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'God's Not Dead' leaves scant room for imagination, mystery

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NCR Today

It would be too easy to disparage 'God's Not Dead' from almost any perspective except that it has made almost \$25 million since its domestic release on March 21. This is more than respectable for an independent Christian film. It is a mark of success that most filmmakers would die for.

But herein lies the problem for me. This story of a freshman college student, Josh Wheaton (Shane Harper), who, along with his fellow philosophy students, is forced by Professor Radisson (Kevin Sorbo) to sign a statement 'for the purposes of this class' that God is dead, is not good story-telling nor is it entertainment. It is, as one reviewer called it, a scripture-based 'tract' aimed at comforting and shoring up those who already believe. It is a course in Scripture-based Christian apologetics with commentary by the folks from Duck Dynasty, who when challenged by an atheist television reporter, offer a very tidy testimony about their belief in Jesus and ethical duck hunting.

And Catholics are going to see it in droves. I spoke with a senior citizen and grandmother in Pennsylvania who went with people in her parish (they were given passes) and she thought it was the best thing she had ever seen because it 'defended God.' She also said that her grandson had been forced to do the same thing in a college class: to sign a paper and deny that God exists (I found this hard to believe; it would be completely illegal and a lawsuit waiting to happen but she insisted it was true). I had already seen the film and brought up the problem of the 'solo

scriptura? perspective of establishing God?s existence and the necessity of believing in Christ for salvation, but to no avail (we Catholics believe in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition as the founts of Divine Revelation but this did not impress her). I didn?t bring up that the film demonizes Muslims (a Muslim girl, who in very short order converts to Christ in the film is cruelly cast out of her home by her father) or that for a freshman Josh is the best-educated professional presenter ever to hit a school campus. This grandmother was convinced that ?God?s Not Dead? is a fine movie.

Darren Aronofsky?s ?Noah? has set the Christian blogosphere afire with people writing and ranting pro, con, and in-between, but it is not a film that falls in the rather new genre of ?Christian? films. ?Christian? films, almost without exception, are not Biblical films. Instead they are films presenting Christians and Christianity almost completely from a white Protestant Christian perspective. With only one recent exception that I can think of (the upcoming ?Heaven is for Real? by director Randall Wallace) the Christian faith films are meant to deliver a clear, mostly triumphalist message that Protestant Christianity is the best.

The French Catholic film critic André Bazin (1918- 1958) once wrote that ?Cinema has always been interested in God.? He even described cinema as a record of the face of God. This kind of sentiment, to me, implies that the imagination and even mystery are part of the cinematic experience, that a director has his or her perspective, but leaves space between the screen and that viewpoint, for the audience to enter into the story and make their own meaning, that the context of the story is what is important, not the content or ?message.?

?God?s Not Dead,? despite excellent production values, leaves scant room for the imagination or mystery. It is a contrived, implausible Sunday school lesson. I think God, whom people seem to think needs defending, deserves better from the artistic community.

Young Josh goes to talk to a pastor in what might look like a Catholic church at first ? lots of stained glass windows and pews. Don?t be fooled. Look to the sanctuary; the tabernacle is missing.

Christian-based companies can flood the movie market with sermon-like movies and if they find an audience, good for them. To me, every day is a search, a journey toward God. Cinema can and often does offer a sacramental encounter with the Divine along the way, even in films such as the ?Hunger Games? by making visible the transcendent invisible realities of God?s presence and grace. But ?canned sermon? movies, to me, don?t let you experience this.

I do not believe that Christian or faith-based movies such as ?God?s Not Dead,? made intentionally for the faith audience, are the answer to the continued need for authentic storytelling about God and the human condition in popular culture. The biggest challenge to the Christian faith in the modern world is not rampant atheism but pervasive consumerism and the worship of money that excludes the poor, that creates poor people or keeps them poor. Films that challenge this reality, as described by Pope Francis in ?The Joy of the Gospel? (see Chapter Two) are the real Christian films (e.g. most recently ?Cesar

Chavez? and ?Cesar?s Last Fast?) and I don't think it was the filmmakers? intention to make ?religious? films. It happened because the stories were truly human and truly of the Gospel.

A film may not have bad language, sex, violence, drugs, smoking or alcohol but a ?good? movie cannot be defined such by what is missing, nor can it be described as good by the ?message? it preaches. As Roger Ebert once told a journalist: you don?t go to movies for Sunday school. I would rather trust the audience to create their own meaning from a film by allowing them to engage their minds, hearts, wills, and imagination. But if you feel the need to have someone figure it all out for you, feel free.

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