



IMAGO DEI: GOD IN FILM



Kierkegaard, Woody Allen, and the Secret to Lasting Joy

THE GREAT NINETEENTH-CENTURY PHILOSOPHER Søren Kierkegaard spoke of three stages that one passes through on the way to spiritual maturity: the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious. During the aesthetic stage, a person is preoccupied with sensual pleasure, with the satisfaction of bodily desire. Food, drink, sex, comfort, and artistic beauty are the dominating concerns of this stage of life. The ordinary fellow drinking beer at the baseball game and the effete aristocrat sipping wine in his box at the opera are both fundamentally enjoying the aesthetic life in Kierkegaard's sense. The pleasures of this stage are pure and intense, and this is why it is often difficult to move to the next level, the ethical.

At this second stage, one transcends the preoccupation with satisfying one's own sensual desire and accepts the moral obligation that ties one in love to another person or institution. The young man who finally abandons his bachelor's life and enters into marriage with all of its practical and moral responsibilities is passing from stage one to stage two, as is the soldier who lets go of superficial self-interest and dedicates himself to the service of his country.

But finally, says Kierkegaard, there is a dimension of spiritual attainment that lies beyond even the ethical. This is the religious. At this stage of life, a person falls in love with God, and this means that she falls unconditionally in love, since she has found the infinite object that alone corresponds to the infinite longing of her heart.

For the religious person, even the objects of deepest ethical commitment—family, country, business, etc.—fall into a secondary position. When Thomas More said on the scaffold, “I die the King’s good servant, but God’s first,” he gave evidence that he had passed from the ethical to the religious stage of life. This famous account of the stages on life’s way came to my mind as I was watching Woody Allen’s film *Vicky, Christina, Barcelona*. Like most of Allen’s movies, this one concentrates on the mores and behaviors of the cultural elite: wealthy business executives, artists, poets, and writers. Vicky and Christina are two young New Yorkers who have resolved to spend a couple of summer months in Barcelona. While enjoying a late meal at an elegant restaurant, they are propositioned by Juan Antonio, an infinitely charming painter, who invites the women to join him for a romantic weekend. Despite Vicky’s initial hesitation, they accept. Juan Antonio is a consummate bon vivant, and he introduces Vicky and Christina to the pleasures of the Spanish good life: the best restaurants, vistas, art galleries, music, etc. And then, of course, he seduces both of them. In order not to spoil the movie for you (and to keep a PG rating for this article), suffice it to say that they become involved in a love triangle—and eventually quadrangle. None of the lovers is capable of a stable commitment, and all make appeal continually to the shortness of life, the importance of enjoying the moment, and the restrictions of conventional morality.

What they all do—to varying degrees—is to reduce sexual relationship to the level of good food and music and art; something that satisfies at the aesthetic level. And what makes this reduction possible is precisely the disappearance of religion. All of the players in this film move in the world of the sophisticated European high culture; an arena from which God has been rather summarily ejected. Kierkegaard thought that the three stages are ordered to one another in such a way that the highest gives stability and purpose to

the other two. When a person has fallen in love with God, both his ethical commitments and aesthetical pleasures become focused and satisfying. But when the religious is lost, ethics devolves into, first, a fussy legalism, and then is swallowed up completely by the lust for personal satisfaction.

This film is a vivid presentation of precisely this declension. And the end result of this collapse is deep unhappiness. What struck me throughout Woody Allen's film was just this: how unhappy, restless, and bored every single character is. So it goes when souls that are ordered to God are bereft of God.

There is, however, a sign of hope. As in so many of Allen's movies—*Hannah and Her Sisters* and *Crimes and Misdemeanors* come to mind—religion, especially Catholicism, haunts the scene. At the very commencement of their weekend together, Juan Antonio showed the two young women the sculpture that, in his own words, “inspired him the most.” It was a medieval depiction of the crucified Jesus. It's as though even this postmodern bohemian, this thoroughly secularized sophisticate, realizes in his bones that his life will not hold together unless and until he can fall in love unconditionally. The joy that none of them finds can be had only when they order their aesthetic and ethical lives to the divine love made manifest in that cross of Jesus.



