NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Failed Systems: Two documentaries explore religion and poverty

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Two films currently in theaters, at least in Los Angeles and New York, probe two key dimensions of modern life and seek to jump start conversations and active solution-seeking: "Oh My God" and "The End of Poverty."

"Oh My God" is a documentary by Peter Rodger. Acknowledging that disagreement about religion has often been and continues to be the basis of wars and conflicts throughout history, he begins his pilgrimage of discovery. With his camera he traveled the world asking people of all major faiths "What is God?". Though the cinematography is sweeping at times, the pace contemplative, with views offered by people such as Ringo Starr, Princess Michael of Kent, and other celebrities and non-celebrities, his attempt to establish common ground between people about this age-old question ultimately fails.

As much as I want to praise Rodger for his overall effort, the film does not succeed for the most obvious of reasons: he barely includes a woman's voice among all those interviewed. With the exception of a born-again Christian woman who owns a gun shop in Texas, Princess Michael, a schoolteacher and two school girls, all the voices, the perspectives, are male.

When I was asked to endorse the film by a prominent Catholic businessman, I shared my concerns. It is true that Rodger is fair and respectful to the Catholic Church, indeed all religions (unlike Bill Maher's 2008 "Religilous" that was a lazy mockery of and potshot at all faiths), I did not feel I could lend a voice to actually promote the film. The businessman thanked me for my perspective then replied that because the film treats the Catholic Church well, he would do so.

My question is: just because the filmmaker respects the institutional Church by including only positive remarks about it, does the film really respect what it means to be Catholic if women of any and every faith barely have a voice to talk the reasons why the spiritual and religious becomes political and violent?

Despite the narration by actor Hugh Jackman, global input by ordinary men, and the great attention to fairness about religious belief as well as the valid opportunity it offers for dialogue and inquiry, "Oh My God" could have been a much better film. The interesting thing is that Rodger actually isolates the problem of religion's failure to create peace: when anyone or any system ignores almost half the population of the world, you do so at your own peril.

"The End of Poverty" is a film by Philippe Diaz about capitalism's utter failure to improve the lives of people in the world and contribute to peace. The bad news is piled on by one expert after another, from Joseph Stiglitz, former chief economist of the World Bank and winner of the Nobel Prize for economics, best-selling author (and unmentioned, a member of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences), to Eric Toussaint, the author of *The World Bank: A Never Ending Coup D'Etat*, to Maria Marcela Olivera, a water warrior from Cochabamba, Bolivia. (Did you notice in Paul Haggis' 2008 James Bond film "Quantum of Solace" that the privatization of Bolivia's water supplies was an element of the plot?)

As a documentary, it is difficult watching. It is a lecture by professor Martin Sheen (the narrator) with a parade of instructors that trace the beginning of capitalism from the day Columbus landed in the Americas in 1492 to the latest tragic statistic that 16,000 children die each day from hunger or hunger-related diseases (Unicef, 2008). But the one stat that caught my attention is that "cutting global poverty in half would cost $20 billion, less than 4 percent of the annual U.S. military budget."

The bottom line is that peace is not profitable, and neither is health or land-ownership by the people who have lived on and from their land for centuries. The film is tough on Christianity. This is because Christianity's emphasis on a personal relationship with God (i.e. religious idea of individualism) fits into the idea of political individualism over communitarian ownership of land and resources, and therefore continues to sustain and feed capitalism endless need for expansion. The role that Catholic missionaries played in colonization is cited as a key element in facilitating the economic dominance of the southern hemisphere by the north. The south provided free labor (slavery and peonage) and free resources necessary for capitalism to expand and flourish ? and continues to do so.

Current policies that let the market govern everything are not going to end poverty.

Director Diaz wants to know: "Why, in a world with so much wealth, do we still have so much poverty, where billions of people live on less than one dollar a day?" The goal of the film "is to change the dialogue around the poverty debate from "poverty is a shame" to "poverty exists for a reason."

There is nothing amusing about "The End of Poverty." However, the film offers a way out of keeping the Third World poor -- and it is neither capitalism nor socialism. It is the global will (with an emphasis on the United States in the light of its pivotal role in the 2008 economic crisis) to create a system that will "1) cancel debts, 2) create fairer trade arrangements, 3) impose taxes on wealth, not consumption of necessities, 4) end privatization of natural resources, 5) develop land reform that shares land, or its value, among the actual producers of farm products, and 6) initiate programs of de-growth in the North, to reduce wasteful consumption."

Notably missing from the film is the economist Jeffrey Sachs and U-2's Bono although they were interviewed for it. According to a statement, Diaz says that because the film was too long and that their approaches to solving world poverty through the theory that "progress and technology ?. mosquito nets and bags of fertilizer will solve everything" differed from those identified in the film, the footage was left on the virtual cutting room floor.

As a documentary, "The End of Poverty" is unadorned and relentless. And though seven women provide expert views, the film is dominated by male perspectives, too -- though the ratio is better than that in "Oh My God."

Religion and violence, mind-numbing deadly poverty, and voiceless women seem unlikely themes for Advent and Christmas viewing and I would bet that their theater runs will be very short.

Yet, are these not the very reasons for the season?

Put these on your Netflix list.

Source URL (retrieved on *03/30/2017 - 08:20*): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/failed-systems-two-documentaries-explore-religion-and-poverty