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Eat. Pray. Love. Alas.

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Julia Roberts and Javier Bardem in *Eat Pray Love*

Let's face it. There are some books that should never be made into movies.

Eat Pray Love, by Elizabeth "Liz" Gilbert, my favorite book of 2008, is one of these.

I wanted to like the film, but got an inkling it might not live up to my expectations when I saw Julia Roberts, who plays Liz in the film, ride a bicycle along a tropical byway with what looks like a pasted-on smile. It didn't ring true and in my heart of hearts, I knew that the film might look good, but would miss the depth of Liz's one-year search for meaning.

I usually love it when I am right (I cheer after every Jeopardy answer I get right, much to the dismay of my community). Alas, I am just disappointed at being right about this movie. The film is OK, but never was able to convey the experience of grace that the book did so well.

The main reason for this is because of the writing. The veteran and proven writers (Ryan Murphy and Jennifer Salt; Murphy also directs) did a good job of assembling the events of the film which is technically proficient, but perfunctory. The cinematography is lovely, but they did not get to the level of feeling or emotional angst, or create the spiritual desert of the book ? and cinema is an emotional medium. They dragged out the events that led up to Liz's decision to take a year to eat, pray and love as a way to

search for meaning and wholeness, but they never let us feel it. Even with the handsome Billy Crudup as Liz's husband and James Franco as David, with whom she had another relationship that was destined to fail, the script lacks soul. This is a huge failing. The producers should have hired writers who had lived through the experience of their interior world falling apart, as Liz's did. Empathy goes far in cinema.

The writers left out two key aspects of the book that might have made up for the emotional deficiencies of the first act: the fact that Liz claimed to know every gelato place in Rome and her sister's visit while there.

In the book Liz compares her sister Catherine's world view with her own developing spiritual perspective: "A family in my sister's neighborhood was recently stricken with a double tragedy, when both a young mother and her three-year old son were diagnosed with cancer. When Catherine told me about this, I could only say, shocked, 'Dear God, that family needs grace.' She replied firmly, 'That family needs casseroles,' and then proceeded to organize the entire neighborhood into bringing that family dinner, in shifts, every single night, for an entire year. I do not know if my sister realizes that this is grace."

Some have criticized Liz's character in the film for going along with the arranged marriage of one of the women she meets in the ashram in India. Critics think Liz should have helped the girl resist but didn't. I don't recall this episode from the book, and actually found this side-story distracting. Besides, do critics think Liz was on a crusade during this year? She barely had her own life together let alone the ability to take on centuries of tradition.

The one stellar performance in the film is by Richard Jenkins ("The Visitor"), who plays Richard the Texan and befriends Liz by telling her the truth about forgiveness. Jenkins didn't just go through the motions for this film; his character was authentic and credible. Actually, the Indian portion of the film was the high point for me -- not because of meditation and Hindu ritual, but because we could feel Richard's anguish and his truth.

Since we are on the topic of Hindusim, let me address Julia Robert's "conversion" to this eastern religion and the Catholic response to it (see http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/entertainment/eat-pray-love-attracts-wrath-of-catholic-leaders_100414982.html).

I didn't know Julia Roberts was a baptized Catholic. I asked a friend today, who is an active Catholic in the industry, if she was aware of this. She said she had heard something here and there about Julia and her brother Eric being Catholic, but had never seen it confirmed. Now it seems Julia's father was Protestant and her mother a Catholic and Julia now says she is a practicing Hindu.

Here's the deal. Instead of castigating Julia Roberts for becoming a Hindu, or maybe judging author Liz Gilbert for not turning to her early Protestant roots, however thin, why don't we ask: why did Christianity not respond to their search for meaning when they needed it? Where was the Christian community in Gilbert's time of need? How did we fail as Christians and church to speak to their existential questions? Why blame Julia? Alas.

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Then, wasn't it Flannery O'Connor who once wrote that many people come to the church by means the church does not approve? I think of Venerable Francis Libermann (1804-1852) founder of the Spiritans (Congregation of the Holy Ghost). In the midst of great spiritual distress and distance from his orthodox Jewish father, he read Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* (1762), a book that offended both Catholics and Protestants because it denies original sin (and other things though it does not seem to have made it to the

Index of Forbidden Books.) But it became the spark of grace that led to his conversion to Catholicism. See Adrian Van Kaam's 1984 book *Light to the Gentiles*, arguably one of the best biographies ever written in my humble opinion (<http://www.amazon.com/Light-Gentiles-Adrian-van-Kaam/dp/0819138045>).

Elizabeth Gilbert could have borrowed for her book the title *Adventures in Grace* from Raissa Maritain's now out of print memoir about converting to Catholicism in early 20th century Paris. Gilbert's adventures (and Julia's) have not led them to the fullness of the Christian faith -- yet. Romans 5:20 comes to mind.

Why do we want authors and movie stars to do our work for us? Why can we not make Eat Pray Love the subject of evangelization and catechesis as the U.S. bishops' 2005 document "The National Directory for Catechesis" suggests? (See Chapter Ten). Millions will see the film in theaters and on DVD and then television or via the Internet. Do church officials think that by denigrating the actor and the film they will contribute to the new evangelization? How does that work, exactly?

Watching "Eat Pray Love" was like watching television lite. It could have been so much more. I think a television mini-series might have been the better medium. But never mind. It's too late now. The book touched my soul; the movie my wallet. Alas.

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