Angels, Demons, and Modern Fantasies about Catholicism

AS I WAS COMING TO THE END of Ron Howard's movie, *Angels and Demons*, I felt like shouting out to the screen, "No, no, you've got it precisely backward!" The central theme of the film, based on Dan Brown's thriller of the same name, is the battle between "science" and Catholicism. It appears as though an ancient rationalist society, the Illuminati, which had been persecuted by the Church in centuries past, is back for revenge. They've kidnapped four cardinals and placed a devastating explosive device under St. Peter's and they're threatening to obliterate the Vatican as a conclave gathers to elect a new pope. To the rescue comes Professor Robert Langdon, a cool agnostic from Harvard, who helps to unravel the mystery after he's given access to the archives to which the Vatican had heretofore denied him access (presumably for his mischief in *The Da Vinci Code*!). As the plot unfolds, and Langdon cleverly uncovers the sinister plot of the scientists, one is tempted to say, "Well, for once the bad guys are the rationalists and the victims are the faithful." Ah, but not so fast (spoiler alert). In fact, we discover the whole thing has been concocted by the evil *camerlengo*, an ultimate Vatican insider, who has revived the old tale of the Illuminati and organized the wicked scheme in order to create a scapegoat against which he could engage in heroic struggle and so engineer his own election as pope! (I swear I'm not making this up.)

Without going into any more of the goofy twists and turns of the story, can you see what prompted my *cri de coeur* about getting it backward? In point of fact, it is not Catholicism that feels the need constantly to revive the struggle between science and the faith, but rather secular modernity—and Ron Howard’s movie itself is exhibit A. There is a stubbornly enduring myth that the “modern” world—especially in its scientific expression—emerged out of a terrible struggle with backward-looking Catholicism. And thus many avatars of modernity feel the need on a regular basis to bring out the Catholic Church as a scapegoat and punching bag, as if to reenact the founding myth. Of course, the central act in this drama is the story of Galileo’s persecution at the hands of the ignorant and vindictive Church, and so Brown and Howard bring the great Renaissance scientist front and center: Langdon is almost suffocated by wicked Vaticanisti while he diligently researches in the Galileo archive, and at the end of the film, a grateful cardinal rewards the intrepid scientist with a long-hidden text of the master. Well.

Though these facts are well known, it appears that they bear repeating. Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas were early advocates of Aristotelian science; Copernicus, the popularizer of the heliocentric understanding of the solar system, was a priest; Gregor Mendel, the father of genetics and a chief forerunner of Darwin, was a monk; many of the founders of modern science—Newton, Kepler, Tycho Brahe, Descartes, Pascal, Leibniz—were devoutly religious men; the formulator of the Big Bang theory of cosmic origins was a priest. Perhaps most importantly, the modern physical sciences emerged precisely in the context of a Christian culture, where the belief in creation and hence in universal intelligibility was taken for granted. And today, the supposedly sinister and anti-scientific Vatican sponsors a number of observatories and supports societies at its pontifical universities devoted to dialogue with the sciences at the

very highest levels. In fact, in November 2014, Jesuit brother and Vatican astronomer Guy Consolmagno became the first clergyman to be awarded the prestigious Carl Sagan Medal “for outstanding communication by an active planetary scientist to the general public.”

Despite the tragedy of the Galileo incident, prompted by the ignorance and in some cases ill will of certain churchmen at the time, Catholicism is not the enemy of science and feels absolutely no compulsion to define itself over against science as though the two are locked in a kind of zero-sum game. It is a longstanding conviction of the Church that since God is one and since all truth comes from God, there can finally be no conflict between the truths of revelation and the truths discoverable through the exercise of human reason. And so the Church rejoices in whatever the empirical sciences uncover and expects no conflict between those discoveries and its own faith, rightly interpreted.

What I found particularly galling about *Angels and Demons* is that Robert Langdon not only solves the mystery but also effectively protects the Church from itself. This, of course, is the modern fantasy in full: “science” emerged from Catholicism after a terrible battle but still has the graciousness and magnanimity to offer its help to its benighted and defeated rival. Ugh! Truth be told, the wound caused by the Galileo incident is being constantly picked open, not by the Vatican, but by representatives of secular modernity; the “battle” between religion and science is now pretty much a shadowboxing affair, radical secularism shaking its fists at a phantom.

Watch *Angels and Demons* if you like a thriller or you enjoy computer-generated images of the Vatican, but please don’t be taken in by its underlying philosophy.



