians. Although Christianity is rarely mentioned on this type of program, it is extremely interesting that the characters are assumed to be Christian as signified by the reading of the Bible. In the 1990s, the “Oprah Winfrey Show” also began to produce a daily segment called “Remembering Your Spirit” which was not overtly Christian, but clearly indicated Christian values. This segment provides individuals with the opportunity to share their personal experiences with faith and spirituality on national television. Similarly, the Sci-Fi Network breakout hit “Crossing Over with John Edwards” avoids blatant acknowledgment of Jesus or God, but the show’s premise rests on the assumption that an afterlife exists. On this program host John Edwards reunites people in the “physical world” with their loved ones who have “crossed over” into the afterlife. This program, which is broadcast Sunday through Thursday nights on the Sci-Fi channel is one of the highest rated programs on the cable channel. While this program does not stand on a firm religious premise, it has connected

itself to other programs with religious themes such as “Touched by an Angel” by incorporating a celebrity reading with one of its stars. In a reading with “Touched by an Angel” star, Roma Downey, she “talks of growing up in war-torn Ireland after John connects with her mother.”³⁹ Downey’s portrayal of an angel on her program as well as her public humanitarian efforts have created an image of her as a Christian person. While “Crossing Over” may not overtly discuss God, Roma Downey’s public belief in God allows for a connection to be made between an afterlife discussed on the program and a religious belief. The incorporation of Christian themes within secular programs illustrates that Christianity is no longer confined to churches, but can be easily accessed throughout various pop culture outlets.

The use of Christianity in popular culture and the use of popular culture within Christianity are indicative of a culture where religious belief is no longer confined to Christian institutions. Religious boundaries in American culture are being redefined and opened up to a broader spectrum. Popular culture is moving away from its secular stereotype, and becoming one of Christianity’s most vital outlets. As conservative and mainstream Christians embrace popular culture, so do previously secular mediums such as film and television embrace Christian values and themes. The use of technologically progressive outlets to present traditional Christian values makes clear how a seemingly progressive culture seeks to simultaneously invoke the traditional. This infusion of secular media by Christian themes in popular culture is symptomatic of a growing influence of Christian ideologies in America. It is becoming increasingly rare to turn on the television, watch a film, or listen to pop music without encountering some form of Christianity.⁴⁰

Popular Hollywood Films of the 1990s and Contemporary Christian Trends

While the manners in which popular culture and Christianity have fused together are diverse, the remainder of this chapter will focus its analysis on how popular Hollywood films of the 1990s have also incorporated Christian themes into their narratives. The 1990s have produced a cycle of films that clearly indicate the transformation of religious practice from traditional church attendance to popular culture outlets as well as focusing on the cultural shift toward the personal religious experience. Many of these films with Christian themes, such as Michael and City of Angels, do not contain church settings implying that Christian values and beliefs are not dependent on the communal experience. And those which do have church settings, such as Dogma and Leap of Faith, attempt to critique the superficial nature of Christian churches and celebrate the personal transformation which leads to a faith in God.

In addition to being popular culture artifacts themselves, the films also adhere to one of the most distinguishable traits of post-modernity by including numerous intertextual pop culture references that clearly illustrate the interaction between popular culture and Christianity in contemporary culture. Keeping the Faith is replete with pop culture references and clearly illustrates the trend of incorporating popular culture into traditional worship services. Both Father Brian (Edward Norton) and Rabbi Jake (Ben Stiller) are young clerics who boost attendance at their services by changing the format from a traditional, somewhat staid service to an updated, energetic service which mirrors a stand-up comedy or late night talk show/audience participation format. Their sermons are filled with popular culture references to Lauryn Hill and the Fugees, the Brad Pitt film Seven and Blanche Dubois. The sudden rise in attendance in response to this new service

format is characteristic of the incorporation of popular culture which exists in many contemporary Christian churches. Similar to the services in Keeping the Faith, many Christian churches are transforming traditional worship services and incorporating elements of popular culture in a desire to increase church attendance.

These references also propose a connection between the comparative power of pop culture and religion in American culture. For example, in Michael, when the angel (John Travolta) refers to the wisdom of John and Paul he is not referring to the Apostles, but to the Beatles. In Dogma, after Rufus, the 13th Apostle played by Chris Rock, falls from the sky he is compared to a character in the film ConAir who was dropped from a plane. The prophets Jay and Silent Bob (Jason Mewes and Kevin Smith) meet Bethany (Linda Fiorentino) on their journey to find Sherman, Illinois, the non-existent setting of numerous 1980s John Hughes films. The muse, Serendipity (Salma Hayek), claims to have been the inspiration for 19 out of the 20 top grossing films of all time. When God (Alanis Morissette) is introduced, her silence allows for her comparison to the lead character in The Piano. And perhaps most interestingly, the healing powers of God in Dogma are compared with the healing powers of Mr. Myagi in The Karate Kid. While on one level these numerous references illustrate a post-modern trend found in many contemporary Hollywood films, on another level the equation of religious figures such as God, the Apostles, and the prophets with popular culture icons such as the Beatles and Mr. Myagi illustrate a trend in contemporary culture which blurs previous distinctions between Christianity and pop culture. This blurring indicates that in contemporary American culture, pop culture icons are equally, if not more recognizable and powerful than Christianity. With this overwhelming power of popular culture in American society,

it is no wonder Christians have reappropriated pop culture to preserve hegemonic authority. While pop culture references appear in almost every film analyzed for this study, two films stand out among the rest in illustrating the critique of organized religion which has been countered by the personal religious experience in contemporary American culture, Leap of Faith and Dogma. Both of these films articulate in narrative form the ideological shift toward a personal, unique relationship with God while they are also examples of popular cultural artifacts which have usurped many of the traditional roles of churches.

Leap of Faith (1992) is a conversion story of a con man, Jonas Nightengale (Steve Martin), who travels around the country disguised as a reverend with the “Miracles and Wonders” revival group. This film is not only a critique of Christian churches, but also of televangelism and the scandals of the late 1980s. The 1992 film, because it is one of the few feature films about evangelism since Elmer Gantry (1960) can be interpreted as a response to the televangelist scandals. In addition to the timing of its theatrical release, the narrative of the film tracks a fraudulent charismatic Christian evangelist and the deception he perpetrates upon innocent people who come to witness a true miracle. The religious discourse used in the film is blatantly evangelical Christian and echoes televangelist signature phrases such as, “Thank you, Jesus” and “It’s a miracle!” The healing power of the evangelist which is so vividly portrayed in the film mimics precisely that of the televangelists, while the use of the black gospel choir and the opulent surroundings are all standard tropes of televangelist broadcasting. The film does not critique different forms of Christianity such as the Catholic church, but through its filmic signifiers and its appropriate timing clearly formulates a response to the scandals.

Although the film is critical of the fraudulent nature into which some forms of organized religion have evolved, the message of the film celebrates the existence of God through Jonas' transformation at the film's resolution from a con man to a believer. For the most part, Hollywood seems to avoid narratives about evangelists, however, after the scandals this film appeared which strongly promoted a genuine God and critiqued a fraudulent church. This film critiques the deceit and betrayal which may exist in Christian churches, while simultaneously reinforcing the divine power and authority of God. While the televangelist scandals led to a distrust of clergy and churches, this film illustrates that although some churches may be fraudulent, the "genuine article" does exist.

The church in this film is not a stationary structure, but is instead a traveling revival which can be set up anywhere. When Jonas is asked where his church is he answers, "On every street corner in every town." He continues by comparing his revival to a traditional church: "I have a ministry, and if you ever sat through church you'd know that's better." He sees his revival as an elaborate show in which he gives people "plenty of music and worthwhile sentiments" and sends most of them "home with a little hope in their lives that wasn't there before." And an elaborate show it is, from the performance to the intricate use of technology including ear transmitters, computers, hidden cameras, and glow in the dark crosses. According to Roger Ebert in The Chicago Sun-Times, "Leap of Faith is the first movie to reveal the actual methods used by some revivalists and faith healers to defraud their unsuspecting congregations. This is the first expose of the high-tech age, showing how electronics and computers are used to fabricate miracles on demand."⁴¹ This set up includes Jane (Debra Winger) who remains hidden in the tour bus, but provides Jonas with vital information through an earpiece about members of the

congregation such as, “Section three, the blue-haired lady. She has arthritis.” The deceitful schemes also include seating an elderly woman in a wheelchair to provide the illusion that she cannot walk allowing Jonas to perform a “miracle” when he convinces her to stand. In addition, the ushers slip an extra twenty dollars into the wallets of people who suspect a fraud to teach them if they give more, they will receive more in return. These schemes make people believe they have witnessed miracles, when in fact they have been conned.

In addition to the technical maneuvers of the show, the revival also manipulates the congregation into giving their money through merchandizing. They sell t-shirts, bumper stickers, tambourines, and bibles as souvenirs of the revival. Similar to the televangelists, the revival is about capital gain rather than worshiping God. The purpose of “Miracles and Wonders” is to “give some empty lives some meaning,” so that they might give financially in return. The goal of “Miracles and Wonders” is to reach an income of \$3500 per night which the group surpasses easily on the first night of the revival. Jonas asks the congregation to give money as “a token that you believe...The more you give, the more you live.” The church is presented in this film as a fraud, and its primary purpose as financial gain.

The film is not only a critique of the church but also a celebration of the personal experience. While the film critiques the church, specifically through televangelism, for its deceitful, manipulative operations, it reinstates and reinforces the existence of God and the importance of faith. Through Jonas’ transformation from a con artist to a genuine believer in God, the film promotes the idea that although some churches may be deceitful, God exists and faith is much easier to find through the personal religious

experience. Jonas is introduced in the film as a con artist as he avoids a speeding ticket by manipulating a police officer and even convincing him to give a donation to Jonas' revival group, "Miracles and Wonders." The group is traveling through the small town of Rustwater, Kansas, when their bus breaks down. Despite the fact that the town is in financial trouble due to a drought and most citizens of the town cannot afford to put food on the table, Jonas decides to set up, perform, and take their money. He appears guilt free in taking advantage of these people who barely have enough money to survive. Instead, he sees himself as providing honest entertainment to a town which truly needs it as illustrated when he says, "Now usually I only play towns that can afford me, but what about towns like this that really need me?" The drought ridden town, although at first skeptical, is manipulated into believing Jonas' miracles and throughout the film begs for the greatest miracle of all, rain.

Jonas is first portrayed as a guiltless con man, but as the film progresses it becomes clear why he has no faith in God. When he was a small child his mother abandoned him on a street corner, and he was taken to an orphanage to live after which he began a life of crime. This abandonment led him to lose faith not only in people, but also in God. This lack of faith is illustrated when he yells at God in frustration shouting, "You say is there one among you who is pure in heart and I say not one." However, during this brief stop in Rustwater, Kansas, Jonas has a personal experience with God by witnessing a true miracle which leads to a genuine gaining of faith. The first change in Jonas begins when he meets Boyd, a teenage boy who was crippled in a car accident and needs crutches to walk. In his attempt to regain full use of his legs, Boyd sought the medical assistance of numerous doctors, and when that failed he attended a revival with

the hope that a preacher could heal him. Yet Boyd's attempts have been unsuccessful. When he meets Jonas and hears of the miracles he is performing, Boyd believes he may have another chance to walk again. Because of Boyd's experience with other fraudulent preachers, he inquires if Jonas is a "fake" to which Jonas answers, "Maybe I am and maybe I'm not. If I get the job done what difference does it make?"

As Boyd begins to know Jonas better he also begins to trust him and believes despite Jonas' denial, he will be able to help him walk again. Boyd decides to attend the final night of the revival to be healed. Jonas, knowing he cannot heal the boy, quickly ends the revival and steps off stage. However, the crowd's continuous chanting of "one more" forces him to go back on stage and attempt to make Boyd walk. As Jonas faces the congregation and preaches that one doubtful soul could cause this miracle to fail, Boyd slowly moves on his crutches toward the crucifix hanging in the center of the tent, touches Christ's feet and begins to walk on his own. Jonas does not believe what he is seeing, and his first thought is that he has also been conned by Boyd; however, over time he realizes that he has witnessed a genuine, divine miracle. As Jane tries to convince Jonas of what they have just witnessed she notes, "This is different. That is not one of our shows in there. Something happened, I don't know what it is, but it happened." Ironically, Jonas' transformation occurs when his deceitful miracles are overshadowed by a true miracle performed by God. Despite the fact that Jonas works within the structure of organized Christianity and preaches about Jesus and God every night, it is only when he experiences God personally that he finds a genuine faith. This miracle forces Jonas to believe that miracles do happen and to give up his lifestyle of deceit. Jonas' moral and religious transformation is made manifest through dialogue with Boyd after he has

regained the ability to walk. While earlier in the film Jonas told Boyd that it made no difference whether or not he was a fake as long as he got the job done, he realizes now that it actually makes a world of difference. After the miracle Jonas attempts to convince Boyd that he is a fraud by telling him, "I had nothing to do with you walking. I run a show here. It is a lot of smoke and noise and it is strictly for the suckers. You kid are the genuine article. I know I am a fake." When Boyd asks, "What difference does it make if you get the job done?" Jonas answers, "It makes all the difference in the world." After his personal experience Jonas now believes in the "genuine article," in the power of God.

Jonas decides to leave the "Miracles and Wonders" tour and late at night hitchhikes a ride with a truck driver out of Rustwater to begin his new life. The fact that Jonas now believes in God is illustrated in two ways. First, when the truck driver asks Jonas, "Are you in some kind of trouble?" he answers, "No sir, maybe for the first time in my life I'm not." This dialogue illustrates that because he now has faith in God he has been "saved" from the trouble life has caused him. As Jonas rides out of town, rain begins to fall from the sky. The one miracle which the town has begged Jonas to perform throughout the entire film has finally been fulfilled. This rain can be interpreted as a recognition of his belief in God and a baptism into a new life. Only once Jonas has ceased his life of betrayal and found faith in God can the drought-infested land be rained upon. As Jonas has previously argued, only when all doubt in the power of God has been erased can miracles occur, and Jonas' new found faith erases his doubt and allows the rain to fall. As he rides through the rain toward his new life he expresses his new found faith by shouting, "Thank you, Jesus!"

Jonas' transformation is illustrated through the metaphoric motif of sight. Throughout the film Jonas speaks of his "second sight" which allows him to see inside a person's soul and to tell people what they need to hear without ever hearing the question. In addition, after Jonas has publicly demanded a sign from God to ease the suspicions of doubters, he performs a staged miracle by painting open eyes on the crucifix which causes thousands of people to travel miles and miles to witness the fraudulent miracles and healings he performs. This opening of Christ's eyes is symbolic of the opening of Jonas' eyes. Only after Christ's eyes have been opened does a true miracle occur which leads Jonas to leave his life of deceit behind and begin a moral, faithful life. The opening of Jesus' eyes parallels the opening of Jonas' eyes to the wrong he has been doing and to the new life ahead of him.

Despite the fact that Jonas has preached the word of God for years in a church-like setting, it is not until he witnesses a miracle and has a personal experience that he truly believes in God. Jonas' transformation mirrors the trend in contemporary American culture toward the emphasis of a personal relationship with God. Although Jonas cannot find salvation through a communal religious practice, this does not mean that it cannot be found. The narrative of this film highlights the recent ideological shift within Christianity which does not confine faith to Christian institutions but celebrates the personal search for religious belief.

Dogma, similar to Leap of Faith, also clearly illustrates the transformation of religious practice of the 1990s. It is a film that directly challenges and questions the traditional doctrines of Catholicism while promoting the significance of the personal experience in [re]gaining a faith in God. While the church in Leap of Faith is constructed

as a fraud, the church in Dogma is portrayed as a superficial institution which has lost the true meaning of God. The superficial nature of the Catholic church is personified by the satirical casting of comedian George Carlin as Catholic Cardinal Glick. It is Glick's brilliant idea to revamp the image of the Catholic church through a campaign he refers to as 'Catholicism Wow.' One of the defining elements of this campaign is the replacing of the crucifix with a new image of a smiling, winking, thumbs-up giving Christ which Glick refers to as the 'Buddy Christ.' 'Buddy Christ' represents an attempt to transform the former authoritarian nature of Catholicism into a more appealing religion which, in turn, will ideally lead to increased attendance. Glick indicates that this campaign will improve the image of the Catholic church through his line, "Mass attendance is at an all-time low in this country, but if we can let them know that the Catholic church has a little panache we can will them back, even get some new ones. Fill the pews people, that's the key!" By retiring the "highly recognizable yet depressing image" of the crucifix, and replacing it with the 'Buddy Christ' Glick believes people will return again to the church to worship. After all, according to Glick, "Christ didn't come here to give us the willies!" Dogma uses this scene to establish a critique of the superficial nature of Catholicism, and the staunch authoritarian influence it seeks to preserve, by creating a Catholic leader who advocates a public relations campaign to increase attendance within the church rather than providing a sincere focus on its actual problems.

In addition to the "Catholicism Wow" campaign, writer/director Kevin Smith also inserted vital scenes and lines of dialogue periodically throughout the film which illustrate the superficiality of organized religion. For example, when Loki (a banished angel played by Matt Damon) is first introduced he explains to a nun the faults of

organized religion by saying, “Organized religion destroys who we are by inhibiting our actions, by inhibiting our decisions out of fear of some intangible parent figure who shakes a finger at us from thousands of years ago.” Similarly, Serendipity also critiques Catholicism for the emphasis it places on fear as a rationale for faith. She tells Bethany, “I have issues with anyone who treats God like a burden instead of a blessing like some Catholics do. You people don’t celebrate your faith, you mourn it.” These lines of dialogue present a critique of Catholicism for fashioning a religious choice based on a fear of hell rather than a genuine desire for faith. Bartleby (Ben Affleck) notes that in addition to the decline in church attendance, those who continue to attend lack a genuine faith, “People don’t go to church to feel spiritual anymore. They go to church and feel bored, but they keep going every week out of habit.” This dialogue has been visually made manifest earlier in the film by panning a congregation during Mass. As the camera reveals the congregation, individual members appear sleeping or listening to CD players, while children are shown fighting in the pews. This scene is symptomatic of how organized religion has become devoid of meaning for many Christians in contemporary America.