The Stoning of Soraya M. and the Figure of Christ

I FIRST BECAME ACQUAINTED with the barbarism of certain aspects of Sharia law through an article published a few years ago in *The New Yorker* magazine. The author detailed how, in many Middle Eastern countries, Muslim men use the prescriptions in the traditional Islamic legal code to terrorize, brutalize, and in extreme cases, kill women who, they claim, have committed sexual offenses. He specified that some of the victims are put to death by their own brothers and fathers! I remember being appalled by this article, but I confess that its impact was short-lived.

It came roaring back to me the other night when I saw the devastatingly powerful film *The Stoning of Soraya M.* The movie is based on the true story of a young woman who lived in a small Iranian village during the years just following the Khomeini revolution of 1979. Soraya was caught in a dreadful situation: her husband, who beat her regularly and cheated on her, wanted to put her away and marry another woman. When Soraya refused to grant him the divorce, her husband conspired with the mullah of the village, the mayor, and several other men to accuse her of adultery, though she was utterly innocent of the charge. When the accusation became public, Soraya raised her voice in protest, but her complaint carried no legal weight, and the council of the village, composed exclusively of men, condemned her, in accordance with Sharia law, to death by stoning. The depiction of Soraya's execution is overwhelming. She is buried

to her waist and her hands tied behind her back. The first stones are thrown by her own father and by her two pre-adolescent sons. Next, her husband attacks her and then all of the men of the town rain stones upon her, as they chant *Allahu akhbar* (God is great).

Now I realize how dangerous and delicate it is to raise a matter such as this. It is extremely easy to fall into the trap of tsk-tsking and tut-tutting at the objectionable practices of another religion without admitting to the outrages of one's own. I fully admit that the Judeo-Christian tradition is anything but blameless. The most casual glance at the book of Leviticus discloses that ancient Israel certainly accepted a legal code that sanctioned lethal violence—burning and stoning—for various offenses. And I humbly confess that Christians, over the centuries, have done terrible things in the name of Christ: the burning of witches, the torturing of heretics, the slaughter of non-Christians, etc. Nevertheless, the events described in *The Stoning of Soraya M.* are not from ancient history; they took place a few decades ago. And the imposition of Sharia law is a lively issue in a number of countries today. So what do we do with a movie such as this?

I am convinced that, though Christians rarely have lived up to it, there is an ideal at the heart of the Gospel that represents a permanent challenge to the travesty of justice on display in the story of Soraya. As the film came to its bloody climax, I found myself haunted by the story told in the eighth chapter of John's Gospel of the woman caught in adultery. Many of the dynamics of the Soraya narrative are evident in this account: a woman accused of a sexual offense, the formation of an angry mob, the sanctioning of violence through religious authority, the thrill that comes through scapegoating. But then there is the decisive difference. When the religious leaders of the mob—thirsty for blood and confirmed in their

self-righteousness—inquire of Jesus what he would recommend, the young rabbi bends down and writes on the ground. Then he stands up and says, “Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to cast a stone at her” (Jn 8:7). This devastating one-liner causes the elders to drop their stones and prompts the crowd to dissipate like a summer cloud. Jesus doesn’t sanction scapegoating violence; he interrupts it. He demonstrates that God stands, not on the side of victimizers, but of victims. And this divine solidarity with victims comes to its richest expression when Jesus becomes himself an innocent victim of a religiously-sanctioned scapegoating mob.

The French philosopher René Girard has argued that all dysfunctional human societies—from coffee klatches to nation states—are predicated upon the scapegoating mechanism, that is to say, the tendency to find someone or some group to blame. In its shared hatred, the group finds a satisfying, though ultimately unstable, unity. One of my colleagues at Mundelein Seminary has summed up Girard’s insight as follows: “Wherever two or three are gathered, look for victims.” Girard identified the first revelation (*unveiling, revelatio*) of Christianity as precisely this uncovering and de-legitimizing of the scapegoating mechanism, and the second as the manifestation of the God who is friend to the victim.

What particularly gripped me as the movie came to its conclusion was this: Soraya, devout Muslim and innocent victim of mob violence, lying dead in a pool of her own blood, is one of the most powerful Christ figures in recent cinema.