The film furthers its critique of Catholicism by taking note of the superficial level of religious knowledge that many Christians exhibit. This is illustrated when Metatron introduces himself to Bethany and in response to her blank stare exclaims, “You people, if there is not a movie about it it’s not worth knowing, is it?” This scene implies that not only have many Christians lost a genuine faith in God, but their knowledge of their religion is equally superficial. The conclusion of the film provides perhaps the most significant critique of the Catholic church when Bartleby refutes the common idea that

the church in contemporary America is a house of God by ranting, “God’s house? God doesn’t live here anymore. He’s grown weary of your superficial faith. He’s turned a deaf ear to your lip service prayers.” At this point, the film insinuates that the superficiality of the Catholic church has so enraged God that God no longer exists within the church. The film portrays the church as an institution that no longer has the ability to provide a genuine religious experience. Therefore, faith must now be found through outlets which exist outside of organized Christianity such as a personal experience with God.

The film’s heroine, Bethany (Linda Fiorentino), also furthers the film’s critique of the Catholic church. Bethany is a Catholic who despite her clear loss of faith in God, continues her weekly Mass attendance out of habit and kneels for prayer every night before bed. While confiding to her co-worker about her faithless church attendance she says, “I don’t know why I still go. I sit there every Sunday and I feel nothing. I don’t think I have any faith left. I think God is dead.” The only thing church does for Bethany is give her time to balance her checkbook every week. She remembers the exact moment when she lost her faith and longs for the child-like unquestionable belief in God: “When you’re a kid you never question the whole faith thing. God is in heaven and he’s...she’s always got her eye on you. I’d give anything to feel that way again.” Although Bethany longs to regain her faith in God, the Catholic church cannot provide her with what she needs. Her faith is not rekindled until she has a personal experience with God.

Despite the film’s strong critique of organized religion, it is similar to Leap of Faith in that it emphatically supports the existence of a God which is genuinely encountered through a personal religious experience. This is clearly indicated by the re-

gaining of Bethany's faith. Bethany is quite different from other faithless Catholics portrayed in the film because she is the last scion, and it is her duty to save the world from the end of existence by preventing two banished angels, Bartleby and Loki, from entering a New Jersey Catholic church and "thus negating all existence." Because of Bethany's genetic make-up, she encounters various divine beings who not only help her stop the angels from entering the church, but also guide her back to a faith in God. While confiding in Rufus, Bethany says, "Yesterday I wasn't even sure God existed," but after Metraton enters her bedroom in flames, Rufus falls from the sky, and the prophets save her from her death she finds herself "up to [her] ass in Christian mythology." In her encounters with the divine figures Bethany comes to realize that God is not dead and that she even shares a "chromosome or two" with Jesus Christ. She learns first hand what Jesus and God are like and about their disappointments in organized religion. According to Rufus, Jesus' "only real beef with mankind is the shit that gets carried out in his name-wars, bigotry, televangelism." Through Bethany's personal struggle with who she is and what she believes, coupled with her personal encounters with God, the Apostle, the Muse, the Prophets, and the Angels, Bethany's faith is rekindled. After her experiences she answers Rufus' question "Crisis of faith over?" with "I think I am now burdened with an overabundance." Bethany's personal experience has provided her a path back toward faith and belief. Her transformation mirrors that of Jonas' in Leap of Faith. Where organized religion has failed them, a personal experience has succeeded in metamorphosing lost souls into faithful believers.

Although the majority of the film presents a strong critique of organized religion, the conclusion is somewhat ambiguous about the future of the Catholic church. While

Bethany's transformation is undeniable, the film never clearly resolves the problems that exist in the Catholic church. On one level the film appears to continue its critique of the church through Bartleby's gruesome murder of Cardinal Glick, yet on another level the film appears to reinstate the authority of the church. With the exception of Glick's death there is no clear resolution to the superficiality of the Catholic church as symbolized through the "Catholicism Wow" campaign. It remains ambiguous whether or not the Catholic church will continue this superficial campaign or return to traditional Catholicism.

The ambiguous resolution is most clearly indicated by God's entrance and exit of the church. Despite the fact that Bartleby has recently proclaimed that the church is no longer God's house, when God ascends and descends from heaven to earth the church serves as a passageway between the two spaces. The film's literal placement of God in this Christian institution implies the attitude that the church is a house of God contradicting Bartleby's previous declaration. In addition, the film leaves the spectator to assume that Bethany will continue to attend Mass, but her rekindled faith will produce a new communal experience for her based not on habit, but on desire. It appears as if the superficial nature of organized religion is no longer a problem for Bethany now that she has encountered a personal religious experience. Although the basic premise of the film is to challenge Catholic dogma specifically through a critique of the Catholic church, the film's resolution appears to reinstate the church's authority. Although Bethany's transformation is evident through her personal encounter with God, it remains ambiguous whether or not the problems of the Catholic church's superficiality have been resolved. The last shot of the film leaves the spectator with the image of a slow camera tilt from the

bottom of the Catholic church toward heaven. If this shot is any indication, it appears that the film has reinstated authority in the Catholic church. However, it remains quite difficult to believe that the harsh criticisms of Catholicism throughout the entire film could be set aside briefly in the few concluding minutes of the film. Whether or not the Catholic church is reinstated by the film's resolution, it cannot be denied that Bethany's transformation is due to her personal experience with those divine figures who enter her life.

Conclusion

Dogma and Leap of Faith are two popular Hollywood films of the 1990s that not only reflect the transformation of religious practice from organized Christianity toward a personal experience, but that also indicate how contemporary popular culture outlets can impart Christian ideologies to a broader culture. This is not to argue that all Americans have abandoned their churches or conversely that all Americans attend churches. But it is to acknowledge the fact that Christian belief structures are no longer dependent on church institutions for expression, but play through films, television, novels, music, and many other form of popular culture. Christian values can be found in secular television programs and films while secular television programs and films can also be used within churches to illustrate Christian doctrines. Although Christian churches may remain a part of American culture, Christianity has also encountered new modes of expression that are no longer insistent upon Christian institutions, but on a personal relationship with God. These films are examples of how Christian values and teachings have become vital parts of popular culture in contemporary American society. Teachings that were once confined to organized Christianity are now made manifest through forms of popular culture. The

ability of popular culture outlets to reach mass society and convey these themes enables Christian ideologies to expand in American culture and maintain, if not increase, Christian hegemony.

¹ Amanda Porterfield, The Transformation of American Religion: The Story of a Late Twentieth Century Awakening (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 6.

² Porterfield 18.

³ Wade Clark Roof, A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993).

⁴ *ibid* 165-168.

⁵ Porterfield 202-203.

⁶ *ibid* 210.

⁷ Richard Cimino and Don Lattin, Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998) 82-83.

⁸ *ibid* 87.

⁹ Porterfield 74.

¹⁰ Roof 49-50.

¹¹ James Hudnut-Beumler, Looking For God in the Suburbs: The Religion of the American Dream and Its Critics 1945-1965 (London: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

¹² Diana Eck, Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) 15.

¹³ Robert D. Putnam, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) 71.

¹⁴ For an interesting discussion on the acceleration of American culture see James Gleick, Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999).

¹⁵ Roof 227.

¹⁶ Robert C. Fuller, Spiritual, But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America (London: Oxford University Press, 2002) 173.

¹⁷ Cimino and Lattin 83.

¹⁸ Stewart M. Hoover, "The Cross at Willow Creek: Seeker Religion and the Contemporary Marketplace," Religion and Pop Culture in America, eds. Ed Bruce, David Forbes and Jeffery H. Mahan (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

¹⁹ This figure is based on a 2000 Gallup poll found at www.gallup.com.

²⁰ Linda Kintz, "Culture and the Religious Right," Media, Culture and the Religious Right, eds. Linda Kintz and Julia Lesage (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) 3.

²¹ Although the inclusion of popular culture within Christianity is not an entirely new phenomenon, there has been a significant increase within the past few years.

²² Richard Flory and Donald E. Miller, in their book, Gen X Religion, present a collection of essays, some of which describe this popular trend toward more non-traditional services, which incorporate popular culture forms into their worship through music and fashion.

²³ Razelle Frankl, "Transformation of Televangelism," Media, Culture, and the Religious Right, eds. Linda Kintz and Julia Lesage (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) 163.

²⁴ *ibid* 177.

²⁵ *ibid* 165.

²⁶ *ibid* 177.

²⁷ Victoria E. Johnson, "Welcome Home?" CBS, PAX-TV, 'Heartland' Values in a Neo-Network Era," The Velvet Light Trap 46 (Fall 2000): 40-55.

²⁸ *ibid* 41.

²⁹ *ibid* 47.

³⁰ Steve McClennan, "PAX in Our Time: Network to Focus on 'Wholesome Family' Fare, Plus Religion," Broadcasting and Cable, Vol. 127 No. 48 (24 November 1997): 10.

³¹ Johnson 46-47.

³² This information was taken from the Providence Entertainment, Inc. website found at www.providentfilms.com.

³³ Maria Glod, "Entertainment that Evangelizes: Churches Join to Promote Big-Screen Action Film," The Washington Post (February 2, 2000): A01.

³⁴ Gloria Hillard, "Deciphering the success of Omega Code," CNN.com, 26 October 1999 [website]; available from www.omegacode.com/newfiles/CNNReview.htm; Internet; accessed 10 February 2002.

³⁵ Examples of how Christianity has been evident in popular culture include the symbol of the cross that has been worn as jewelry by both Christians and non-Christians. For further information see Colleen McDannell, Material Christianity: Religion and popular Culture in America (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

³⁶ Joe Gow, "Saving Souls and Selling CDs: The Mainstreaming of Christian Music Videos," Journal of Popular Film and Television 25 (Winter 1998): 183-188.

³⁷ Cimino and Lattin 40.

³⁸ Lorraine Ali, "The Glorious Rise of Christian Pop," Newsweek (July 16, 2001): 41.

³⁹ This information was obtained from the "Crossing Over" website located at www.scifi.com and accessed 10 February 2002.

⁴⁰ It is also important to note that despite the transformation of religious practice in America from churches to popular culture that churches remain a vital element of Christianity in American culture. This is specifically evident during times of crisis. For example, the events of September 11, 2001 clearly illustrate how Americans turn to their churches for strength and guidance during difficult times. At times of crisis the communal religious experience overpowers the individual experience and Christian churches once again become heightened symbols of faith and worship. A less tragic example of the reinforced authority of Christian churches in America occurred when Sinead O'Connor ripped up a photograph of the Pope on "Saturday Night Live" in October of 1992. O'Connor was attempting to make a statement critiquing the politics of the Catholic Church. However, instead of supporting or even understanding her critique of Catholicism, the American public was outraged at her blatant disrespect for the Pope. This incident illustrates that on a superficial level a mild critique of organized religion is acceptable, yet an action as inflammatory as ripping up the Pope's photograph enrages not only Catholic Americans, but many Christians. Similar instances occurred in the art world in the 1990s with the censorship of "blasphemous" artwork such as Andres Serano's "Piss Christ" in which a plastic crucifix was submerged in urine and cow's blood. This type of censorship occurs at the hands of not only the religious right, but also mainstream Christians. The censorship of Serano's work and the outrage caused by O'Connor's actions are indications that the expression of personal religious belief through popular culture outlets is indeed limited. Under circumstances such as these the authority of the church surpasses that of the personal, religious experience. While it is true that Christianity may now be expressed through different outlets other than churches and may focus on the personal experience rather than the communal one, the church remains a pillar of American Christianity. The superficial nature and hypocritical authority of the church may be denounced, yet at times of crisis it becomes a necessary haven for many American Christians.

⁴¹ Roger Ebert, "Leap of Faith," Chicago Sun Times 18 December 1992, accessed from www.suntimes.com/ebert_reviews/1992/12/795432.html.

CHAPTER 3

PERFORMATIVE PLURALISM IN A MULTICULTURAL AMERICA

There is no doubt that contemporary America has evolved into a multicultural society. People from all over the world live and interact together on American soil. Yet while debates surrounding multiculturalism attempt to establish an egalitarian world, minority cultures are often constructed as inferior to the dominant cultural ideologies. Multicultural societies are not only constituted by various ethnicities, national identities, and languages, but also by diverse religious beliefs. And the diverse religious beliefs in American culture are often suppressed by the dominant Christian ideologies. The superficial acknowledgement of America's diverse religious make-up is exhibited through many popular culture outlets, notably popular Hollywood films. A paradox exists in American culture between the growing multicultural make-up of American daily life and the homogeneous culture that is imagined through popular media. This chapter will focus its analysis on the role of religion in multiculturalism by examining how diverse religions are slowly gaining equality in American culture, while only scant or superficial acknowledgment of this religious diversity is made by recent popular Hollywood films. Through close analysis of the religious implications of Keeping the Faith and City of Angels, this chapter will illustrate how a superficial tolerance for

differing belief systems attempts to camouflage ideologies that uphold Christian dominance in American culture.

Multiculturalism is often studied in relation to ethnicity and national identity, however, religion cannot be erased from the multicultural perspective. It is a similarly crucial factor in constructing cultural identity. Bhikhu Parekh, in Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory explains the relation between religion and cultural formation. He argues, “Since culture is concerned with the meaning and significance of human activities and relations, and since this is also a matter of central concern to religion, the two tend to be closely connected. No culture is based on religion, but is shaped by it.”¹ The Multicultural Riddle, by Gerd Baumann, addresses the need to rethink multiculturalism in terms of the relationships between national identity, ethnicity, and religion. For Baumann, “the boundaries between religion and the rest of the social world are blurred, and they answer to political, ideological, and even academic ambitions.”² As these scholars have argued, religion is a vital factor contributing to the construction of cultural identity. With this perspective in mind, this chapter sharpens its focus to the influence of America’s dominant religion, Christianity, on a multicultural society.

Multiculturalism, according to C.W. Watson, “creates not just a sense of differences but also recognizes those differences as springing from a universally shared attachment of importance to culture and to an implicit acknowledgement of the equality of all cultures.”³ Multiculturalism is not simply the acknowledgment of diverse cultures living in the same space, but an interactive dialogue between them which creates an egalitarian relationship. Parekh argues, “A dialogue between cultures requires that each

should open itself up to the influence of and be willing to learn from others, and that in turn requires that it should be self-critical and willing and able to engage in a dialogue with itself.’⁴ In an ideal multicultural society, heterogeneity is embraced and diverse cultures live together in harmony, however, in reality multiculturalism is often overshadowed by hegemonic culture. While contemporary American culture is constituted by numerous diverse cultures abiding by diverse religious beliefs, Christianity continues to be imagined as the country’s only religion.

The Performative Nature of Multiculturalism

While ideally, multiculturalism is founded on ideas of genuine interaction and respect for differing people and beliefs, it has been argued that multiculturalism, “is at best partially enacted and characteristically disguises an assumption of the centrality of predominantly white ethnic groups or of the dominant culture.”⁵ Despite the religious diversity that exists in American culture, acknowledgement of this diversity is often partially enacted through a performative pluralism. America prides itself on being a country founded on the idea of religious freedom in which all people, regardless of nationality, may be successful in living the “American Dream.” However, in reality the “American Dream” of equality and success for everyone is a fallacy. It is an imagined dream that is kept alive by the conservative ideological rubric in contemporary American culture. One of the many ways in which it is kept alive is through a performative, superficial acknowledgement of America’s diversity. This chapter addresses how a superficial acknowledgement of America’s diversity by social indicators and ideologies of popular films constructs an image of an equal society while its underlying foundation is inherently hierarchical. The term “performative” describes the manner in which many

Americans as well as elements of American culture superficially “perform” acceptance of a diversifying culture, while upholding a genuine belief in the inferiority of cultural others and their belief systems.

In her book A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Now Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation, Diana Eck argues that over time the rise of the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition has created a public awareness of fundamentalist Christianity in which, “The language of a ‘Christian America’ has been voluminously invoked in the public square.”⁶ Despite the truly diverse religious beliefs increasing in contemporary American culture, she argues that for many Americans, “religion basically means Christianity, with traditional space made for Jews.”⁷ According to Eck, “The religious landscape of America has changed radically in the past fifty years, but most of us have not yet begun to see the dimensions and scope of that change, so gradual has it been, yet so colossal.”⁸ Instead of taking note of this changing religious landscape, many Americans hold fast to the idea that all Americans are Christians. This chapter examines the performative nature of America’s multiculturalism through an analysis of cultural indicators and popular film that reinforce a false assumption of Christian hegemony which many Americans refuse to relinquish.

Religious Diversity: Exclusivist, Inclusivist and Pluralist Beliefs

The rise of multiculturalism has triggered the usage of adjectival terms to describe the spectrum of religious tolerance in multicultural societies, terms such as exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist. An exclusivist believes that his/her religion represents the only true path to God, and Christian exclusivists are often, but not limited to, evangelical and fundamentalist Christians. Eck describes exclusivism as, “not just ardent enthusiasm for

one's own traditions. It is coupled with a highly negative attitude toward other traditions. Christian exclusivists insist that the truth of Christ excludes all others- outside the Church, no salvation."⁹ They feel that difference is dangerous and must be destroyed.

An inclusivist religious belief acknowledges religious diversity and differing beliefs and traditions, however, an inclusivist's "own way of seeing things is the culmination of the others, superior to the others, or at least wide enough to include the others under [his/her] universal canopy and in [his/her] own terms."¹⁰ Unlike exclusivists, inclusivists do not condemn other's beliefs, but they assume, "that immigrants will come and blend in, contributing to the cultural mix but ultimately relinquishing the most distinctive aspects of their home culture to take on American culture."¹¹ The inclusivist believes that all people are welcome to come to America as long as they assimilate into American culture, a culture where Christianity is the dominant religion.