District 9 and the Biblical Attitude Toward the Other

I JUST SAW A REMARKABLE FILM called *District 9*. It's an exciting, science-fiction adventure movie, but it is much more than that. In fact, it explores, with great perceptiveness, a problem that has pre-occupied modern philosophers from Hegel to Levinas, the puzzle of how to relate to "the other."

District 9 sets up the question in the most dramatic way possible, for its plot centers around the relationship between human beings and aliens from outer space who have stumbled their way onto planet earth. As the film gets underway, we learn that in the 1980s a great interstellar spacecraft appeared and hovered over Johannesburg, South Africa. When the craft was boarded, hundreds of thousands of weak and malnourished aliens were discovered. These creatures, resembling a cross between insects and apes, were herded into a great concentration camp near the city, where they were allowed to live in squalor and neglect for twenty some years. In time, the citizens of Johannesburg came to find the aliens annoying and dangerous, and the central narrative of the movie commences with the attempt to shut down the camp and relocate the "prawns" to a site far removed from the city.

Placed in charge of the relocation operation is Wikus van de Merwe, an agreeable, harmless cog in the state machine. While searching for weapons in the hovel of one of the aliens, Wikus comes

across a mysterious cylinder. When he examines it, a black fluid sprays out onto his face, and in a matter of hours, he is desperately ill. He is taken to the hospital, and the doctors who examine him are flabbergasted to discover that his forearm has morphed into the appendage of an alien. Almost immediately, the state officials reduce the suffering man to an object, resolving to dissect him and experiment on him. Wikus manages a miraculous escape, but he is ruthlessly hunted down throughout the film. I promise not to give away much more of the plot. I'll add only this: as his transformation progresses, Wikus becomes an ally of the "prawns" and they come to respect him and to protect him from his persecutors.

With this sketch of the story in mind, I should like to return now to the two philosophers I mentioned at the outset. The nineteenth century German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel taught that much of human history can be understood as the working out of what he called the "master/slave" relationship. Typically, people in power—politically, culturally, militarily—find a weaker, more vulnerable "other" whom they then proceed to manipulate, dominate, exclude, and scapegoat. Masters need slaves and slaves, Hegel saw, in their own way need masters, each group conditioning the other in a dysfunctional manner. Masters don't try to understand slaves (think of the dominant Greeks who characterized any foreigners as barbarians, since all they said was "bar-bar"); instead, they use them. Furthermore, almost all of history is told from the standpoint of the masters, and mastery is the state to which all sane people aspire.

Emmanuel Levinas, a twentieth-century Jewish philosopher whose family was killed in the Holocaust, reminded us how the Bible consistently undermines this master/slave dynamic, since it recounts history from the standpoint of the other, the outsider, the oppressed. Levinas argued that Biblical ethics commences, not with philosoph-

ical abstractions about the good life, but with the challenging face of the suffering “other.” The prophets of Israel consistently remind the people that since they too were once slaves in Egypt, they must be compassionate toward the alien, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan. In the faces of those “others,” they find the ground for their own moral commitments. They compelled the people not to adopt the attitude of the master, but to move sensitively into the attitude of the slave. This unique Israelite perspective came to embodied expression in Jesus, who “though he was in the form of God, did not deem equality with God a thing to be grasped” and who rather “emptied himself and took the form of a slave.” (Phil 2:6-7) In Christ, the God of Israel became himself a slave, the despised other, even to the point of enduring the rejection of the masters and dying the terrible death of the cross. In Jesus, the God of Israel looks out from the face of the other and draws forth compassion from those who gaze upon him.

In *District 9*, we see the master/slave dynamic on clear display: the characterization of the aliens by a derogatory nickname, their sequestration in a squalid ghetto, the violence—direct and indirect—visited on them consistently, etc. These are practices evident from ancient times to the present day. But we see something else as well: an identification of the oppressor with the oppressed, the openness to interpreting the world from the underside, from the perspective of the victim. This, I would submit, is the Biblical difference, though I doubt that most people today would recognize it as such. It is the view that comes from that strange spiritual tradition which culminates in a God who doesn’t make slaves but rather becomes one.



The Coen Brothers and the Voice from the Whirlwind

IN THE COURSE OF MY MINISTRY as a teacher, lecturer, and retreat master, I hear, perhaps more than any other question, the following: “How do I know what God wants?” Put in more formal theological language, this is the question concerning the discernment of God’s will. Many people who pose it tell me that they envy the Biblical heroes—Moses, Jeremiah, Jacob, David, etc.—who seem to have received direct and unambiguous communication from God. I usually remind them that even those great Scriptural figures wrestled mightily with the same issue. And then typically I draw their attention to Job, the person in the Biblical tradition who anguished most painfully over the matter of discerning what in the world God was doing.

The Coen brothers, among the most gifted and thought-provoking filmmakers on the scene today, have made a movie called *A Serious Man*, which amounts to a contemporary retelling of the story of Job. The hero of their film is Lawrence Gopnik, a mild-mannered Jewish physics professor at a small college in 1960s-era Minnesota. There is nothing particularly impressive about Larry; in fact, he corresponds pretty closely to the stereotype of the *schlemiel*. More to it, he’s surrounded by a fairly dispiriting cast of characters, including a henpecking wife, a pair of self-absorbed teenage children, and an unemployed brother who spends his days (and nights) draining a boil on the back of his neck. As the story unfolds, we witness a steady

accumulation of woes befalling Larry. First, his wife announces that she is in love with another man and that she wants a divorce; next, the dean of the math department informs our hero that his tenure application is in doubt; then, Larry's brother is arrested for illegal gambling and suspicion of sodomy; finally, the father of one of his students threatens him with a lawsuit. All at once, everything is collapsing around Larry Gopnik, who is a modern Job.

At this point, he turns to his Jewish faith for answers. It's interesting to note that none of the major characters in this film seems to disbelieve in God. As in the book of Job, the question is not whether God exists, but what God is up to. Larry speaks first to a very young rabbi, who seems to be fresh from the Yeshiva and is filled with fairly trite recommendations about changing one's attitude in order to see God in all things. He opens the blinds to reveal the drab parking lot and effervescently comments that God can be found even there. Unsatisfied, Larry moves on to a more mature rabbi, who tells him a strange story. It seems that there was a Jewish dentist who discovered a series of Hebrew letters on the backside of a patient's teeth. They spelled out "help me; save me." This miracle vividly reminded the dentist of God's presence, and sent him on a spiritual quest. Still wondering, still uneasy, Larry comes in desperation to the office of the most respected rabbi in the area, but he is rebuffed by the great man's secretary. "He's busy," she blandly tells him. The three rabbis are meant to represent, it seems clear, the three friends who attempt, unsuccessfully, to comfort Job in the wake of his enormous sufferings.

The answer that Larry seeks comes most unexpectedly. Throughout the film, we see his son Danny preparing, in a fairly desultory way, for his Bar Mitzvah. In the midst of one of his Hebrew classes, the boy is listening on his transistor radio to the Jefferson Airplane song "Somebody to Love." His annoyed instructor

confiscates the device and it eventually finds its way to the aged rabbi whom Danny's father had unsuccessfully tried to see. After the Bar Mitzvah ceremony, Danny is ushered into this great man's presence to receive a word of wisdom. To the boy's infinite surprise, the ancient rabbi begins to quote from the Jefferson Airplane song: "When the truth is found to be lies, and all the joy within you dies...wouldn't you want somebody to love? You better find somebody to love."

At the very end of the film, a great tornado is bearing down on the town, and we hear on the soundtrack the powerful voice of Grace Slick intoning those words: "You better find somebody to love." Of course, the book of Job comes to its climax when, in response to Job's questioning, God finally speaks out of a desert whirlwind. "You better find somebody to love" is therefore the Coen brothers' version of this divine word out of the storm; the ultimate answer to the question of what God is up to.

If we look back at the three "answers" given in the film, we find a coherence with the great biblical tradition. The simple word of the young rabbi is, in fact, spiritually rich. God is indeed found in all things, even the most ordinary, and we do need to shift our awareness in order to appreciate his presence. And the story of the mysterious letters is also Biblical: sometimes, on rare occasions, God speaks through miraculous and extraordinary means. But the word of the old rabbi—and the voice that sings out of the whirlwind—is indeed the ultimate communication from the Holy One. If you want to discover God's presence and intention, especially during times of great struggle, "You better find somebody to love." Not bad advice from the rabbis Coen.