Unlike the previous two positions which deny the validity of other religions, or demand assimilation into American culture, the pluralist acknowledges that, "Reality cannot be encompassed by any one religious tradition."¹² Pluralists believe that learning about and truly understanding different religious beliefs is a vital way to understand and strengthen their own beliefs. They believe that learning about other religions does not hinder their own religious journey, but instead deepens it. Pluralism, "does not mean giving up our commitments; rather, it means opening up those commitments to the give-and-take of mutual discovery, understanding, and indeed, transformation."¹³

The categorical terminology of inclusivist, exclusivist and pluralist rhetoric is helpful in understanding the struggle toward becoming an egalitarian multicultural society. Mere tolerance of diverse cultures and religious beliefs does not create a

pluralist, multicultural society. While tolerance of diversity acknowledges or observes the changing nature of American culture, pluralism is an active desire to understand and learn from these other cultures and religions. A tolerant culture acknowledges difference, but a pluralist culture grows from an equal exchange of beliefs and a mutual understanding of one another. Although America may be slowly evolving into a tolerant society, the mutual exchange and understanding of a genuinely pluralist society remain far out of reach. While the exclusivist Christian response may be the most loudly expressed in America, according to Eck, most Christians are probably inclusivists.¹⁴ She argues that, "Inclusivism is a 'majority consciousness' not necessarily in terms of numbers, but in terms of power. And the consciousness of the majority is typically 'unconscious' because it is not tested and challenged by dialogue with dissenting voices. The danger of inclusivism is that it does not hear such voices at all."¹⁵ Christian inclusivists constitute the hegemonic group in American culture and therefore their ideologies remain dominant. Despite the growing religious and cultural diversity which is clearly evident in contemporary American culture, Christian inclusivists retain cultural dominance and deny genuine interaction among different beliefs. It is this Christian dominance which causes the suppression of pluralism.¹⁶

Cultural Indicators of Trends Towards a Pluralist Society

Although diverse religions remain overshadowed by the dominance of Christianity in American culture, there are clear indications of a gradual evolution toward a pluralist, multicultural society which, although seldom recognized by popular film, exists in everyday American life. Eck attributes this religious diversification to a growing multiculturalism since the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act reopened

America's borders for immigration by removing quotas set in place by earlier legislation. She argues, "The exponential growth of culture and ethnicities in America has dramatically expanded our diversity, including the diversity of our religious traditions."¹⁷ She takes note of the growing diversification specifically from 1990 to 1999 providing statistical evidence which shows that the Hispanic population grew 38.8 % to 31.3 million while the Asian population grew 43% nationwide to 10.8 million.¹⁸ This increased demographic diversity has led to an intensified multicultural dialogue which has guided many of the policy changes of the United States government and American corporations concerning freedom of religious expression in the workplace. For example, the Dominos Pizza corporation now allows its Muslim employees to wear turbans under their uniform hats and no longer requires them to shave their beards. In 1997 the White House released Guidelines on Religious Exercise and Religious Expression in the Federal Workplace which provided clear descriptions for what is and is not acceptable religious practice and exchange in the workplace.¹⁹ Also, in 1997 the month of Ramadan was officially proclaimed by Governor Bill Graves in Kansas and in 1999 the first Muslim Chaplain was appointed to the New York Police department.²⁰

In addition to the examples of religious diversity which Diana Eck provides, other scholars cite additional cultural factors which contribute to a growing pluralistic attitude in American culture, one of which is the increase in interfaith marriages in the 1990s. Wade Clark Roof notes that according to a 1991 Los Angeles Times article, "Half of all young Jews marrying today choose non-Jewish partners- double the number who married outside the Jewish faith twenty years ago."²¹ In addition, he argues that Protestant/Catholic marriages have also increased in recent years. Interfaith marriages

allow for a greater exchange and interaction of different religious beliefs which may cumulatively contribute to the development of a pluralist culture. The discussion of Keeping The Faith which appears later in this chapter illustrates the paradox between the growing acceptability of interfaith marriages in “reality” and the denial of these ideologies in this film. The romantic couple in this film, Anna and Jake, find true happiness through Anna’s decision to convert to Jake’s religion.

In addition to his discussion of interfaith marriages, Roof also discusses how divorced families may promote a tolerant attitude in children who attend different churches with different parents. He provides an example of a child of a divorced family who attends four different churches: a Southern Baptist church, a United Methodist church, a Catholic church, and Calvary Chapel. While on one level, this religious diversity within a family may create strain, it may also teach children how to become tolerant, or perhaps even pluralist regarding differing beliefs in American society. Roof argues that, “a great variety of religious and secular styles,²² are increasing in America providing the ability to contribute to a genuinely pluralist attitude.

Within the 1960s, the increasing number of people attending college in addition to the rise of religious studies programs at the college and university level contributed to the growing acceptance of diverse religions in American culture. Religious studies programs created a secular, academic environment in which world religions could be studied and understood, leading to a pluralistic rather than inclusivist religious attitude. According to Roof, “Better educated people are more likely to hold to nonorthodox and nontraditional religious views. They are more likely to hold to a religious universalism, that is, the view that all religions are equally true and good.”²³ Authors Campbell and Kean also

acknowledge how these cultural trends may contribute to a greater tolerance. They state, “Almost 2/3 of Americans in the 1980s attended church services of at least three different denominations, a trend which appears to be encouraged by educational background and inter-marriage.”²⁴

Spirituality in Contemporary Christianity

An important trend of the late twentieth century that thrived in the 1990s was the change in religious discourse that accompanied the transformation of religious expression addressed in chapter two. This change in discourse was encapsulated by replacing the term “religion” with the term “spirituality”. According to Eck, “For many, the word religion is too thing-ish, too static, too exterior and institutional in its present connotations. Clearly, for many people ‘spirituality’ has a more positive connotation than ‘religion.’ Today the term seems to connote ‘real religiousness’ or ‘religion that really means something.’”²⁵ Spirituality, because of its lack of focus on particular doctrines of specific religious traditions, may be interpreted to encompass tolerance toward a variety of religions. According to Amanda Porterfield in The Transformation of American Religion, “the language of spirituality served as a means of avoiding more controversial topics of dogma, creed, and ecclesiastical authority. American usage of the term quickly expanded to include personal experiences and attitudes associated with a variety of different religious traditions.”²⁶

In addition, diminished emphasis on doctrine allowed for the mixing of different religious traditions, specifically of Western and Eastern religious rituals. Many authors have noted the recent popular trend towards the incorporation of aspects of Eastern religious practices into Western belief systems. Diana Eck argues, “this serious ‘crossing

over' into the spiritual terrain of an Eastern religious tradition is one of the most important spiritual movements of today,'²⁷ Marianna Torgovnick, in her book Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy, also addresses the integration of differing religious traditions in her discussion of the phenomenon of new age thinking and spirituality at the end of the millennium. Describing New Age thinking as, "an eclectic collection of phenomena drawing from a variety of cultural and religious traditions, past and present, Western and Eastern, modern and primitive, familiar and exotically Other," she argues that, "supporters praise the New Age's freedom from dogma and capacity to acknowledge that many traditions offer valuable insight into how to integrate body, mind, and spirit with the powers of the universe."²⁸ The rise of a spiritual discourse in American culture has spawned an inter-faith interaction that is not only accepted but is often encouraged. It is now acceptable for a Southern Baptist to practice yoga or a Catholic to engage in traditional Buddhist meditation. According to Eck, "There is no question that many in the West, in this last part of the 20th century are embarked now on the inward journey. Our cultures are thirsty for whatever it is that is named with the word spirituality."²⁹ A later discussion of Keeping the Faith illustrates how Hollywood films have adapted this trend toward spiritualization into their narratives specifically through the portrayal of churches that integrate Eastern and Western faiths.

Because spirituality avoids doctrinal study and instead focuses on the broader values which most religions share- such as the bettering of the human spirit and its relation to the natural and/or supernatural world, spirituality encompasses almost all belief systems. Through its mixing of various distinct religious traditions, contemporary

spiritualization appears to celebrate both the similarities and diversities of all religions thus leading America toward a more pluralist society.

Cultural Indicators of Performative Pluralism

Through this chapter, examples of how America has slowly progressed toward becoming a nation accepting of non-Christian religious traditions have been noted. Yet these changes do not ensure a genuinely pluralist attitude among Americans. American culture entails a contradiction between the celebration of diversity on one level, and the suppression of it by the hegemonic culture on the other. Despite the religious diversity that constitutes contemporary society, America is still imagined to be an exclusively Christian nation. While in American culture diverse religions appear to be not only acknowledged, but embraced as acceptable faiths, a closer analysis of social and popular culture indicators illustrate the performative nature of religious pluralism. In the 1990s, Christianity remains the religious paradigm that structures American culture.

Many of those researching contemporary religious trends (such as Roof, Campbell and Kean) appear to identify a growing diversity in religious belief through their writings. However, while many of these writings appear to substantiate growing tolerance of diverse religions in America, interestingly, they focus primarily on Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish faiths rather than including a discussion on the role of other faiths such as Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism in America. While these scholars briefly acknowledge these other religions, the focus of their work seems to revolve around Judeo-Christian practices. Cimino and Lattin note the sort of diversity that does exist but that seems to be diminished in many scholarly discussions concerning religion in America. They quote an “interfaith leader in Chicago” who addresses the true religious

diversity of the city by stating, “In the Chicago area there are more Muslims than Jews, more Thai Buddhists than Episcopalians. There are 80,000 Hindus attending seventeen different temples in metropolitan Chicago. That’s the kind of diversity we are talking about.”³⁰ With some notable exceptions (such as the work of Diana Eck and Amanda Porterfield), much scholarly writing concerning contemporary religion in America encompasses the theory of performative religious tolerance by constructing scholarly books about religious tolerance written primarily from the dominant Judeo-Christian perspective.

In addition to the Judeo-Christian focus of much religious scholarship, various social indicators illustrate how a pluralist attitude is performed in contemporary American culture. The debate over prayer in public schools and the dates of public school vacations continue to uphold Christian ideologies as dominant in a country founded on religious freedom. The debate over prayer in school encompasses the concerns of those who fear Christian prayers will be forced upon non-Christian children or children who may not practice any religion at all. The moment of silence, which was the compromise settled upon by many states, appears to promote a tolerant attitude by avoiding a specific religious association with prayer; however, it still rests upon the assumption that all children pray, which is not necessarily the case. In addition, public school vacations have illustrated tolerance through a superficial name change while still upholding the traditional dates of school vacations. Although the rhetorical change from “Christmas break” to “Winter break” appears to promote religious tolerance and an awareness of non-Christian beliefs, the fact remains that public school vacations (winter and spring) fall on or near the Christian holidays of Christmas and Easter.

Perhaps the most significant manifestation of performative pluralism is found through elements of popular culture. The multicultural make-up of the United States remains superficially acknowledged specifically through television and Hollywood films. The lack of genuine acknowledgment is illustrated not only by the token number of non-white characters, but, more covertly, by the lack of religious diversity. While many television programs and films appear to encompass a multicultural religious perspective, a close analysis reveals a superficial acknowledgement of multiculturalism that camouflages the Christian ideologies remaining dominant in American culture. Although political discourses remain ecumenical throughout the year by mentioning “God” rather than making specifically Christian references to “Jesus”, the annual television program “Christmas in Washington” overtly portrays the President and his family celebrating the birth of Christ. The “Christmas in Washington” program began in the Johnson administration and was originally broadcast on NBC, yet over the past three years the program has been broadcast on the cable channel TNT. The majority of the program, which is an annual fundraiser that benefits the Children’s National Medical Center, is devoted to celebrity and non-celebrity performers who sing traditional Christmas songs, both religious and secular, including “Santa Claus is Coming to Town” and “Joy to the World.” The last few moments of the program, however, are dedicated to the President’s speech which is often filled with Christian rhetoric. In 1997 President Bill Clinton expressed thanks to the Children’s National Medical Center by saying:

We revel in their excitement. We rejoice in their growth. We renew our pledge to help them make the most of their God-given gifts. It all began with the miracle of a child, born in a manger, who grew to teach a lesson of peace that has guided us for 2,000 years now. It continues to light our journey toward a new century and a new millennium. Every child is a miracle, and it is for their futures that

we must all dedicate ourselves to work for that universal, timeless vision of peace in every nation, in every community and, most important, in every heart.³¹

When Clinton speaks of “a lesson of peace that has guided *us* for 2,000 years...in every nation,” he appears to be encompassing not only America, but also the world through Christian discourse. This rhetorical assumption that Jesus’ teachings guide the world illustrates the dominance of Christian ideologies in American culture. Although the President strives to remain religiously tolerant in public throughout the majority of the year, this program presents the leader of America and his family as Christians. Although many Americans celebrate diverse religious holidays, Christmas is the only holiday which the nation is invited to watch the President celebrate on television.

“Christmas in Washington,” the debate over prayer in school and public school vacations are all social indicators contributing to the authority of Christianity in American culture. While ideologies are changing due to diverse religions that are challenging Christian dominance, Christianity maintains its power through hegemonic negotiation. It is able to do so by superficially acknowledging these counter-ideologies while covertly incorporating them into the dominant ideologies and promoting Christianity as the primary belief system in America. By doing this it is insinuated that America is “a Christian nation”, a concept which is highly disputable and imagined.

Intolerance for Atheists and Agnostics in Contemporary American Culture

Although a performative pluralism may exist for diverse religions, an overt intolerance exists in American culture for atheists or agnostics. What appears to be significant throughout the debate of the move toward a pluralist, multicultural society, is the insistence on some form of religious belief. While many Americans may be

becoming more tolerant of other religious faiths, they remain highly intolerant of atheists and agnostics. Diana Eck addresses the association of religious non-belief and Satanism in American culture. In her discussion of Paganism she argues, “Most people have no idea about the spiritual ecology of American Paganism, a path that emphasizes humans’ intimate dependence upon the Earth and its ecosystems. People tend to identify Paganism with broad negative strokes, classifying it with Satanism and their worst stereotypes of witchcraft.”³² These associations are also applicable to atheist and agnostic beliefs illustrated through the assumed Christian dichotomy that if one does not believe in God, one must believe in Satan.

Many Hollywood films also take note of this intolerance towards atheists and agnostics. For example, in the majority of the films examined for this project including Dogma, City of Angels, Michael and Leap of Faith, a lost soul is saved by a divine presence and becomes a believer in God by the film’s resolution. These films do not leave room for a successful, happy life as an atheist or agnostic. In fact, in Hollywood as in American culture at large, such “unbelievers” are often associated with Satanism. In Dogma, those who do not believe in God, such as Azrael (Jason Lee), are portrayed as associates of Lucifer. This film also illustrates the necessity of having a belief in God through Serendipity’s telling dialogue line, “It doesn’t matter what you believe, just as long as you believe.” Each of the characters in the film believes in something, and the possibility of credible atheism or agnosticism is non-existent in this film. Even one of the most controversial Hollywood products of the 1990s, a film protested by numerous religious groups, rests on the assumption that everyone must believe in God. This line expresses the paradox that lies at the heart of much religious discourse in contemporary

America that celebrates religious freedom and diversity while simultaneously reinforcing the essential nature of religious belief.

Keeping the Faith and City of Angels are two very different films which contain very similar messages about religious pluralism in America. Similar to Dogma, both films deny the validity of an atheist or agnostic interpretation of the world. In both films, the existence of God is undeniable. In addition, they both provide a superficial pluralist attitude toward other faiths which is offset by underlying inclusivist themes and symbolism.

Performative Pluralism in Keeping the Faith

Keeping the Faith addresses numerous issues surrounding religion in the 1990s including the increasing multiculturalism of the U.S., the move toward a more spiritually-based faith rather than a doctrine-based faith, and the trend toward a growing tolerance of non-Christian faiths. While much of the film appears to illustrate the genuine pluralist interaction of diverse peoples and religious beliefs, it simultaneously reinforces the performative nature of these interactions through its inclusivist ideologies. The romantic comedy is set in New York and centers on two best friends, Brian and Jake, who happen to be a priest and a rabbi and their childhood friend, Anna, now a business executive, who re-appears in their lives after sixteen years. In addition to the romantic triangle between the three friends, the film begins by providing an interesting portrait of the multicultural diversity among Christian churches and the numerous other faiths which exist in not only New York, but all over America. However, as the film proceeds the performative nature of this diversity becomes clear.

The film is highly aware of growing multiculturalism and goes to great lengths to represent a New York characterized by religious, linguistic and lifestyle diversity. Jake makes this point directly in a sermon when he says, “We live in a really complex world. A world where boundaries and definitions are blurring and bleeding into each other in ways that, I think, challenge us not just as Jews, but as human beings.” These blurring boundaries and definitions are visually constructed within the first scene of the film through the characterization of a bartender (Brian George). While according to the film’s director, Edward Norton, the bartender was originally written to be a “traditional Irish bartender” he decided to cast a character who is self described in the film as a “Sikh Catholic Muslim with Jewish in-laws.” In noting the diverse cultural backgrounds that are now “blurring and bleeding” together in New York, Norton said he loved the idea of a bartender with such a diverse cultural make-up. According to Norton, “He seemed like the contemporary New York to me.”³³ The film also portrays the emerging linguistic diversity of the American multicuture by containing a scene in which Father Brian conducts confession in Spanish. Brian’s fluency in Spanish illustrates the diverse demographic make-up of his congregation which is indicative of contemporary multicultural New York. Catholics in New York, as well as the rest of America, are not simply English speaking, white Americans, but are people from all over the world who speak many different languages. This scene illustrates Diana Eck’s point that along with new religions which have recently appeared in mainstream America, Christian churches are also diversifying and including people of all cultures.

While on one level the information in this scene foreshadows the struggle with his vow of celibacy that Brian will later encounter, it simultaneously portrays the

multicultural diversity of Brian's congregation. As the young Hispanic boy confesses to having sexual fantasies about women, English subtitles appear as Brian responds in Spanish saying, "It's completely normal to have those feelings. Everyone has them. What is important is what you do with those feelings." As the film progresses, Brian displays similar feelings toward Anna that the young boy has toward other women and must abide by his own advice. The fact that the filmmakers chose to conduct this telling scene in Spanish rather than English illustrates the multicultural make-up of a "contemporary" New York whose verisimilitude the filmmakers wanted to illustrate.

Keeping the Faith also illustrates the interaction between people of a multicultural society through its non-traditional lifestyle characterizations of Brian and Jake that appeal to the diverse demographics of their community. Both men lead attractive, fashionable lifestyles that are signified through their costuming, age and appearance. They are young, attractive men who often dress in fashionable black leather and sunglasses. They do not adhere to the stereotypical characterizations of clergymen. In fact, the film even attributes a celebrity-like status to them. In one interesting scene Brian and Jake walk down a crowded New York street together shaking hands and greeting the crowd surrounding them. This scene, which is shot in slow motion and is underscored by the Carlos Santana/Rob Thomas pop hit "Smooth," attributes a glorified, celebrity-like status to these men by the welcomed recognition they receive by so many people. They are not only well known in their New York community, but are also well liked, and their popularity leads to an interaction between the white clergymen and the people of diverse cultures. These relationships are made manifest through scenes in which Brian and Jake play basketball with a group of young African-American men as well as through Brian's

interaction with a Spanish-speaking congregant. The non-traditional, urban lifestyle constructed for these clergymen allows for a different relationship between Brian and Jake and the community they serve. The two clergy members are not only spiritual advisors to the community, but through their social relationships they also engage in genuine interaction with the multicultural community.

As Porterfield has noted, the increased focus on spirituality and diminished focus on the doctrine of specific religions in the 1990s led to a heightened tolerance of diverse religions and a movement toward a pluralist America. This process is illustrated through the film by ongoing struggles between progressive and traditional clergy members. Keeping the Faith treats two young, progressive clergymen who want to bring their faiths into the 21st century by incorporating non-traditional styles into their religions. One major way in which they do this is through the combination of different religious traditions. Adhering to the trend of mixing Eastern and Western religions which Eck and Porterfield have noted, Rabbi Jake goes to great efforts to include elements of Eastern religions into his services. Within an important sequence in the film is a brief shot of Jake and his congregants engaging in traditional Eastern religious practices by sitting on the floor Indian style while holding hands and chanting in Hebrew. Underscoring the thematics of hybridization in this scene are brief measures of Indian-sounding music while Jake is overheard shouting, “Feel the prana.” The sequence continues with Brian’s voiceover discussing how he and Jake plan to “kick the dust off their faiths” and “bring them up to speed with the times.” They attempt to challenge traditional religious practices by incorporating new forms into their traditions to move away from exclusivist and inclusivist attitudes toward a pluralistic understanding of religious diversity.

In addition to incorporating Eastern traditions into his services, Rabbi Jake also invites the Harlem gospel choir to the synagogue to sing the traditional Jewish song, “Ein Keloheinu.” Although the incorporation of an African-American gospel choir in a Jewish service is celebrated by Jake, the elder clergy members on the synagogue board are “not thrilled” with Jake’s more progressive attitudes. Jake feels that his ministerial style is “pushing people to grow and expand,” and to bringing some enjoyment to what he has characterized as dry, traditional religious services. However, Jake’s mentor, Rabbi Lewis, points out that, “Tradition is not an old habit. It is comforting to some people.” This sequence is characteristic of the struggle which exists many within synagogues and churches between traditional and progressive clergy as well as traditional and progressive congregants. Throughout the film, the two younger, more progressive clergymen push the “higher-ups” to evolve with an ever-changing society. Jake’s goal is to give his congregants, “An old-world God with a new-age spin.” In pushing for change, Jake and Brian attempt to challenge the traditional nature of their institutions. An additional way these two friends push the limits is by creating a joint Jewish/Catholic senior center where members of the two faiths can interact together. The conclusion of the film portrays the success of the center signified by dancing, singing, and genuine interaction between members of each faith, including the elder clergy members. Jake and Brian appear to have succeeded in convincing their more traditional superiors that an interfaith center as well as genuine pluralist interaction is a key element to keeping contemporary organized religion vibrant in American culture.

The film also illustrates the trend toward the spiritualization of religion in contemporary America by showing how spiritual discourses underwrite the performed

pluralism of contemporary churches and synagogues. This is illustrated during one of Father Brian's first sermons in the film when he discusses the difference between faith and religion. He distinguishes between the two when he says, "It is very important to understand the difference between religion and faith. Faith is not about having the right answers. Faith is a feeling, is a hunch, really. It is a hunch that there is something bigger connecting it all together, connecting us all together. And that feeling, that hunch, is God." Father Brian says these words after he has "quizzed" his congregation about biblical specifics by asking them to list the seven deadly sins. While on the surface, this scene appears to emphasize spirituality over doctrinal religion, what is of significance in this scene is the manner in which a spiritual discourse is used to lead the congregation back toward the importance of doctrine. Although the sermon appeals to broad spiritual beliefs, the biblical context of the sermon indicates that the spiritual discourse is limited to a Christian perspective. While on a superficial level the spiritual discourse of a "hunch connecting us to God" illustrates a pluralist religious perspective, a deeper analysis of this scene reveals the reinforcement of a traditional, doctrine-based inclusivist religion.³⁴

The beginning of Keeping the Faith illustrates the growing pluralist attitude associated with Catholicism and Judaism in contemporary American culture, however, as the film progresses it seems to backtrack on the promotion of pluralism. The film presents a love triangle between Brian, Jake, and Anna which introduces extremely problematic issues between each man and his faith. Brian must struggle with his love for Anna and his vow of celibacy to the Catholic church, and Jake must struggle with his love for Anna and his congregation's expectation that he marry a Jewish woman. Jake has stressed to Anna the pressure put upon him to marry a Jewish woman not only by his

synagogue, but also by his mother. Jake dates Jewish woman who are clearly coded as wrong for him, yet although he and Anna appear to have a strong relationship it must be kept secret because she is not Jewish. As Jake explains to Anna, “It might be hard for you to accept, but the fact that you are not Jewish is a real problem for me.” The resolution of the film first appears to construct a pluralist and more progressive portrayal of religion, yet as it develops, the scene shifts directions and reinforces a traditional inclusivist attitude through its construction of romantic coupling. Brian chooses to remain a priest (incidentally, he seems to choose the church over Anna because she doesn’t love him, not because he doesn’t love her. When speaking with his mentor, Brian says, “If she had kissed me back I would have given it all up”). Jake, on the other hand, does choose to be with Anna despite the fact that she is not Jewish. At this point in the film Jake’s decision appears to confirm religious pluralism within the synagogue, however, Anna soon reveals to him that she has secretly been taking classes taught by Rabbi Lewis and will soon convert to Judaism. The resolution of this film illustrates that pluralism is acceptable in the form of friendship (Brian and Jake’s relationship), but not through marriage or romantic coupling (Jake and Anna’s relationship). Although the film promotes the social interaction of differing religious beliefs, Anna’s conversion illustrates the importance of a unified religious belief especially within marriage. While on the surface the film seems to promote the possibility of a successful inter-faith marriage, a closer analysis reveals that religious unity is presented as the likely outcome of a healthy, romantic relationship. Despite the statistical evidence which Roof provides indicating the rise of inter-faith marriages in contemporary American culture, Keeping the Faith reinforces an inclusivist perspective on inter-faith marriages through Anna’s conversion.

In addition to Anna's conversion to Judaism, it must be noted that while this film appears to promote a pluralist society, the film celebrates the bringing together of two faiths (Catholicism and Judaism) that, when compared to other religions in America such as Islam or Hinduism, have had a longer history of acceptance in America. Although Eck acknowledges that anti-Semitism does still exist in American culture, she quotes Leonard Dinnerstein who argues that after WWII anti-Semitism became a fringe activity: "As Leonard Dinnerstien put it, the tide of anti-Judaism began to ebb. The full knowledge of Hitler's atrocities made anti-Semitism disreputable and gradually confined to a 'lunatic fringe.'"³⁵ She also argues that the election of John F. Kennedy "was a critical turning point in laying many [Catholic] stereotypes to rest" such as the subservient attitude of Catholics to the Pope's authority.³⁶ While historically these two faiths have struggled to gain equality within a Protestant-dominated country, in contemporary America they have evolved into accepted faiths. According to Eck, "Catholics and Jews were pioneers in dealing with the religious prejudices of America."³⁷ This film could have promoted a more meaningful statement about pluralism if it had depicted a clergy member in a less accepted religion in America such as Hinduism or Islam. Ironically, the screenwriter's first concept for this film was centered on a Catholic priest and a Muslim on a trip together to Mecca. He is quoted, however, as saying, "That was just too ridiculous."³⁸ Does this statement mean that it was too ridiculous for Hollywood executives to support, or too ridiculous for American audiences to believe or does it mean that it is too ridiculous to even occur? According to Diana Eck, the interaction between a Muslim and a Catholic may not be so ridiculous. She notes that, "There are more Muslim Americans than Episcopalians, more Muslims than members of

the Presbyterian Church USA, and as many Muslims as there are Jews- that is about six million.”³⁹ Although according to Eck’s statistics, it appears as likely for a Catholic priest to come into contact with a Muslim as a Jew, the filmmakers found this concept “ridiculous” and instead created a story about the friendship of a priest and a rabbi. The genuine interaction between Catholic and Jewish characters rather than Jewish and Muslim ones stems from a desire to define religious practice in America on certain safe ideological terms in which “accepted” faiths retain cultural dominance while “unaccepted” religions remain inferior.

Although Keeping the Faith intentionally celebrates New York’s multicultural make-up, it also, perhaps unintentionally, is characteristic of an inclusivist religious perspective that shapes much of contemporary American culture. Superficially this film promotes the mixing of different traditions and friendly interactions among individuals of different religious beliefs through casting people of diverse nationalities and incorporating Eastern and Western religious traditions into the film. However, it simultaneously portrays characters whose romantic success appears dependent upon the intolerant necessity of marrying within one’s own religion while centering the film on the tolerant interactions of two religions that already find wide acceptance in American culture.

Angel Culture and Christian Symbolism in City of Angels

City of Angels, a re-make of Wim Wender’s 1987 German film Wings of Desire, differs from Keeping the Faith in that it attempts to illustrate religious tolerance on a less blatant level. While the narrative of Keeping the Faith revolves around clergy members and their desire to bring people of differing religious traditions together, City of Angels

attempts to encompass a variety of religious faiths by focusing less on religious doctrine and more on spirituality. Yet in a manner similar to Keeping the Faith, the surface of the film presents a pluralist attitude, while on a deeper, symbolic level, its themes reinforce the dominant Christian ideologies of American culture. City of Angels does this specifically through its construction of angels whose surging popularity in the 1990s contributed to the spiritualization associated with a performative pluralistic attitude in American culture.

The sudden interest in angel iconography in the 1990s infiltrated numerous popular culture outlets from films to television to music. The rhetoric of protection associated with angel culture in the 1990s and its claims to buffer individuals from a chaotic world was illustrated through the popularity of “guardian angel” pendants worn by many Americans to “ensure” safety in everyday experiences. A large number of films in the 1990s including Michael, The Preacher’s Wife, Dogma, Angels in the Outfield, A Life Less Ordinary, and City of Angels also based their narratives on the protection and/or saving of human characters by angels. In addition, the fascination with angels in the 1990s was also illustrated through television dramas such as “Touched by an Angel,” daytime programming such as “The Oprah Winfrey Show” which designated an “Angel Network” of caring good Samaritans, popular music such as the country music hit, “Angels Among Us” and even advertising campaigns such as the Victoria Secret Angel campaign. According to “Angels Among Us,” a 1993 Time article, “If there is such a thing as a universal idea, common across cultures and through the centuries, the belief in angels comes close to it.”⁴⁰ The article states that angels exist not only in Christianity, but also in Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Islam and Judaism. Because angels

transcend religious doctrinal distinctions, the inclusion of angels in Hollywood films appears to indicate a pluralistic attitude toward differing religious beliefs in America by adhering to broader spiritual values. However, this tolerance exists primarily on a superficial level. As City of Angels illustrates, the Christian symbols and connotations in the film diminish the superficial pluralist attitude presented through its usage of angels.

City of Angels appears to be a film which takes note of growing religious tolerance and diversity in American culture. Because it makes no overt mention of Jesus or other Christian dogmas, and focuses its narrative around an angel (Seth, played by Nicolas Cage), the film appears to encompass a variety of faiths and religious beliefs. In addition, the film filters its religious content through a love story between Seth and Maggie (Meg Ryan). Because the film is a romance, the religious themes are not the primary focus of the narrative. The film does not present overtly religious doctrine, therefore, it encompasses a wider audience of both religious and non-religious viewers. However, under the guise of this love story are highly coded Christian themes and symbols that superficialize the film's themes of pluralism and diversity.

The film most clearly depicts Christian ideologies through its presentation of Seth as a Christ-figure. Seth's primary purpose in the film is to comfort Maggie in her time of "despair," specifically by guiding her towards a belief in God. Maggie clearly states that she does not believe in God or an afterlife, yet after she is unable to save a patient on her operating table in a "textbook case" where she "did everything right" she begins to question her beliefs. After the death of her patient Maggie says to Seth, "I used to think I had it all figured out...then something happened in my O.R. and I got this jolt, I got this feeling that there is something bigger than me out there." Through Seth's discussions

with Maggie about life, death, and “the enduring myth of heaven,” Maggie slowly begins to find her faith in God. Seth explains to her that the patient who died “is living, just not the way you think.” When Maggie denies her belief in God, Seth responds, “Some things are true whether you believe in them or not.” These early discussions between Seth and Maggie characterize her as a lost soul who is clearly in need of being “saved.” The film depicts Maggie’s “lostness” when she returns a library book which Seth has given to her. As Maggie returns the book (Hemingway’s A Moveable Feast), she stands below a banner that advertises the works of “The Lost Generation” (a group of writers in Paris in the 1920s of which Hemingway was a part). By positioning Maggie under this banner, the film indicates her need to be saved, openly attributing a lost status to her by comparing her lost soul to the lost generation writers.

While the film has illustrated how Seth is Maggie’s “savior” through dialogue, his Christ-like characteristics are constructed visually through his “fall” from celestial existence to humanity. He stands atop a Los Angeles skyscraper and slowly extends his arms perpendicular to his body into a cross-like image symbolizing the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. This scene is elongated through slow motion as the camera encircles him and follows him through the entire “fall.” Although this “fall” creates a “death” of his celestial existence, Seth is “resurrected” into a new life as a human being. Similar to Christ, Seth has come to earth to ensure another’s salvation. Through her relationship with Seth, Maggie gains a faith in God. Therefore his “fall,” even though it is an act of free will, can be interpreted as a sacrifice or a “death” of celestial existence so that Maggie’s lost soul may be saved. Just as Jesus was crucified on the cross so that others might receive salvation, so does Seth’s Christ-like “fall” symbolize a death of one

existence and a resurrection of another which, in turn, leads to Maggie's salvation. The characterization of Seth as a Christ-figure indicates that he is not an angel from any other religion, but that he is specifically a Christian angel.

The Christian symbolism is furthered through the use of a water motif that is symbolic of the sacrament of baptism. This motif is evident throughout the film, but appears specifically during and after Seth's "fall." During the "fall," a series of images appear on screen from what appears to be Seth's subconscious flashing his future before his eyes, one of which is an underwater shot of Seth swimming in the ocean. On one level this image is used within the narrative to denote that Seth, as a human, will now be able to feel the water on his body (these angels have no sense of touch). Yet, symbolically, the water illustrates a baptism washing away his past life and signifying the beginning of his new life as a human. While this first water motif existed within Seth's mind, it is presented again shortly after Seth's fall when he is caught in a rainstorm. Standing in a downpour, with no shelter and nowhere to go, Seth is baptized into humanity.

Maggie's transformation from faithless to faithful is portrayed clearly in the scenes which lead to her death. Soon after Seth has become human and he and Maggie have made love for the first time, she is tragically killed in a bicycling accident. Maggie's last bike ride is extremely important when compared with her first bike ride earlier in the film. When Maggie is first introduced she is seen riding her bike through the polluted, crowded city on her way to work. Her purpose in this ride is to avoid the traffic and make it to work on time, and the sequence characterizes her as an extremely busy person who is concerned primarily with working rather than enjoying life.

Comparing this ride with her final ride to the market illustrates Maggie's transformation in the film from non-believer to believer. During Maggie's last ride, which takes place in the remote countryside far removed from her busy lifestyle in the city, she notices her beautiful, peaceful surroundings. An aerial wide shot opens this scene revealing the blue sky, green trees and shimmering lake surrounding Maggie as she rides. This ride illustrates the new found joy in her life which Seth has brought her not only through his love but also through her faith in God. Through her relationship with Seth (who is connoted as a Christian angel), Maggie has become a Christian, and this Christian faith has given her a new perspective on life. After Maggie's faith has been rekindled, she no longer hurries through life, but has a new found love for it and takes the time to enjoy the beauty around her.

Maggie's faith is also signified through her Christian-encoded death. Just before her life is suddenly ended, Maggie slowly extends her arms in a Christ-like manner, lifts her head toward the sky and closes her eyes. This body language not only mirrors Seth's "fall" to earth, but also symbolizes both characters' faith in God. Seth's role in guiding Maggie to her new found faith is made manifest by crosscutting Maggie's Christ-like body positioning with Seth. As Maggie slowly extends her arms, the film cuts to Seth who creates the same Christ-like symbol with his body. As Maggie and Seth both extend their arms the image of Christ on the cross is invoked illustrating the strong Christian influence of this film. It is of extreme significance that Maggie creates this cross-like symbol immediately before she dies. This signifies that she not only believes in God, but because she believes in a Christian God she will be rewarded with a Christian afterlife. Although angels may exist in numerous religions, Seth is clearly coded as a Christian

angel and therefore, Maggie receives her salvation through Christianity. Maggie's faith makes the tragic ending of the film less tragic because she is no longer a lost soul, but has found love and faith through guidance from Seth. As Maggie moves toward the visually constructed bright, white light of heaven she acknowledges her new found faith when she says to Seth, "I am not afraid."