The Dangerous Silliness of *Agora*

I RECENTLY SAW THE FILM *AGORA*, which is a retelling of the story of Hypatia, the brilliant woman philosopher from Alexandria who was killed, supposedly by a mob of “Christians,” in the year 415. Along with the tales of Galileo and Giordano Bruno, the legend of Hypatia is a favorite of anti-religious ideologues.

I first heard the story from Carl Sagan, the popular scientist whose multi-part program *Cosmos* was widely watched back in the 1970s. *Cosmos*, in fact, comes to its climax with Sagan’s melodramatic rehearsal of the narrative. Hypatia, he explained, was a scientist and philosopher who ran afoul of Cyril, the wicked bishop of Alexandria, who then stirred up a mob of his superstitious followers, who subsequently put Hypatia to death. Sagan commented, “The supreme tragedy was that when the Christians came to burn down the great library of Alexandria, there was no one to stop them.” And just to rub it in, he said, “and they made Cyril a saint.” Sagan’s account found its roots in Edward Gibbon’s version of the story in his deeply anti-Christian classic *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In fact, Gibbon was the first to link the murder of Hypatia with the burning down of the Alexandrian library. Alejandro Amenabar’s new *Agora* film stands firmly in the Gibbon/Sagan tradition, presenting Hypatia as a saint of secular rationalism who desperately gathers scrolls from the library before it is invaded by hysterical Christians and who goes nobly to her death, defending reason and science against the avatars of religious superstition.

Well, Hypatia was indeed a philosopher and she was indeed killed by a mob in 415, but practically everything else about the story that Gibbon and Sagan and Amenabar tell is false. For the complete debunking of the myth, take a look at David Hart Bentley's book *Atheist Delusions*, but allow me to share just a few details. The library of Alexandria was burnt to the ground, not by Christian mobs in the fifth century, but by Julius Caesar's troops, some forty years before Jesus was born. A temple to the god Serapis, called the Sarapeon, was built on the site of the ancient library (which might have contained some scrolls in it in the fifth century), and it was this building that was sacked by angry Christians in Hypatia's time, in response to pagan defilements of Christian houses of worship. Now mind you, I'm not excusing any of this for a moment. Whenever Christians respond to such attacks with violence, they are opposing themselves to the one who said "love your enemies" and "turn the other cheek." But I am indeed insisting that the charge that Christians mindlessly and gleefully destroyed the greatest center of learning in the ancient world is pure calumny.

More to it, Hypatia, sadly enough, found herself caught in the middle of a struggle between two powerful figures in Alexandria, namely, Orestes the civil authority and Cyril the bishop. She was most likely killed in retaliation for the murder of some of Cyril's supporters by agents of Orestes. Again, all of this is nasty stuff, and I'm not trying to exculpate anyone, but to pitch this largely political story as a battle between sweet reason and vicious religious superstition is misleading to say the very least.

Finally, though the film portrays her largely as an astronomer (probably to compel comparisons with Galileo), Hypatia was best known as a neo-Platonist philosopher, a devotee of Plato and Plotinus. Not only were there Christians in Hypatia's classes, not only were Christian bishops among her circle of friends, but Chris-

tian theologians—Augustine, Ambrose, and Origen, just to name the most prominent—were enthusiastic advocates of neo-Platonism. Therefore, to portray her as the noble champion of reason over and against mouth-breathing Christian primitives is just ridiculous.

But none of this gets to the heart of why I object to *Agora*. In one of the most visually arresting scenes in the film, Amenabar brings his camera up to a very high point of vantage overlooking the Alexandria library while it is being ransacked by the Christian mob. From this perspective, the Christians look for all the world like scurrying cockroaches. In another memorable scene, the director shows a group of Christian thugs carting away the mangled corpses of Jews whom they have just put to death, and he composes the shot in such a way that the piled bodies vividly call to mind the bodies of the dead in photographs of Dachau and Auschwitz. The not-so-subtle implication of all of this is that Christians are dangerous types, threats to civilization, and that they should, like pests, be eliminated. I wonder if it ever occurred to Amenabar that his movie might incite violence against religious people, especially Christians, and that precisely his manner of critique was used by some of the most vicious persecutors of Christianity in the last century? My very real fear is that the meanness, half-truths, and outright slanders in such books as Christopher Hitchens's *God is Not Great* and Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* have begun to work their way into the popular culture.

We Christians have to resist—and keep setting the record straight.