Conclusion

The religious implications of City of Angels and Keeping the Faith are symptomatic of the performative pluralistic attitude that shapes the paradox which exists in American contemporary culture. Although both of these films superficially acknowledge a pluralist America through either the spirituality associated with angels or the multicultural make-up of contemporary society, their underlying themes reinforce dominant Christian/Judeo-Christian values. While on the surface progressive steps are being made toward becoming a more tolerant society, America remains an inclusivist rather than pluralist country. By avoiding discussions of doctrine, the trend toward more spiritual topics and the mixing of Eastern and Western religious practices as well as an intensified multicultural dialogue which has led to egalitarian religious work policies appear to illustrate a progressive movement toward a pluralist society. However, social factors such as public school vacations and cultural artifacts such as popular Hollywood films are clear indicators of the dominant Christian ideologies that permeate American culture. Despite the increasing diversity of religious and non-religious practices in American culture, many elements of contemporary society uphold the dominance of Christianity and reinforce the myth that America is a "Christian nation."

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- ¹ Bhikhu C. Parekh, Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000) 146-147.
- ² Gerd Baumann, The Multicultural Riddle: Rethinking National, Ethnic, and Religious Identities (New York: Routledge, 1999) 23.
- ³ C.W. Watson, Multiculturalism (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2000) 2.
- ⁴ Parekh 338.
- ⁵ Peter Brooker, A Concise Glossary of Cultural Theory (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 144.
- ⁶ Diana Eck, A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001) 4.
- ⁷ *ibid.*
- ⁸ *ibid.* 1. Although Eck's work focuses on religious diversity in contemporary America, she argues that religious diversity is not a new concept, but that this diversity is now affecting a much larger portion of America's population. In her 1993 book, Encountering God, she states, "what is new today is not the diversity of our religious traditions nor the task of interpretation. What is new is our sharply heightened awareness of religious diversity in every part of our world and the fact that today everyone- not just the explorers, the missionaries, the diplomats, and the theologians- encounters and needs to understand people and faiths other than their own." See Diana Eck, Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) 43.
- ⁹ Eck Encountering God 178.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.* 168.
- ¹¹ Eck, A New Religious America 54.
- ¹² Eck, Encountering God 169.
- ¹³ *ibid.* 168.
- ¹⁴ *ibid.* 178.
- ¹⁵ *ibid.* 185.
- ¹⁶ Although most Christian Americans continue to uphold an inclusivist attitude, it is important to note that a small step has occurred toward becoming a pluralist country. The fact that other religions are acknowledged if even only on a superficial level illustrates the evolution of America from a primarily exclusivist culture to an inclusive one. Where religious diversity once referred to the differences among Christian denominations or the debates between Protestant and Catholic beliefs, today non-Christian faiths as well as non-religious people factor in the spectrum of religion in America. According to Eck in A New Religious America, "As long as religious diversity meant Methodists, Congregationalists, Southern Baptists and Catholics, or as long as it meant, at the most, Christians and Jews, the issues were not so troubling and the tension not so palpable." While the broadening of the meaning of religious diversity may complicate religious issues and tensions in American society, the acknowledgement, albeit superficial, of non-Christian and non-religious beliefs illustrates a small move toward a pluralist society.
- ¹⁷ Eck, A New Religious America 30.
- ¹⁸ *ibid.* 2.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.* 320.
- ²⁰ *ibid.* 355.
- ²¹ Wade Clark Roof, A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journey of the Baby Boom Generation (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993) 228.
- ²² *ibid.* 229.
- ²³ *ibid.* 167-168.
- ²⁴ Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean, American Cultural Studies: An Introduction to American Culture (New York: Routledge, 1997) 107.
- ²⁵ Eck, Encountering God 150.
- ²⁶ Porterfield, Amanda, The Transformation of American Religion: The Story of a Late Twentieth Century Awakening (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 40.
- ²⁷ Eck, Encountering God 153.
- ²⁸ Marianna Torgovnick, Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1996) 172-173.
- ²⁹ Eck, Encountering God 151.
- ³⁰ Richard Cimino and Don Lattin, Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998) 123.

³¹ This speech appeared in a press release from The White House Office of the Press Secretary dated December 14, 1997, and was found on www.clinton6.nara.gov/12/1997-12-14-remarks-by-the-president-at-christmas-in-washington.html.

³² Eck, A New Religious America 301

³³ Edward Norton and Stuart Blumberg, Keeping the Faith: DVD Commentary (New York: Touchstone Pictures, 1999).

³⁴ It is interesting to note that this “faith is a hunch” sermon was taken from an actual priest when Norton was researching the role of Brian. During the DVD commentary, Norton relates that this was not a fictional sermon written for the screenplay, but was instead given in a real Catholic church, by a real priest, to a real Catholic congregation. The information provided by this commentary further substantiates the claim that this film is closely related to the realities of social life.

³⁵ Eck, A New Religious America 61.

³⁶ *ibid* 302.

³⁷ *ibid*.

³⁸ Norton and Blumberg DVD Commentary.

³⁹ Eck, A New Religious America 2-3.

⁴⁰ Nancy Gibbs, “Angels Among Us,” Time, 27 December 1993: 56-65.

CHAPTER 4

“FAMILY VALUES” IDEOLOGIES AND SCENARIOS OF GENDER IN CHRISTIAN-THEMED HOLLYWOOD FILMS

The struggle for gender equality has been a gradual process which remains ongoing in contemporary American culture. While it is true that many advances have been made toward women's equality, American culture remains deeply patriarchal, and patriarchal authority is perhaps most evident within organized Christianity. This chapter analyzes the struggle for gender equality in both secular society and Christianity arguing that the progressive steps of feminism in secular society, although quite limited, are much less evident in organized Christianity. The rise of feminist theology combined with greater frequency in the ordination of women in many denominations appears to indicate a move away from Christian patriarchal authority; however, these small advances have contributed to an even greater backlash from the New Right which has countered feminist ideologies specifically through the formation of gender exclusive groups such as the Promise Keepers and more generally by promoting traditional gender roles through “family values” ideologies. The intensification of Christian dominance in contemporary American culture perpetuates patriarchal authority embedded in Christian ideologies within a broader secular society.

The backlash made so visible by the New Right, has infiltrated other areas of American culture, notably popular culture. Because of the patriarchal ideologies embedded in Christianity, Hollywood films with blatantly Christian narratives are less likely to challenge patriarchy than films with secular narratives. In a softer, less obtrusive manner than the New Right exhibits, many 1990s popular Hollywood films with Christian themes reinforce traditional patriarchal ideologies by portraying women who choose a subordinate role because they realize that they “need” the guidance and support of a man to ensure true happiness. Although much contemporary rhetoric emphasizes gender equality, gender roles are socially constructed and learned primarily from example, and the examples provided by popular Hollywood films reinforce traditional patriarchal ideologies through female choice rather than male imposition. This chapter analyzes the patriarchal ideologies of Leap of Faith, Keeping the Faith, City of Angels and Dogma as symptomatic of women’s struggle within religious and secular society for equality.

Feminism in Secular Society and Christianity

The struggle for equality of women in a patriarchal world has been ongoing for decades. According to authors Joseph Martos and Pierre Hegy, “Patriarchy entails the inherent injustice of perpetually unequal treatment of the sexes, not to mention the myriad injustices and insults that derive from the abuse of power.”¹ The feminist struggle to break free from patriarchal injustices has led to gradual shifts in the roles now available to women in American culture. With the advances of the nineteenth and early twentieth century women’s suffrage movement, the demand for women in the workplace during World War II, and the numerous advances associated with the 1970’s feminist

movement, women have achieved significant gains toward equality in secular society. It is legal for women to vote as well as pursue occupations other than the traditionally feminine professions of housewife, mother, nurse, teacher and clerical worker. In the 1990s, while still somewhat rare, it was no longer abnormal to find women holding successful white-collar positions as doctors, corporate executives, or lawyers. Despite the advances of women in contemporary culture, a truly egalitarian society is not yet upon us. According to Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Although women’s employment has significantly expanded in the prestigious professions, they are still the minority. Women’s work continues to be clustered in the traditional female professions and service areas.”² In addition, while women may hold the same positions as men, their salaries tend to be drastically lower. A 2002 New York Times article noted the growing gap between male and female managerial salaries stating, “In entertainment, communications, finance, insurance and retailing...the gap between men and women grew by as much as 21 cents for every dollar earned.”³ While theoretically women can pursue and succeed at almost any profession, many elements of American culture reinforce the patriarchal structure of society in which women are subordinate to men.

While advances for women are evident, although partially enacted in secular society, a greater struggle exists for women within the bounds of organized Christianity. According to Gaile M. Pohlhaus, “Churches as institutional organizations are usually slow to accept changes, and some are slower than others.”⁴ Because of the patriarchal ideologies embedded in Christianity, many churches have not matched the advances that have existed for women in secular society. In addition, the feminist changes within secular society simultaneously highlight the unchanging patriarchal bias of Christianity.

Authors Martos and Hegy argue, “The visibility of sexism in organized religion is heightened today by the relative decline of sexism in secular society. The bulk of organized Christianity is therefore at odds with the stated (if not always lived out) ideology of contemporary Western culture in the area of sexual justice.”⁵ Because of the strong patriarchal bias of Christianity, it becomes more difficult for women to gain equality in churches than in secular society.

Author Harriet Baber proposes a reason for this gap between feminist advancement in secular society and organized Christianity. She argues, “It seems likely that the church as an institution at the local level tends to be more socially conservative and more sex-segregated than the larger society in part because it is a voluntary organization: individuals who cannot or will not operate within the existing parameters of the institution are more likely to leave the organization or become inactive than to work for change, so the status quo tends to perpetuate itself.”⁶ While the voluntary status of Christian churches may be a possible factor contributing to the perpetuation of patriarchy, the debates surrounding female ordination and the rise of feminist theology appear to counter the implication of a feminist failure to activate change in churches.

Female Ordination

The role of women in churches is one of the most debated issues in contemporary Christianity. The changes brought upon American society with the second wave feminist movement have been noted through reported statistical increases in attitudes surrounding women’s leadership in contemporary American churches. The Gallup organization has recently recorded a dramatic rise in the acceptance of women’s leadership in churches, reporting that 71% of Americans favor having women as pastors, ministers, priests, or

rabbis in their own faith or denomination as opposed to 42% who favored it in 1977.⁷ According to authors Cimino and Lattin the number of women enrolled in seminaries has drastically increased. They report that, “In six of the nine seminaries of the Graduate Theological Union, women now outnumber men, and they are closing in on the Southern Baptists and Roman Catholics- the last vestiges of patriarchal ministry.”⁸ However, this reported acceptance of Americans does not match what is truly occurring in churches. These authors also argue that an increase in women with theological degrees has not triggered a rise in female clerics. It remains somewhat rare for women to be offered positions within Christian churches, and even more unusual for them to become senior clergy. Women who gain employment within ecclesiastical institutions are often given more traditionally feminine, nurturing positions such as music, youth, or children’s minister, or they receive employment outside of religious institutions such as pastoral care or chaplaincy positions. This is not to argue that, in comparison, secular society is an egalitarian utopia. However, women have a greater opportunity to work in secular fields than in certain branches of organized Christianity. Although in secular society it is illegal to deny job opportunities based strictly on gender, this is not the case for many religious professions where gender is often the primary qualification.

Women began entering seminaries in the 1960s, yet the ordination of women has been much more sporadic. While Methodist Protestants have been ordaining women since the nineteenth century, most denominations began ordaining women with the rise of the second wave feminist movement. In 1956 the Presbyterians U.S.A. and the Methodist Episcopal church began ordaining women, and in the 1960s and 1970s women were ordained into leadership positions within the American Lutherans, the Lutheran

Church in America, and the American Episcopal church.⁹ In contrast to the many denominations which have accepted the role of female leadership, there are still Christian denominations that do not allow the ordination of women. The Southern Baptist Convention and the Roman Catholic Church, two of the largest denominations in America, continue to exclude women from clergy positions. As recently as 1994 Pope John Paul II banned discussion of ordaining women in the Catholic Church, although it is allowed for women to be “spiritual directors,” or one-on-one religious tutors in Catholicism.¹⁰ Similarly, in 2000 the Southern Baptist Convention also formally took a firm stand against the ordination of women as senior pastors.¹¹ Into the late 1990s both the Southern Baptist Convention and The Roman Catholic Church have clearly acknowledged their positions against female leadership in churches, yet this public decision has caused many debates and separations within churches. For example, many “moderate” Southern Baptist churches have split from the Southern Baptist Convention on points of dissent including the ordination of women. In the late 1980s many congregations split to form the Alliance for Baptists, in 1991 the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship was founded and most recently, in 2000 the Texas State Baptist Convention withdrew from the SBC due to its disagreement with its strict fundamentalist beliefs.¹² While these splits indicate a shift in attitude of some churches toward female ordination, Christian institutions remain empowered to legally discriminate against women.

Feminist theology

With the rise of the second wave feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s grew the development of feminist theology, an area of study that has challenged traditional patriarchal Christian ideologies with the purpose of overcoming the inferiority of women

in Christianity and secular society. While an in-depth theological discussion is beyond the scope of this project, it is important to briefly note this advancement in the study of Christianity which, as we shall see, has influenced the ideologies of some Hollywood films as well as the construction of gender in American culture. Many feminist theologians assert that the negligible representations of women in the Bible combined with the patriarchal belief in God the Father, reinforces a sexist culture in which women are deemed inferior to men. Harriet Barber argues, “It could be that the use of the masculine pronoun to refer to God, and the imagery of Fatherhood and Kingship, colors the way in which men and women view themselves and one another,”¹³ while Robert C. Fuller notes that, “the symbols, myths, and metaphors of [Christianity] largely reflect the experiences of men.”¹⁴ While some feminist theologians seek to destroy these sexist ideologies by attempting to transform a predominately patriarchal religion into an egalitarian one, others, such as Mary Daly reject Christianity altogether arguing that it cannot be redeemed from patriarchy. Daly proposes that to overcome oppression women must reject the concept of a male God as well as the biblical notion of the hierarchical universe that is constructed by dualities such as good versus evil, spiritual versus worldly, and male versus female.¹⁵ She argues that, “as long as God is male, men will be Gods,”¹⁶ and by challenging the patriarchal authority of Christianity women may overcome the inferiority imposed upon them and reach true equality.

This chapter will address two specific key points of feminist theology in relation to the film Dogma. These key points are the incorporation of gender inclusive language within Christianity and the rejection of a patriarchal conception of God. Increasing numbers of “liberal” congregations have utilized non-specific gender language by

changing the rhetoric of hymnals, prayer books, and lectionaries from androcentric to more inclusive language.¹⁷ Dogma provides an interesting filmic portrayal of this debate by constructing characters who refer to God equally through masculine and feminine pronouns.

The promotion of gender inclusive language in churches has been coupled with the challenging of the patriarchal image of God that has contributed to the belief in the inferiority of women. One of the manners in which feminist theology has sought to re-examine the patriarchal nature of Christianity is by taking note of biblical evidence that refutes patriarchal biases. While for years patriarchal Christianity has defended the inferiority of women by providing specific biblical references that appear to support female subordination, feminist theologians have similarly noted passages that support gender equality such as, “There is no male and female for all of you are one in Jesus Christ” (Galatians 3:28). In addition to noting these biblical passages, feminist theologians have also addressed the gender construction of God. This an exceedingly complicated debate in which some feminist theologians put forth an image of the Goddess, while others debate the existence of an androgynous God, and others promote a notion of God that is free from human gender constructions.¹⁸ Despite the variances in the debate surrounding the gender of God, the subversion of patriarchy underlies each of these arguments. Dogma takes note of these various images of God by constructing a God whose gender is not coded as clearly male or female, but is ambiguous. Through casting, dialogue and costuming, Dogma incorporates many aspects of feminist theology into its narrative that enables a critique of patriarchy non-existent in the additional films analyzed for this project.

The incorporation of feminist theology into Christianity allows for greater progression towards gender equality in a patriarchal dominated society. According to Bridget Walker in “Christianity, Development, and Women’s Liberation,” feminist theology encourages women to reclaim their faith by arguing, “men have used religion to serve their patriarchal purposes, but there is a more woman-friendly tradition to be reclaimed. Feminist theology takes as its starting point the search for women’s identity, grounded in women’s own experience, rather than in the forms imposed by a patriarchal culture. This leads to personal and social transformation.”¹⁹ At the same time that many denominations were lifting the ban on female ordination, feminist theology contributed to a new understanding of Christianity through its promotions of gender inclusive rhetoric and a non-patriarchal image of God.²⁰

A Backlash Against Feminism: The Regaining of Patriarchy Through Gender Exclusive Organizations and “Family Values”

The advances of second wave feminism and feminist theology beginning in the 1970s were met with a backlash that celebrates the traditional patriarchal ideologies of female subordination and male authority in both Christian and secular society. Ruether takes note of the backlash associated with feminism by arguing, “The victories of the women’s movement soon inspired a backlash that used those issues to mount a multifaceted assault on progressive politics and social change.”²¹ This backlash contributed to a popular longing for a more masculine Christianity as well as a reinforcement of traditional family values. As feminist theologians attempt to gain equality for women within patriarchal Christianity, counter ideals exist which posit that Christianity is an overwhelmingly feminine religion that must provide a more masculine approach in order to rekindle male participation in churches. In Touchstone, the monthly

magazine of the Fellowship of St. James in Chicago, the authors argue that churches should, “establish more vigorous programs for boys...emphasize male responsibilities in church and Sunday school curricula...[and] particularly emphasize the Fatherhood of God and its implications to young men. They are intended to head families.”²² According to this magazine, because women attend church more frequently than men churches are already “feminized.” Therefore the concerns of feminism must be disregarded in order to promote a solely patriarchal Christianity which the editors believe appeals to men.²³

One of the most significant promotions of masculine Christianity in the 1990s has been the all-male organization, The Promise Keepers. Founded in 1990 by former University of Colorado football coach Bill McCartney, the Promise Keepers is a non-denominational evangelical Christian organization whose agenda is to “hold men to promises to be sexually monogamous husbands and responsible fathers in Christian marriages.”²⁴ One of the most significant debates surrounding the Promise Keepers is its exclusivist nature that promotes the subordination of women and the “headship” of men. In an article discussing the Promise Keepers USA Today Magazine author Edd Doerr argues, “As an exclusively men’s movement, and one that encourages male dominance, it is viewed with concern or even alarm by feminists and champions of the fights of women, who still earn less than men, bump their heads on glass ceilings, and are grossly underrepresented in lawmaking and policymaking bodies.”²⁵ While gender separation has always existed within Christianity, whether illustrated through Catholic priests and nuns or in Protestant gender-segregated Bible studies and Sunday school classes, there may be signs that the rising influence of women in churches is correlated with greater gender separation.

While all-male Christian organizations such as the Promise Keepers perpetuate patriarchy through “family values” ideologies, it is also important to take note of the all-female Christian organizations simultaneously contributing to gender separation in churches. Despite the attempt of feminism to overcome the inferior position of women in American culture, not all women feel that patriarchal ideologies should be challenged. In fact, many believe that their proper place is in the home, and female Christian organizations such as the Promise Reapers²⁶ exist primarily to promote the patriarchal constructs of Christianity by supporting members of their male counterpart organization, the Promise Keepers. The rise and popularity of such gender exclusivist groups such as the Promise Keepers and Reapers promote even greater gender separation within Christianity by using religion as a rationale for female subordination and in doing so creating a religion constructed through gender hierarchy.

One of the most significant issues surrounding the Promise Keepers is their promotion of “family values.” A broad shift has occurred in contemporary Christianity from concerns of doctrine to concerns of morality in contemporary American culture. Christians have begun to categorize themselves by their ideological beliefs rather than by specific doctrinal beliefs and in doing so have crossed denominational lines. Many Christians are no longer as concerned with the distinctions between Protestant and Catholic as they are with broader cultural issues such as abortion and homosexual rights. These debates encompassing broader cultural conflicts have come to be understood as the “culture wars.”²⁷ According to Diana Eck, “Our battle lines in the culture wars over issues like homosexuality, the family, education and moral relativism cut straight across Methodist, Lutheran, and Catholic churches and through Jewish communities as well,

attracting partisans to one side or the other.²⁸ One of the major battles of the culture wars is the debate over the role of the family in contemporary American culture in which the nostalgic desire of many Christians to return to the idealized model of the “traditional nuclear family” characterized by male headship and female subordination is promoted.

The “family values” debate is not an exclusively religious issue. Elements of secular society such as politics and popular culture often promote the traditional nuclear family as the ideal model in American culture.²⁹ However, the root of these ideologies is almost always based on Christian teachings. In Wade Clark Roof’s discussion of the interaction between the family and religion he argues, “In the case of the United States, religion and family have long been viewed as working together in a voluntary religious order to ensure the maintenance of beliefs and values in society through moral and religious socialization of the young.”³⁰ Due to the connection between family and religion, many Christians believe that a change in family structure will result in a decline in religious values. According to Roof, “The symbolism of religion and family has long been closely intertwined, with religious beliefs and sanctions shaping norms of sexual practice, marriage, and child-rearing. These teachings on family life are at the core of Judeo-Christian religious heritage.”³¹ While it is doubtful that an ideal nuclear family model ever truly existed in American culture, a nostalgic desire for this familial model and the assumption that it will solve the majority of America’s problems lies at the heart of the “family values” campaign. Roof argues that:

The very definition of what constitutes family is itself up for debate and what was at one time looked on as a normative, mutually supportive relationship for religion and family is hardly so anymore. Not surprisingly there has been much inflamed rhetoric about “family values” and the rise of family-based ideologies in recent decades. So much flux, too, fans a good deal of lingering nostalgia for a 1950s-style, Norman Rockwell

United States where family life is thought to have been better ordered. Moreover, such imageries perpetuate, as sociologist Penny Long Marler points out, a “nostalgic church,” one lost in the 1950s, she says, caught between family fiction and family reality.³²

While the nostalgic family myth is promoted by the Christian Right as the solution to the majority of America’s hardships, it is hardly attainable for the majority of American families. According to Rosemary Radford Ruether, “The efforts of the Christian Right to hark back to a nostalgic myth of male breadwinners and full-time housewives are becoming evermore unrealistic both culturally and economically.”³³

Despite the fact that the “family values” ideal is virtually unattainable, a more significant criticism is found through its patriarchal ideologies. Although in reality numerous types of families (including single-parent, divorced and homosexual families) constitute American culture, the family values debate champions one family model, that which is based on male headship and female subordination.³⁴ Ruether argues that the family values ideologies are, “generally coded messages about women and how they should behave in relation to men...inspired by the assumption that women have departed from their proper role in the family through some recent corrupting influence and must be persuaded and/or coerced back into that role by a combination of insistent propaganda (by religious and political leaders) and political policy.”³⁵

As was previously mentioned, Hollywood films in the 1990s have, whether intentionally or not, incorporated “family values” ideologies that have broadened the backlash against feminist advances from the New Right to the larger movie going public. In his article “Home Alone Together: Hollywood and the ‘Family Film,’” Robert C. Allen notes the emergence of a ‘family film’ in the 1980s and 1990s characterized by Hollywood’s desire to “maximize marketability and profitability across theatrical, video,

licensing and merchandising markets by means of what we might call cross-generational appeal.³⁶ These films including Home Alone, Hook and Jurassic Park were not only cross-generational money makers, but also adhered to the ‘family values’ ideologies that were simultaneously becoming a “central concern in American politics and public policy.”³⁷ Although the films analyzed for this project may not be considered ‘family films,’ they are examples of popular Hollywood films that promote ‘family values’ ideologies through more ‘adult oriented’ narratives. With the exception of Dogma, all of the films analyzed for this study maintain traditional “family values” ideologies that reinforce patriarchal authority through a backlash against homosexuality and/or feminist developments. The remainder of this chapter will analyze how these Hollywood films reflect patriarchal ideologies through their portrayal of the roles of women and homosexuals in secular and Christian society. The last section of this chapter addresses the more subversive ideologies of Dogma that represent a glimmer of hope for gender equality within contemporary American culture.

The Backlash Against Homosexuality in 1990s Popular Hollywood Films about Christianity

One of the major issues at stake in the “family values” debate is homosexuality. Members of the Christian Right argue that homosexuality is wrong not only because they believe that “God founded the order of Creation that mandates monogamous heterosexual marriage as the only legitimate context in which sex may take place,”³⁸ but also because homosexuality challenges the structure of the traditional nuclear family that the Christian Right so strongly supports. Although homosexuality may be considered one of the most controversial and debated issues in American culture, it remains largely avoided by many popular Hollywood films. And when homosexuality does appear it often tends to avoid

gay sexuality by constructing gay characters as props and punchlines. Two films in this study address homosexuality, Keeping the Faith and Dogma, and while they only briefly touch on the issue, the ideologies exhibited by pertinent scenes are strikingly similar to the anti-homosexual beliefs of “family values” supporters. Keeping the Faith first makes mention of homosexuality in a brief montage section of the film in which Father Brian describes how he and Jake have turned an “abandoned gay disco into a joint Catholic-Jewish senior center/karaoke lounge.” The visuals accompanying this voiceover reveal a brief shot of Father Brian visiting an ill gay man and his partner in the hospital. Nothing more is mentioned about this couple, but instead the issue of homosexuality is displaced by a progressive discussion of multiculturalism. Although it can be assumed that because Brian is visiting a gay couple that he is not homophobic, the construction of an ill gay character simultaneously carries the implication that gay culture is dying out. Despite these implications, the film avoids taking an overt stand on the issue of homosexuality by displacing it with a narrative of multicultural tolerance.

The film circles back briefly to the issue of homosexuality when Anna questions Brian about his vow of celibacy. Anna, finding a sex-free life incomprehensible, asks Brian repeatedly if he is gay to which he answers, “No, no, no, but if I was the rules would be the same.” Again, the discussion of homosexuality is quite brief, yet extremely significant. Brian’s immediate and repeated denial of homosexuality carries connotations that homosexuality is an undesirable lifestyle for him. Yet even more interestingly, the exchange between Brian and Anna insinuates Anna’s assumption that because Brian is celibate, he must be gay. Anna’s tone when she asks Brian, “Are you sure?” implies that she believes no heterosexual “normal” male could give up sex. However, it is more

feasible for Anna to understand Brian's vow if he were a homosexual attempting to deny his sexual orientation. Because Brian tells Anna that he is a heterosexual, she finds his decision to live without sex "amazing" and "admirable."

Similar to Keeping the Faith, Dogma also constructs a very brief yet telling portrayal of homosexuality through its characterization of Jay (Jason Mewes). Impressed with Rufus' (Chris Rock) omniscience, Jay asks Rufus to reveal something about Jay that no one else knows. Rufus responds by announcing Jay's darkest secret, that he has sexual fantasies about other men. What is significant about this scene is Silent Bob's disgusted reaction to the information about Jay's homosexual fantasies. Bob's disgust is signified by his negative facial expression which causes Jay to partially deny the accusation of homosexuality by saying he doesn't fantasize about men all of the time. Bob's horrified reaction carries homophobic connotations that the film leaves unaddressed. It is noteworthy that even a film which is quite subversive in its challenging of racial and patriarchal ideologies reinforces the conservative belief that homosexuality is abnormal and should be denied.

In each of these situations the brief mention of homosexuality does not blatantly characterize it as an unacceptable lifestyle, but connotes it as an activity which must be suppressed either by avoiding the issue through displacement or by presenting it as something shameful which should be denied. By not blatantly acknowledging homosexuality or by constructing it as abnormal, these films reinforce the ideologies associated with "family values" that idealize the heterosexual family consisting of a male head of household and a female subordinate.

Women in 1990s Popular Hollywood films: A Reinforcement of Patriarchy through Female Choice

In addition to the negative representations of homosexuality in these films with Christian themes, the patriarchal bias of Christianity is reinforced through the character portrayals of women and the choices they make to ensure happiness. Although patriarchal ideologies also exist in films without Christian narratives and characters, Christian-themed films are less likely to provide a challenge to those ideologies due to the highly patriarchal nature of Christianity. These patriarchal ideologies are reinforced blatantly through the portrayal of an exclusively male clergy and covertly through the construction of female characters that choose a life path that accepts rather than challenges patriarchal ideologies. One of the major manners in which patriarchy is reinforced in these Christian-themed Hollywood films is through the non-existent portrayal of female clergy. Although recent statistics indicate that female ordination is gaining acceptance by the American public, these films continue to portray clergy as an exclusively male profession. Of the six films analyzed for this project, only Dogma presents female leadership within Christianity, and even this film does not do so through portrayals of the clergy. Despite the fact that females outnumber men in many seminaries, leadership in organized religion remains strictly patriarchal in these films.

In addition to the blatant lack of female clergy in these films, patriarchal ideologies are also reinforced in more covert manners. With the exception of Dogma, all of these films construct a female protagonist who feels in some way incomplete until she has a man in her life. Although the majority of these women have successful careers, true happiness is only attainable with successful romantic coupling which often requires the sacrifice of that career. While female characters have long sacrificed their own desires to

ensure happiness in patriarchal society, a change has occurred in the way that patriarchal ideologies are reinforced in contemporary Hollywood films. While women's subordinate role in patriarchy was at one time constructed as an imposition upon women, contemporary patriarchal ideologies are now more likely to be masked through the illusion of female choice. Contemporary Hollywood films celebrate female characters that choose traditional roles within the patriarchal system.

Keeping the Faith epitomizes contemporary patriarchal ideologies through its construction of Anna, a high-powered business woman who chooses a romantic relationship over her career. Throughout the film Anna is denoted as a workaholic who has no time for relationships and, at least in the beginning of the film, appears perfectly content with her hectic, professional lifestyle as is indicated by her description of her job as "good, very good." Brian attempts to describe her career to Jake by saying, "She's like analyzing synergies or synergizing analogies or some such thing. I couldn't follow it. She's like this very high powered business, you know...woman." Brian's hesitation here is revealing of the gender politics at work in this film. Although Anna is an extremely successful corporate executive, Brian's loss of the appropriate word to describe her signifies his uncomfortable association with the term "business woman." Anna's professional success is signified by her dialogue through lines such as, "I work harder than God. If he had worked for me, he would have made the world by Thursday." Anna is never apart from her cell phone, is constantly working or on call, and is often on the phone yelling at her co-workers, who all happen to be men, about what they have done wrong. In order for Anna to be successful, the film portrays her as ruthless, and this ruthless behavior causes Jake to be genuinely amazed over the respect Anna receives

from her co-workers. After observing Anna interacting with her co-workers at a party Jake says with awe, “Those guys love you. They really respect you. It’s amazing. You should be running that company.” Jake’s amazement at Anna’s success is telling of the sexist ideologies the film constructs of corporate America. It is “amazing” that Anna’s male co-workers respect and love her not because she is an outstanding supervisor, but because she is a woman. It is assumed that as a female she should be looked down upon rather than respected.

Despite Anna’s professional achievements, as the film progresses and she and Jake begin to spend time together romantically, her outlook on her career gradually begins to shift. In a conversation with Jake’s mother she says, “You know, as a woman, on your own trying to make your mark what do you do with that victory energy at the end of the day? I mean, don’t you want someone to share it with?” This sort of dialogue illustrates the beginning of Anna’s transformation away from her high-powered, successful career toward a patriarchal, submissive relationship with Jake. While there is nothing overly patriarchal about longing for a romantic connection with another person, Anna’s desire for Jake leads her to sacrifice her own career advancements and personal beliefs in order to ensure a successful relationship with him. Although Anna has been offered a promotion to run the San Francisco division of her firm, she decides that she would rather put in for a transfer to New York and remain in her current career position so that she may be near Jake. In contemplating her life choices she says, “What is scary is when you spend ten years going after things you thought were important, get those things, and then feel a sneaking suspicion that you went after the wrong things and that where the important things are concerned, you’re still an idiot.” This piece of dialogue

epitomizes the reinforcement of contemporary patriarchal ideologies constructed through female choice. Through her professional achievements Anna has successfully challenged the patriarchal confines of the corporate world and has become a respected superior to many men. However, after challenging patriarchy she realizes that what she really wants and what is truly important is found within patriarchy rather than outside of it. Anna chooses to sacrifice her career to ensure the only true happiness that is deemed available to women in patriarchal society.

The film goes a step further in the sacrifice Anna that makes in order to be with Jake. In addition to giving up her career advancements, Anna also chooses to convert to Judaism. While the film does not reveal what, if any, religion Anna believes in, her conversion to Judaism appears to be quite a simple choice for her. In fact, her religious study is compared to other classes she has taken such as taekwondo and kickboxing. The film does not explore the magnitude of this decision, but instead trivializes it by presenting it as an easy decision which Anna makes to ensure her coupling with Jake. Anna has completely altered her lifestyle to ensure romantic coupling while Jake's life has remained unchanged. Throughout the film Anna has transformed from a high-powered, independent business woman to a (we assume) soon-to-be rabbi's wife.

What is important in the film's staging of neotraditional female decision making is that Jake never asks Anna to give anything up. He is happy for her when she receives the promotion and encourages her to take it by saying, "This is everything you have worked for, right?" The film constructs Anna's decision to give up her career promotion as a choice that she makes, not as a decision imposed upon her by patriarchal society. Jake also does not assume that Anna will convert to Judaism and is surprised by the news

that she has done so. All of Anna's sacrifices are constructed as choices that she makes on her own. Anna could have chosen to accept her promotion or to enter an inter-faith relationship with Jake, yet the film constructs Anna's true path to happiness by the adherence to patriarchal ideologies.

Within the constraints of patriarchal culture the option does not exist for Jake to sacrifice his career for the success of a romantic relationship. Despite the fact that Anna's income probably triples Jake's salary, his patriarchal role is to be a provider, and the possibility of Jake sacrificing his career to move to California to be with Anna is non-existent. The only way for Jake and Anna to stay together is for Anna to choose to give up her professional successes and convert to Judaism. The film presents Anna with the burden of sacrificing her career and lifestyle to be with Jake, yet this burden is presented as a simple, desirable choice.

Anna's conversion to Judaism and the sacrifice of her career are telling not only of patriarchal ideologies in secular society but also within Christianity. With the obvious exception of Catholicism, the strong connection between "family values" and Christianity appears to create an assumption in American culture that a proper spiritual leader needs to have a family. This is illustrated throughout Keeping the Faith by the insistence of Rabbi Jake's congregation on finding him a proper Jewish wife. Because this film centers around the romantic relationship of a clergy member, the patriarchal ideologies are less likely to be challenged by the film's outcome. To reinforce traditional, patriarchal Judeo-Christian ideologies, Anna must choose to sacrifice her career in order to become the proper "rabbi's wife."

Leap of Faith also illustrates that true happiness for a woman is found within the confines of patriarchal authority through Jane's choice to be with Will at the film's resolution and his guidance in leading her toward a more acceptable, Christian lifestyle. Throughout the film Jane's "need" for a man is a repeated element of the narrative. Near the beginning of the film Jonas takes note of her desire for companionship by telling her, "Jane, I gotta get you a man. You have been on the road for too long." Despite the fact that neither Jonas nor Jane is involved in a romantic relationship, Jane is characterized by her need/desire for a man while Jonas is content being single. From the beginning of the film, the patriarchal norms of the independent man and the subordinate woman needing male guidance and companionship are reinforced.

As the film progresses, both characters experience a transformation in which they realize that their manipulative lifestyle is not the best path for them to follow. Although the film focuses the majority of its attention on the transformation of Jonas, Jane also encounters a transformation of her own. However, the manner in which each undergoes transformation illustrates the patriarchal ideologies at work in this film. As was noted in chapter two, Jonas finds his redemption through a personal experience with God after he has witnessed a genuine miracle, yet Jane's transformation occurs primarily through her romantic relationship with the town sheriff, Will (a clear personification of patriarchal authority). Jane's responsibility is to flirt with the sheriff so that he does not interfere with the revival's success, but in her attempt to stop Will from exposing Jonas as a fraud she falls in love with him. Through their relationship Will leads her to abandon her manipulative lifestyle and settle down with him in Kansas. Will's role in guiding Jane away from her previous lifestyle is made clear as he and Jane take a romantic walk

together in the cornfields. Jane asks Will, “I know you think I am crooked, so why did you ask me here?” to which he answers, “I knew you were worth saving.” This dialogue illustrates Jane’s need in patriarchal society to be “saved” by a man. Her transformation from a “crooked” lifestyle to a more acceptable one is made possible only by settling into a submissive role in the confines of a patriarchal relationship.