Eat, Pray, Love

SO MANY PEOPLE HAD URGED ME to comment on the film *Eat, Pray, Love* that I felt obligated to see it on its opening weekend. The theater in which I viewed the movie was pretty much full, and the gender ratio was approximately 92% female, 8% male. The storyline of *Eat, Pray, Love* adheres fairly closely to the classic spiritual quest trajectory. As the narrative commences, our heroine, Liz Gilbert (played by Julia Roberts), finds herself in a sort of midlife crisis. Her marriage has lost its spark, her job is going nowhere, and her friends don't know how to help her. In one of the most affecting moments in the movie, Liz kneels down and, with tears, simply begs God to show her the way.

She resolves that she will take a year away from her busy life in Manhattan and spend a third of the time in Rome (to enjoy its sensual pleasures), a third of the time at an ashram in India (to commune with her ex-boyfriend's guru), and a third of the time in the Indonesian paradise of Bali (responding to the invitation of a Yoda-like wise man whom she had met the previous year). In Rome, Liz indulges in the beauty of the architecture, revels in the delights of the Italian language, and above all, she eats and eats. As I watched this section of the film, I was put in mind of Pascal's observation that we begin the spiritual journey on the level of the body, which is to say, of the senses and their attendant pleasures. There is nothing in the world wrong with eating, drinking, admiring, listening, and touching. In fact, really attending to these pleasures is of central

importance, for one of the ways that spiritual progress is interrupted is to bypass, repress, or look down upon these elemental joys.

After a few months in Rome, Liz makes her way to India (the city is never specified) and participates in the life of a Hindu ashram, where she is schooled in the classic practices of chanting, silence, and meditation. After several months of ascetic exercise, she concludes that “God is in me, as me.” This is when I began to suspect there was something seriously wrong with Liz’s spiritual itinerary. She was gesturing toward the famous Hindu principle “Atman is Brahman,” meaning that the individual soul (Atman) finally becomes transparent to the source of all existence (Brahman), but her formulation seemed to me just a species of narcissism. If God is simply identified with the self (me), including all of its flaws and imperfections (as me), then any real conversion is ruled out and the ego has effectively deified itself.

Liz’s godlike self then moves on to Bali, where she promptly falls in with a handsome businessman, played by Javier Bardem. When he proposes that they run off together to a favorite island of his, Liz balks, objecting that he is trying to dominate her. She eventually agrees to accompany him, but only when she is convinced that the journey is being undertaken on her terms. I suppose that this was supposed to count as the “love” part of the program, but again it seemed like self-indulgence to me, the natural consequence of the “God is in me, as me” principle.

Now what especially struck me about *Eat, Pray, Love* is that Liz, presumably a Christian by background and training, never once turned to a Christian spiritual teacher or advisor at any point in her quest. During the Rome part of the movie, we were treated to extraordinary photography featuring the numberless churches of the Eternal City, but never once did Liz darken the door of any of those

places of worship. There is a cute scene of Liz sitting on a bench next to a couple of nuns licking ice cream cones, but it never occurs to our spiritual seeker to wonder about the spiritual path those habited women had found.

If she had followed a Christian path, it would have led her to a very different conclusion than “God is in me, as me.” Many great Christians—Dante, Augustine, and Ignatius of Loyola come readily to mind—began where Liz Gilbert did: lost, anxious, despairing. But they moved along a very different trajectory. They commenced with detachment, which is to say, a letting go of anything that has taken the place of God—pleasure, money, power, ego. This had nothing to do with Puritanism; it had everything to do with the right ordering of desire. Once they had passed through this purgative and spiritually clarifying process, they discovered the divine center—that God is indeed in them, but certainly not as them. They found God as the power that ordered all of their passions, energies, and talents and that then sent them on mission. The authentically Christian spiritual itinerary never ends with something as bland as “self-discovery.” Rather, it ends with the splendid privilege of participating in God’s own work of bringing grace into the world.

I very much admired Liz’s honest prayer, and I respected her willingness to go on a spiritual journey. I just wish she had asked one of those nuns for advice!



True Grit and the Everlasting Arms

TRUE GRIT, THE 1969 FILM starring John Wayne, was the first “grown-up” movie I saw as a kid. I was nine years old at the time, and I remember the experience vividly. I also discovered, through that film, that I had a gift for mimicry. For years afterward, at family parties, I was invited to reproduce the Duke’s distinctive drawl: “I wouldn’t a-asked you to bury him if he wann’t dead.”