The cinematography of Leap of Faith romanticizes the slow, natural, domestic world in which Will lives in contrast to Jonas’ fast, flashy, neon-lit revival world. A pivotal scene near the end of the film in which Will asks Jane if she is interested in ever “settling down” visually constructs Will’s lifestyle as one which could also be desirable for Jane. The scene begins with a high angle wide shot of tree branches blowing in the breeze with Will’s large, white home in the background. Jane is sitting on a white tree swing talking to Will as he rubs her feet. This scene ends with Jane and Will walking to a nearby field that is filled with thousands of butterflies who, according to Will, “end up back here with the same mate year after year.”

The photography, setting, and dialogue in this scene construct Will’s home as the site of a much more appealing lifestyle than the “flashy” revival world in which Jane has lived for so long. This scene ends with Will taking note of the contrast of these two lifestyles by saying to Jane, “I’m not a flashy guy, but I’d like to make you some promises.” Although Jane does not yet choose to settle down with Will, the construction of this scene makes it evident that this domestic lifestyle is her chance to achieve true happiness.

This film illustrates the difference in the transformations of Jonas and Jane through crosscutting techniques in its final scenes. Although the realizations of their

fraudulent lifestyles have been somewhat gradual for both characters (for Jane through her relationship with Will and for Jonas through his interaction with Boyd) throughout the film, the catalyst for their transformations is the genuine miracle they witness as Boyd begins to walk. This event leads both of them to choose to leave the revival, however, where they go is quite significant. Jane goes to Will's home where they make love for the first time, in a symbolic enactment of her choice to settle down with him. At the same time scenes are crosscut of Jonas packing his clothes and hitching a ride with a truck driver out of town. Both characters have decided to abandon their fraudulent lifestyle, yet the resolution of the film insinuates that Jane's future happiness is guaranteed only through a romantic, domestic relationship with Will, while Jonas will be happy moving on through life independently. Both of these characters transform from a life of fraud and manipulation to an honest, Christian mode of living, yet this film adheres to patriarchal ideologies which stipulate that a woman's happiness is found through romantic coupling while a man's happiness is found through independence and freedom. Although both of these characters have participated in fraudulent Christianity, Jane's religious transformation comes through her relationship with Will and her choice to become romantically involved with him, while Jonas's religious transformation comes through his personal relationship with God. Through the comparison of the religious transformation of these two characters, the film insinuates that within the confines of patriarchal Christianity, a woman needs a man not only to ensure true happiness, but also for spiritual guidance and morality.

Both Keeping the Faith and Leap of Faith reinforce patriarchal ideologies by constructing a domestic, romantic lifestyle as the ideal, though not exclusive, choice for

women. Both Anna and Jane sacrifice a vital part of who they are to ensure romantic success while Jake and Will's lives remain unchanged. Anna sacrifices her career and Jane sacrifices her independence, but each chooses to do so for what the films portray as a better life.

Family Values Ideologies in City of Angels

As was discussed earlier in the chapter, the "family values" ideologies associated with the Christian Right in American culture have broadened into the realm of popular Hollywood films. In addition to the 'family films' noted by Allen, numerous other 'adult oriented' films reinforce the traditional patriarchal ideologies found through the romanticizing of the traditional nuclear family. City of Angels is one of these films, which through its Christian symbolism and characterization of Nathaniel reinforces Maggie's desire for a family. Indicating its centrality to the narrative, the subject of "family values" is introduced into the film very early on through Maggie's discussion with a male colleague about his child's first steps:

Colleague: "The kid started walking- three unassisted steps."

Maggie: "Do you have it on video?"

Colleague: "I wasn't even there."

Maggie: "Oh, failed as a father already, how does that feel?"

Although this exchange is presented in a humorous manner, it illustrates the idea that being a successful doctor also carries with it the stigma of being an absent parent. This brief discussion plays as an introduction to the familial themes that are upheld throughout the film, which emphasize the strong promotion of the existence of God and the importance of the family in American culture.

Although Maggie is a single woman with no children, the film characterizes her as a maternal figure. Maggie is a heart surgeon who the film nevertheless repeatedly locates in the pediatric division of the hospital with no professional motivation for doing so. At one point Maggie says she goes to pediatrics to “hide,” yet it appears that Maggie actually uses this department to escape from the stress that she finds in her job as a surgeon. After a patient has died on Maggie’s table she retreats to pediatrics where holding and seeing the children appears to help soothe her pain. Although she is a surgeon, the joy that she finds through caring for children illustrates her proper societal role according to dominant patriarchal ideologies. The film furthers the idea that Maggie’s proper place is working in pediatrics by showing that she has a talent for the field. Although she has recently lost a heart patient in a textbook case, she successfully diagnoses the illness of an infant which no other doctor has been able to determine. This scene illustrates that while Maggie has encountered failure in surgery through her patient’s death, she has found great success in the more maternal characterization of caring for sick children.

This theme of the family is also put forth through dialogue when Maggie says, “I should have gone into pediatrics,” to which her friend replies, “Oh, no, every man you meet is either married or a gyno.” In its suggestion that women’s career choices should revolve around finding a husband, such dialogue trivializes Maggie’s professional identity and sets the stage for her introduction to Seth. Maggie’s maternal instinct is visually constructed by holding and rocking sick infants in the nursery while Seth longingly watches her through the glass. Although Maggie does not have a husband or a family, this scene seems to illustrate that a family is something that she, as well as Seth,

strongly desires. Their familial desire is further portrayed through a slow motion shot of Maggie and Seth walking through the pediatric ward looking at the sick children. Maggie, followed by Seth, watches the children as they play with balloons, sing songs with their parents, and are engrossed in cartoons on the television. These images of the pediatric ward indicate the strong desire for a family which is reinforced in this film.

As Maggie's desire for a family is evident through her visits to pediatrics, Seth's familial desire is made manifest through his "fall." As he falls, he sees flashforwards of his life with Maggie and the family they could have. He sees brief images of Maggie's face, a pregnant woman's bare stomach, children playing and laughing together, and a close up of two hands touching each other. Seth's love for Maggie and the family he believes they will eventually create together causes Seth to deny his existence as an angel and become a human being.

The film most clearly places emphasis on "family values" through the character of Nathaniel Messenger (Dennis Franz), who describes himself as a "former celestial body, new addition to the human race." Nathaniel, because he is a patient of Maggie's as well as a former angel, becomes a sort of middleman between Maggie and Seth. Nathaniel is coded as the ideal family man and serves as a guide for Seth through his decision to "fall" so that he may also gain the joys of family life. He explains to Seth how he can "fall" to earth, but also emphasizes what he will be giving up in doing so. He tells Seth, "Nobody likes to think of the old life that they gave up," to which Seth responds, "Then why did you do it?" Without saying a word, Nathaniel reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a wallet full of photographs of his family and proceeds to tell Seth about his wife Theresa, his daughter Ruth, and his many grandchildren. Although Nathaniel never

answers Seth's question directly, the photographs illustrate that he gave up an existence as an angel so that he could have a family. The film further visually constructs the ideal family life after Nathan's release from the hospital at a homecoming party which Seth and Maggie both attend. At this outdoor cookout, Nathan's grandchildren are seen running, laughing, hugging and enjoying themselves. As the children play with Seth and gather with him for a photograph, Maggie gazes longingly at the family life around her.

The characterization of Nathaniel and the love that he and his family have for one another, combined with Maggie's escapes to pediatrics and the images of family in Seth's "fall," clearly illustrate the idealization of the family this film promotes. It is an idealization that, interestingly enough, creates a vision of the perfect nuclear family as a better life than a celestial existence. This strong focus on "family values" brings the film even closer to the Christian patriarchal ideologies of male headship and female subordination in American culture.³⁹

Dogma: An Attempt at Challenging Patriarchy

While the previous discussions of popular Hollywood films have clearly illustrated how patriarchal ideologies are reinforced through female choice and "family values" ideologies, the subversive nature of Dogma stands apart from the previous films by providing a challenge to patriarchal authority. Although, as previously noted, Dogma appears to reinforce homophobic ideologies associated with "family values," it simultaneously takes a bold step in rejecting the traditional ideals of biblical representations of gender. The film bases much of its narrative around the concepts promoted by feminist theologians by touching on issues of gender inclusive language, the gender of God/divine beings and the traditional gender roles constructed by patriarchy.

One of the most significant ways in which the film challenges patriarchy is through its gender [de]construction of God and other divine beings. Following the teachings of feminist theology, the film rejects the belief in God the Father and creates a God, who throughout the film, is referred to using inclusive language. As the film begins, God is referred to exclusively through traditional patriarchal language. However, as the film progresses, God is gradually referred to using feminine pronouns more frequently. The equal use of masculine and feminine pronouns to address God reflects contemporary feminist debates within Christianity over God the Father which contribute to the broader themes of gender [de]construction and ambiguity in this film. God is referred to in both masculine and feminine language because the film insinuates that God's gender is ambiguous and possibly beyond human gender constructions.

This [de]construction is made manifest through the casting of and dialogue surrounding God, which renders unclear whether God is female, male, both, or neither. The film appears to ground the ambiguity of God's gender in the fact that gender is socially constructed by humans, and therefore it is illogical for God to be constructed by such qualifications. Gender ambiguity is illustrated most obviously through the casting of both a male and female to portray God. Alanis Morissette portrays the body of God while Alan Rickman plays Metatron, the highest choir of angels, who portrays the voice of God.⁴⁰ The reason that the narrative provides for God's duality is because the human ear cannot audibly comprehend God's voice. Because Metatron's voice is accessible to humans, he speaks for God. Yet utilizing members of both genders to portray God also challenges the traditional patriarchal belief in God the Father. In this film, a complete God which humans can both see and hear is unattainable if exclusively male.

In addition to casting both a male and a female actor to portray God, the film also fashions this deity through costuming, make-up and dialogue. All of the creatures' bodies including the angels, disciples, the muse and God are visually constructed as lacking human genitalia. The angel Metatron asserts, "I'm as anatomically impaired as a Ken doll." Throughout the film the angels remove their clothing to reveal genitalia-free Barbie and Ken-like anatomy further rejecting the traditional notion that they are either male or female. The costuming of the body of God (Alanis Morissette) also challenges the human gender construction of God. When God appears on screen he/she is costumed in a white and silver dress, yet as he/she performs a handstand, the dress falls to her/his head revealing a pair of boxer shorts. God appears wearing two distinctive gender specific clothing items, a dress which is traditionally a female's attire and boxer shorts which are traditionally male clothing, illustrating that human gender constructions do not apply to God.

Contributing to the casting and visual construction of the divine beings, the dialogue of the film also illustrates the gender ambiguity which constitutes this film. After Bethany meets God, Serendipity turns to her and responds, "See, I told you she was a woman." Rufus then refutes Serendipity's human gender construction of God by saying, "She's not really a woman, she's not really anything," to which Bethany replies, "She's something, all right." This exchange reveals the film's position that God is neither male nor female, but is something, perhaps genderless- perhaps androgynous, beyond the human imagination. Creating a God whose gender is ambiguous illustrates one of the most important themes of the film which is that while humans attempt to understand God

on their terms, God is something beyond the confines of human construction, beyond human gender and even beyond human auditory capabilities.

The film continues to challenge patriarchal ideologies by breaking gender stereotypes and creating a heroine, rather than a hero, who saves the world. Bethany is chosen because she is the last scion, a direct descendent of Jesus Christ, to help the divine beings prevent two fallen angels from entering a Catholic church, which in doing so would prove God infallible and negate all existence. Bethany rejects traditional female stereotypes through her characterization as an aggressive woman who participates in the film's action and physically fights alongside the men. In addition to her "unfeminine" qualities, Bethany is also constructed as an unlikely choice to help God save the world. She is a single woman who, because she has been left by her husband and cannot bear children, has completely lost her faith in God. Bethany is an unlikely protagonist for a religious film not only because she is a woman, but also because she has lost her faith and works at an abortion clinic. According to the ideologies of conservative Christianity, and most particularly Catholicism, Bethany's "sinful," anti-family values beliefs construct her as the last person who should hold the fate of the world in her hands.

Despite Bethany's independence within patriarchal culture, she feels her life is incomplete. This is perhaps where the subversive elements of the film arguably backtrack. Although she challenges patriarchal ideologies by living on her own, independent of a man, she does not do so by choice. The film makes it clear that Bethany's loss of faith stems from her loss of family and insinuates that if she were able to bear children and her husband had not left her, her "crisis of faith" would not have occurred.

While the absence of a traditional nuclear family appears to have left Bethany incomplete, the resolution of the film partially reinstates patriarchal ideologies allowing for a slight challenge of patriarchy that does not exist in the other films examined for this project. Through Dogma's resolution, Bethany does not find completion in a man, but through reaffirming her faith in God by her personal religious experiences with the angels, prophets, and apostles. Bethany's transformation from an unhappy, lost soul into a joyful, strong, independent woman is constructed by challenging rather than conforming to the patriarchal assumption of romantic coupling. Although Bethany's transformation is not dependent on a man, the film simultaneously reinforces aspects of patriarchy by constructing Bethany's completion through motherhood. As the film concludes Bethany realizes that God's healing touch has impregnated her with a baby girl. While the film still constructs Bethany's primary desire as a woman to be a mother, it also challenges patriarchal "family values" ideologies by allowing her to bear and raise her child, a descendent of Jesus Christ, as a single parent. Bethany is not dependent on the love and support of a man to ensure her happiness, but instead finds happiness within herself.

Unlike the other Christian-themed films in this project, Dogma rejects traditional patriarchal ideologies by challenging the masculine gender construction of God and celebrating a female heroine whose strength and completion is found in God, rather than a man. However, the critique of patriarchy is also somewhat limited. Although this discussion has celebrated Dogma for its subversive qualities challenging the patriarchal ideologies at work in many other Hollywood films, it must be noted that there are elements of this film in which patriarchal authority is exhibited. In addition to its

avoidance of a genuine discussion of homosexuality this film also contains segments such as Serendipity's stripping scene in which women are objectified and portrayed as inferior beings whose purpose is to serve the sexual gratification of men. Dogma is quite similar to The Last Temptation of Christ in that they are both highly controversial films which spawned passionate opposition to their releases, yet both of these films are unable to completely break free from the traditional patriarchal ideologies embedded within Christianity.

Conclusion

Although the developments of feminism have contributed to creating a secular society in which gender discrimination has lessened somewhat, Christianity remains a belief system strongly embedded with sexist ideologies. The backlash against feminist advances has created a reinforcement of patriarchal authority that appears to be increasing through the family values ideologies promoted not only by the Christian Right, but also through popular Hollywood films. While films such as Dogma represent the possibility of gender equality within Christian and secular society, the numerous protests and controversies surrounding the film in combination with its significant problems getting released illustrate the expectation of support for patriarchal ideologies in the majority of Hollywood films. The traditional ideologies in many Hollywood films illustrate a patriarchal authority which is no longer opposed by women, but is desired by them and entered into by choice. Although women now have the legal ability to work outside the home thus ensuring their independence, economically and psychologically, the backlash against feminism has reinforced traditional ideologies which promote patriarchal authority as an ongoing, incontestable social norm.

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- ¹ Joseph Martos and Pierre Hegy, "Gender Roles in Family and Culture: The Basis of Sexism in Religion," Equal at the Creation: Sexism, Society, and Christian Thought, eds. Joseph Martos and Pierre Hegy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998) 5.
- ² Rosemary Radford Ruether, Christianity and the Making of the American Family (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000) 195.
- ³ Elizabeth Baker, "Study Finds a Growing Gap Between Managerial Salaries for Men and Women," New York Times (January 24, 2002): A24.
- ⁴ Gaile M. Pohlhaus, "Catholics and Protestants, Conservatives and Liberals: Christian Marriage Today," Equal at the Creation: Sexism, Society, and Christian Thought, eds. Joseph Martos and Pierre Hegy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998) 143.
- ⁵ Martos and Hegy 19-20.
- ⁶ Harriet Barber, "Feminism and Christian Ethics," Anglican Theological Review 77 (Summer 1995): 335-356.
- ⁷ This figure is based on a 2000 Gallup poll.
- ⁸ Richard Cimino and Don Lattin, Shopping for Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998) 89.
- ⁹ Ruether 153.
- ¹⁰ David Van Biema and Emily Mitchell, "Will a Woman Become Pope?" Time 155 (February 21, 2000): 59.
- ¹¹ Patrik Jonsson, "Baptist Women, Denied Pulpit, Fill Stadiums," Christian Science Monitor 92 (June 7, 2000): 1.
- ¹² Jane Lampman, "Baptists on the Brink," Christian Science Monitor 92 (November 16, 2000): 15.
- ¹³ Harriet Barber, "Feminism and Christian Ethics," Anglican Theological Review 77 (Summer 1995): 341.
- ¹⁴ Robert C. Fuller, Spiritual But Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 88.
- ¹⁵ *ibid* 89.
- ¹⁶ Quoted in Karen Toole, "Spirited Women Re-gender God," Herizons 15 (Fall 2001): 44. For further work by Mary Daly see The Church and the Second Sex (1968) and Beyond God the Father (1973).
- ¹⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, Christianity and the Making of the American Family (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000) 154.
- ¹⁸ For further discussion see Robert C. Fuller's Spiritual But Not Religious, and Rita Gross' Feminism and Religion (1996).
- ¹⁹ Bridget Walker, "Christianity, Development, and Women's Liberation," Gender and Development 7 (March 1999): 19-20.
- ²⁰ Ruether 152.
- ²¹ *ibid* 156.
- ²² Ted Byfield and Virginia Byfield, "The Problem Christians Don't Want to Discuss: Why Are There so Few Men in the Churches?" Report/News magazine (Alberta Edition) 28 (February 19, 2001): 49.
- ²³ According to Touchstone senior editor Leon J. Podles, "Congregations run as high as seven females for every one male." Quoted in Byfield 49.
- ²⁴ Ruether 175.
- ²⁵ Edd Doerr, "Promise Keepers: Who, What, and Why?" USA Today Magazine 126 (March 1998): 30-33.
- ²⁶ The Promise Reapers is a female, evangelical Christian organization whose purpose is to support men's involvement in the Promise Keepers. The fact that an exclusively female Christian organization is devoted to supporting the spiritual development of men rather than women epitomizes the backlash against feminist thinking in contemporary Christianity.
- ²⁷ For a detailed discussion of America's culture wars see James David Hunter, Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America (Basicbooks, 1991).
- ²⁸ Diana Eck, A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001) 31.
- ²⁹ See Ruether's discussion of political policies constructed to support the family in Christianity and the Making of the Modern Family.
- ³⁰ Wade Clark Roof, Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 217.

³¹ Wade Clark Roof, A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993) 225.

³² Roof, Spiritual Marketplace 218.

³³ Ruether 181.

³⁴ *ibid* 3.

³⁵ *ibid* 5.

³⁶ Robert C. Allen, "Home Alone Together: Hollywood and the 'Family Film,'" Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies, eds. Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby (London: BFI, 1999).

³⁷ *ibid*

³⁸ Ruether 173.

³⁹ It is interesting to note that the "family values" ideologies exist exclusively in the Hollywood remake of City of Angels and are not present in Wings of Desire.

⁴⁰ Notice the similarity in the actor's first names, Alan and Alanis. While I doubt that this was intentional (the filmmakers initially wanted to cast Emma Thompson in the role of the body of God), casting two actors with a male and female version of the same name furthers the theme of gender ambiguity associated with God.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis has been to address the media's involvement with the growing influence of Christianity in contemporary American culture and its reinforcement of an increasingly traditionalist neo-conservative ideological climate. Despite the hegemonic authority of a more traditionalist culture, progressive ideologies simultaneously exist in contemporary culture creating a constant struggle between differing beliefs which has led to a hegemonic negotiation that superficially acknowledges more progressive ideologies and then displaces them with traditionalist values. Both progressive and traditional ideologies exist simultaneously in contemporary American culture; however, through hegemonic negotiation traditional Christian ideologies maintain cultural dominance.

Through its interdisciplinary approach, this project has illustrated how the interaction of media and Christianity has contributed to the heightening of Christian dominance in American culture and the reinforcing of traditionalist ideologies. What were once considered highly progressive media and often labeled as the primary contributors to the downfall of America's traditional morals and values have now become some of the most vital outlets used to reinforce Christian hegemony. Popular culture outlets such as television, music and film have not only been reappropriated by Christian producers through networks such as PAX-TV and The Family Channel and films such as The Omega Code and Left Behind, but have also incorporated Christian themes into

secular television shows such as “The Oprah Winfrey Show” and films such as City of Angels and Keeping the Faith. The intensified integration of popular culture and Christianity in the 1990s has illustrated the contemporary manner in which Christianity may retain hegemony even as church attendance declines.

An analysis of social indicators in contemporary American culture reveals numerous suggestions of progressive change, which counter more traditionalist ideologies. Many American Christians are straying away from their churches in search of a genuine personal religious experience and are taking a more active role in their own spiritual development rather than adhering to more passive traditional practices of church attendance that often entail believing in the unquestioned authority of churches. Indications of a move toward more pluralist attitudes of non-Christian religions include the noted increase of interfaith marriages and the mainstreaming of non-Christian holidays such as Ramadan by government officials. In addition, the increase in the number of women enrolling and graduating from seminaries coupled with recent statistical evidence supporting the growing acceptance of female clerics by Christians also appear to indicate a progressive move away from traditionalist Christian values.

However, despite these progressive social indicators, even clearer signs of a desire for traditional Christian values are at work in contemporary culture that counter those progressive advances. Indicators such as public school vacations illustrate the Christian dominance in American culture by consistently falling near Christian holidays rather than incorporating non-Christian holidays into the school calendar. Despite the increasing multicultural make-up of America, television programs such as “Christmas in Washington” provide strong evidence of the dominant Christian traditionalist ideologies

preventing the movement toward a genuinely pluralist culture. A backlash against feminist advances has contributed to a nostalgic neo-conservative outlook that is particularly evident through intensified “family values” ideologies that promote a desire for the imagined traditional patriarchal family in contemporary society. Patriarchal ideologies are illustrated by the unequal treatment of women in the workplace, particularly within Christian churches. The record enrollment of women in seminaries is countered by the fact that they are rarely offered senior ministerial positions and often paid less for the same position. While America has the potential to evolve into a pluralist society where genuine interactions between diverse individuals and egalitarian relationships thrive, traditionalist ideologies hinder this evolution by promoting Christian hegemony and the inferiority of non-Christian beliefs.

This thesis has demonstrated that some of the clearest cultural indicators illustrating the struggle between progressive and traditional ideologies and the ultimate reinforcement of traditional ideologies are to be found in popular Hollywood films. Popular Hollywood films of the 1990s provide insight into the manner in which the broader religious trends of the late twentieth century are at work. While there are progressive signs in American culture, the ideological content of many films, particularly those with religious themes reinforce Christian dominance and traditional patriarchal ideologies. More subversive films such as Dogma and The Last Temptation of Christ attempt a challenge to traditional Christian hegemony, but the highly controversial nature of these films and the attempted censoring of them by evangelist groups indicate the strong intolerance of even a slight challenge to traditional Christian ideologies in American culture. Both of these films are revealing in that neither of them present a full

critique of Christianity. On the contrary, their resolutions reinforce the existence of a Christian God. Each of these films speaks clearly to the struggle between progressive and traditionalist ideologies in American culture. While progressive ideologies exist which challenge more traditional ones, this challenge is indeed limited and almost always overpowered by traditional patriarchal Christianity.

Whether providing a more progressive or traditionalist view, each of the films analyzed for this project addresses contemporary religious trends associated with Christianity in the late twentieth century. These noted trends include an absorption of popular culture in Christian practice, an increase in the importance of the personal religious experience, a heightened debate over the role of female leadership within churches coupled with the role of women in society, and a shift toward a more tolerant attitude of non-Christian faiths. The rise of the personal experience and critique of organized Christianity is evident in the character transformations of Dogma and Leap of Faith where protagonists are shown to be dependent on a personal experience with either God or a religious figure. Neither Bethany nor Jonas find the genuine faith they are looking for through traditional organized Christianity, but rather encounter a spiritual transformation only after their personal experiences. Both of these Hollywood fictions take note of the questioning of traditional organized Christianity and reinforce this shift of religious practice through their major characters.

Many of the films analyzed for this project also take note of the debate surrounding the role of women in Christianity and secular society. Counter-patriarchal ideologies can be located in Christian-themed Hollywood films, but they are few and far between. The majority of the films analyzed for this project reinforce ideologies that

portray women as inferior to men. The role of women in Christianity in these films is virtually non-existent, with the exception of Dogma, which constructs the body of God as female and the film's protagonist as a female descendant of Jesus. Despite the increased female attendance in seminaries in contemporary culture, none of the films examined for this project cast females as clerics, reinforcing the patriarchal dominance of church leadership.

The portrayal of women in Leap of Faith, Keeping the Faith, and City of Angels reinforces patriarchal ideologies in secular society by constructing women whose true happiness in life is dependent on heterosexual romantic coupling. Although many of these characters are extremely successful in their professions and some (notably Keeping the Faith's Anna) appear content throughout much of the film being single, they each choose to enter romantic relationships to ensure complete fulfillment in their lives. As previously mentioned, Dogma presents a challenge to patriarchal ideologies by constructing a protagonist, Bethany, who does not find completion in her life by choosing romantic coupling, but by finding strength and faith within herself from her personal experience. However, Bethany's independence from male dominance is slightly countered by her ultimate desire to be a mother. While slight patriarchal critiques offered through the representation of Bethany are small indications of potential cultural change, they remain exceptions to the vast majority of films that reinforce patriarchal ideologies of women in American culture.

Lastly, many of these films also address the trend toward a heightened tolerance of diverse religious beliefs in American multicultural society. While the dominant reading of Keeping the Faith appears to celebrate the multicultural diversity of New York

City, a negotiated reading reveals the performative pluralism of the film through its underlying inclusivist ideologies. Although much of the film blatantly promotes interaction between differing religious faiths through Brian and Jake's relationship and the diversity of their congregations, Jake and Anna's coupling at the resolution of the film indicates its actual dependence on an inclusivist rather than pluralist religious framework. The film does not allow for the possibility that Anna and Jake could have a successful inter-faith relationship and equates healthy relationships with religious homogeneity.

Although the contemporary Christian trends noted by scholars of religion were often addressed through fictional narratives of the 1990s, it will be interesting to see how these trends develop throughout the twenty-first century and how Hollywood films respond to them. Although we are only at the dawn of the twenty-first century, upcoming Hollywood films and recent cultural events appear to indicate that Christian hegemony remains largely uncontested. The events of September 11, 2001 appear to have drastically altered the religious landscape of American culture and briefly heightened Christian attitudes towards organized religion and religious tolerance. The numerous televised memorial services, public urging of government officials of Americans to pray and the media's heightened coverage of clergy members who provided spiritual guidance during those tragic times are significant indicators of the culture's longing for and return to traditional organized Christianity. In addition, drastic increases in church attendance were also reported following the events. According to the Seattle Times, "In the weeks immediately following September 11, church pews, synagogue seats and mosque prayer halls were filled as they hadn't been in years. People openly talked about God and

religion, uttered prayers and returned to places of worship they hadn't been inside since childhood."¹ Despite this immediate increase the Gallup organization reported that by the end of 2001 church attendance had tapered back to pre-September 11 levels.² While it may be too soon to observe the broad impact these events will have on Christianity and religion in contemporary American culture, it appears that as the shock of the terrorist events decline, so will church attendance.

In addition to the turn toward organized Christianity, the terrorist attacks simultaneously produced conflicting ideologies concerning religious tolerance regarding American Muslims. After the September eleventh attacks, American Muslim mosques were vandalized while Muslims were warned against wearing traditional dress in public. The verbal renunciation of these violent actions by American government officials combined with their pleas for religious tolerance did not have an effect on the actions of some Americans who blamed all Muslims for the terrorist events. The public tolerance for Muslims posited by the government was countered with a violent intolerance of them for events over which they had no control. Despite the fact that Muslims had been a vital part of the American religious landscape throughout the 1990s, it took a terrorist act associated with Islam to bring American Muslims significantly into the public eye.

Performative pluralism was clearly evident in the interaction between American Muslims and Christians after September eleventh. While on the surface many government and church leaders voiced imperative tolerance, these events publicly brought Americans back into predominantly Christian churches for guidance against the Muslim enemy. A key difference from traditional Christian church services was that Muslim clerics were invited to attend and often participate in these services. However,

what is significant is that less than a year after these services showcased tolerance through Christian and Muslims worshipping together, these images have disappeared from the public realm. The lack of sustained genuine interaction between the two faiths illustrates the performative pluralism of the religious events immediately following the September eleventh tragedy. Less than one year after the terrorist attacks appeared to bring Christian and Muslim Americans together to worship, the apparent genuine interaction between the two faiths has become overshadowed by predominantly Christian ideologies.

Although September eleventh produced clear signs of church revival, the accusations of sexual abuse within the American Catholic Church in spring 2002 have reiterated public dissatisfaction with organized Christianity. This new scandal within noted Catholic churches in Massachusetts, California and New York has become a highly publicized story that has spawned an episode of “The Oprah Winfrey Show” on March 28, 2002, and has constituted “breaking news” on CNN in recent weeks. It remains to be seen whether this scandal will have similar effects on American culture and Hollywood films as the televangelist scandals did in the late 1980s. Even after periods of national tragedy have brought Americans back into churches, social circumstances such as the accusations of sexual abuse in American Catholic churches indicate the waning authority of organized Christianity and its new vulnerability to being displaced by personal religious experience.

Many of the trends of Christianity in late twentieth century America appear to be continuing into the early twenty-first century, and popular Hollywood films from 2000-2002 also address many of the same trends. However, the majority of these films reflect

a shift away from the overt Christian representations of clergy members, God, Jesus, or angels in 1990s films and instead provide more symbolic Christian themes, characters and narratives. Many films of the early twenty-first century construct narratives around the possibility of an afterlife (Dragonfly [2002]), a symbolic Christ figure (The Green Mile [2000], Joshua [2002]), or a redemptive woman of faith (A Walk to Remember [2002], The Other Side of Heaven [2002]). While it is clear that many of these characters are Christian, they are not church leaders or “heavenly beings,” but are constructed as ‘normal’ people. Despite the shift away from overt religious representations, the films of the early twenty-first century share similar narrative patterns and ideologies with 1990s popular Hollywood films that are preoccupied with the need to find faith in a chaotic, uncertain world.

Particularly interesting are the similarities of the recently released film Joshua (release date April 19, 2002) starring Tony Goldwyn to many of the 1990s films examined for this project. The film addresses many of the Christian trends and ideologies of Hollywood films analyzed throughout this thesis such as the emphasis on the personal religious experience, the debate between progressive and traditional ideologies within churches and the strong influence of “family values” ideologies. Joshua is described as a “Christ-like stranger who transforms a small town through acts of kindness and down-to-earth spirituality.”³ Throughout the majority of the film Joshua appears “Christ-like,” yet the film’s resolution asserts that he is in fact Christ. While the majority of these small town citizens attend churches on a regular basis, it is their personal experience with Joshua and his reliance on “spirituality” rather than doctrine that rekindles their faith. Reminiscent of Jonah’s transformation in Leap of Faith,

Joshua's personal interaction with a fraudulent evangelist leads to the minister's transformation from a "phony faith healer into a true believer in miracles."⁴ In addition, the film mirrors Keeping the Faith through its portrayal of the debate between progressive and traditional clergy. The film creates a division between "two priests who believe very strongly in the same thing, but in very different ways,"⁵ and through a personal experience with Joshua each work through their differences and find common ground through their belief. Lastly, the film also adheres to "family values" ideologies through Joshua's success in saving a "housewife's" [Joan] marriage by helping her put "passion and life" back into it.⁶ The patriarchal ideologies of this review are clearly indicated by the reference to Joan as a "housewife" which illustrates that her role in patriarchal society (housewife) is just as, if not more important than her name (Joan) or who she is. Although Hollywood films may be experiencing a slight shift to more symbolic rather than blatant religious figures, Joshua illustrates that they continue to follow contemporary Christian trends and produce Christian themes that reinforce Christian hegemony.

In addition to addressing many late twentieth century Christian trends within its narrative, Joshua represents an appropriate conclusion to this thesis through the culmination of Christian dominance in American culture found through its intertextual connection with television, popular music and politics in the recent television program, "Celebrating America's Musical Heritage- A Salute to Gospel Music." The production of this program brought together many of the elements this project has addressed including the blurring of popular culture outlets with Christianity, Christian dominance in American multicultural society and the integration of politics and Christianity. This is a

program about Christian music, sponsored by a Christian film, broadcast on a (although it does not claim to be one) Christian network and hosted by the President of the United States and his wife. This special aired twice on PAX-TV, a network noted in Chapter two for its emphasis on “family values,” on March 5 and March 7, 2002. In addition, the program also addressed the integration of film and Christianity through the program’s sponsor, Joshua, an “inspirational film” about the possible second coming of Christ. Lastly, this special centered on gospel music and starred many musicians who have blurred the lines between Christian and pop music such as Michael W. Smith and Ce Ce Winans. However, perhaps the most significant indicator of Christian dominance in American culture in the twenty-first century is that President George W. Bush and Laura Bush hosted this program, which celebrates Christian gospel music, at the White House. According to Mrs. Bush in a statement supporting her involvement with this program, “Gospel music’s roots are distinctly American and its message speaks to the ages, uniting people of all backgrounds in one voice of joyful praise.”⁷ The First Lady’s remarks are revealing not only of the Christian viewpoint of the current political administration, they also speak to the belief that though Americans adhere to numerous non-Christian faiths, the Christian message of gospel music can “unite people of all backgrounds.” This program is a prime example of the Christian dominance in American culture that infiltrates popular culture outlets including film, television and music, blurs the lines between politics and Christianity and insinuates the inferiority of non-Christian religions in American culture.

While events in the early twenty-first century appear to be re-shaping the religious terrain in American culture and Hollywood films are shifting from overt to more

symbolic Christian narratives, the underlying ideological implications of Christian hegemony have crossed into the next century. While progressive and traditional ideologies simultaneously exist in American culture, traditional Christian values maintain dominance by camouflaging their ideologies under more progressive popular culture outlets that superficially perform a spiritually based, tolerant egalitarian faith. Despite progressive elements within American culture, it appears the ideologies of “Ole Time Religion” retain hegemonic authority.

While this thesis has been highly critical of traditional Christian ideologies and practices in American culture, it is important to remember that not all Christian beliefs are necessarily equated with a nostalgic longing for traditional patriarchal ideologies. In fact, there are numerous Christians who genuinely support and fight for a pluralist society in which people of all genders, races, sexual orientations and religious preferences live and interact in an equal society. However, the strong influence of the traditional ideologies of the New Right in America’s public sphere overshadows these more progressive views, and the heightened exposure of the New Right allows for more frequent reinforcement of traditional patriarchal ideologies. Christianity itself is not a problematic element in contemporary society. What are problematic, however, are the oppressive, intolerant ideologies that are created and/or reinforced in the name of Christianity. By taking note of the repressive and intolerant ideologies often associated with Christianity, American culture may be able to move away from discriminatory attitudes and one day become a genuinely pluralist culture.

¹ Janet I. Tu, "September 11 Spike In Worship Begins To Fade," Seattle Times, (February 3, 2002), accessed from http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/134399371_churchgoing03m.html.

² *ibid*

³ Paul Lauer, "Joshua: Hope Has a New Name," YOU! Magazine, 2002 [Joshua- The Official Motion Picture Site]; available from <http://www.joshuathemovie.com/reviews.htm>; Internet; accessed 12 April 2002.

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ "Joshua- Synopsis," 2002 [website]; available from <http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/joshua.htm>; Internet; accessed 12 April 2002.

⁷ "About the Show," 2002 [PAX-TV website]; available from <http://www.pax.tx/specials/gospel/>; Internet; accessed 12 April 2002.

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