The Coen brothers, the auteurs behind *Fargo*, *No Country for Old Men*, and *A Serious Man*, are among the best and most spiritually alert filmmakers on the scene today. And so it was with great excitement that I learned that the Coens had produced a remake of *True Grit*.

Though their version is far different from the original, I found it compelling, especially in the measure that it brings the religious dimension of the story to the fore.

The leitmotif is set in the opening moments of the movie, as we hear Mattie, the narrator and principal character, say in voice-over, “The only thing in life that’s free is the grace of God.” The film will unfold as an extended meditation on the play between justice and mercy, between what is owed and what is given as a grace. Fourteen-year-old Mattie, whose father had been killed in cold blood by a man he had befriended, lives in a world of strict justice, of give and take, of contracts and obligations. Bound and determined to see her

father's killer hanged, Mattie hires a wizened old law man named Rooster Cogburn (played with characteristic naturalness by Jeff Bridges) and gives him the charge of tracking down the murderer. We get a delicious taste of Mattie's personality as she, with lawyerly skill and fierce persistence, wrests from an oily horse trader the money she needs to pay Rooster. And when Cogburn leaves without her, convinced that the teenaged city slicker would only slow him down, she rides her horse right across a raging river to catch up to him—and then reminds him that he is in breach of contract! Mattie is a *mulier fortis*, a woman not to be trifled with.

She moves with Rooster and Le Boeuf—a Texas ranger who is also looking for the murderer—into Indian country, a place of lawlessness, where drifters live outside the constraints of polite society. They corner a couple of members of Ned Pepper's gang, for Rooster is convinced that the killer might have joined forces with these desperados. After a shoot-out and a violent interrogation, two men are dead and a third is wounded. The next day, by the bank of a river, Mattie encounters her father's killer and manages to wound him before being captured by Ned Pepper and his men. In the most stirring scene in the film, Rooster manages, single-handedly, to take on the entire Pepper gang, holding the reins of his horse in his teeth and firing with both hands. After this encounter, four more men lie dead. Finally, Mattie frees herself and shoots to death her father's murderer, but the recoil on the gun is so strong that she is pushed into a snake pit, where she receives a bite on the hand. I'll get back to the snake pit in a moment, but notice first what this canny fourteen-year-old girl's lust for vengeance has wrought: eight dead men. She wanted only to bring her father's killer to justice, but the single-mindedness of her pursuit conducted toward a disproportionate, even barbaric, result, something far beyond the requirements of justice. Her excessive and one-sided passion for righteousness kicked her into a den of snakes,

and no one with a biblical sensibility could miss the symbolic over-tone of this kind of fall.

As she lies helpless and desperately injured, Mattie looks up and sees Rooster Cogburn lowering himself by rope to the bottom of the pit. He cuts into her wound and sucks out as much of the poison as he can, then he brings her back up, places her on a horse, and commences a furious ride to the nearest doctor, who is many miles away. When the horse gives way from sheer exhaustion beneath him, Rooster picks up Mattie in his arms and carries her through the night to the doctor's home. Now Cogburn is a man of the law, and like Mattie, he was aiming to bring a killer to justice, but what these heroic actions on behalf of the girl reveal is that he is more than that. His passion for justice is accompanied by, even surpassed by, his mercy, his graciousness, his willingness to give even when that giving was not, strictly speaking, owed.

As the film comes to a close, we have fast-forwarded many years into the future, and a still prim, unmarried, and somewhat cold Mattie has just learned of the death of Rooster Cogburn. We then see that she has but one arm. Though Rooster's graciousness saved Mattie's life, the doctor, evidently, was not able to save her limb. And as the final credits roll, we hear the beautiful old spiritual "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," which speaks of the "fellowship and joy divine" which comes from "leaning on the everlasting arms" of God. Rooster had carried Mattie in his two arms, evocative of both justice and mercy, attributes that come together supremely in God. Mattie's tragedy is that she had only justice, only one arm.

The same Coen brothers who gave us a powerful image of God in the tornado at the conclusion of *A Serious Man* and in the pregnant police officer in *Fargo* have given us still another in the strong arms of Rooster Cogburn.