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SILENCE IS GOLDEN? THE REPRESENTATION OF RELIGION IN AUSTRALIAN FILMS, 1900-1929

Peter Bentley

In the last few years there has been a growing interest in examining the representation in Australian cinema of various subjects.

Once area which has received comparatively little interest is the representation of religion and religious images in films.[1] Over the nine decades of the existence of the Australian film industry there have been about thirty films which have either a central religious character or a major religious component.

From the earliest film, *Soldiers of the Cross* to recent films like *The Navigator* (1988) and *Evil Angels* (1989), religion has featured in a significant way. Over two hundred more films contain minor religious references, often of a bizarre nature.[2] Of the thirty or so major 'religious' films, about one third were made during what is termed the silent era - 1900 to 1929.[3]

Peter Bentley works for the Commission on Doctrine and the Christian Research Association. He is on the Executive Committee of the Church Records and Historical Society. This article was presented as a paper to the "Studying Australian Christianity" Conference in 1993.

It should be noted that few feature films made in the silent period are available for viewing even if they have survived. For the purposes of this paper I have developed two categories. First, films where religion is a major part of the subject matter and is integral to the whole film. Rather than being merely 'open to religious interpretation', these films need to be interpreted from a religious perspective.

Secondly, films which make use of religious themes, characters and incidents purely because religion or religious characters and incidents are conventional or functional elements.

FILMS IN WHICH RELIGION IS A CENTRAL PART

Soldiers of the Cross (1900) was a dramatic combination of film, stills and commentary. It was produced by a department of the Salvation Army, the Limelight Department, which could be termed today a multi-media department.[4]

Salvation Army work started in Australia in 1880, fifteen years after the movement had begun in England under the leadership of William and Catherine Booth. As a new mission-based organisation it did not have any of the restrictions which often come with established practice and the Army joyfully experimented in the use of new forms of communication technology to present their message of salvation and reform.

The leading person behind the Army's venture into film production was Major Joseph Perry, an Englishman, who joined the army in New Zealand, came to Australia in 1885 and was placed in charge of the Limelight Department in 1892.[5]

The production concentrated on the heroic stories of Christian martyrdom, including the deaths of Stephen and Peter, and countless other Christians who would rather face an earthly death than recant their faith or worship a false God.

In 1909, under Perry's supervision, the Limelight Department embarked upon the production of two other major religious films, *Heroes of the Cross* (1909), which was a remake of *Soldiers of the Cross* with additions and *The Scottish Covenanters* (1909), which was not shown in Australia owing to the demise of the Limelight Department.[6] It has not been established why the Army closed down the Department, but it seems it was because film had lost its appeal as a pure light form to be used for God's purpose.[7]

Like *The Christian* in 1911, *The Silence of Dean Maitland* (1914) proved to be a popular film version by Raymond Longford of an established play. As a Deacon, Maitland has an affair with a younger woman. The father of the woman confronts him and is killed in the ensuing fracas. Because of his secrecy and lies, his best friend is charged and subsequently sentenced to 20 years for the crime. By the time his friend is released, Maitland is a Dean and an eminent and respected citizen. His friend arrives at his church and Maitland is so overcome by his appearance that while in the pulpit he suddenly and publicly confesses his guilt and then promptly drops dead. His last words:

> 'The three darkest blots upon the soul of man - **IMPURITY, BLOODSHED, TREACHERY** - have stained my soul . . . I declare before God and man, I repent.'

The Church and the Woman (1917) was a Longford and Lyell effort. The story revolved around the subject of mixed marriages, perhaps now a rather quaint term for a marriage between a Roman Catholic and a Protestant. The father of the bride refuses to consent to their marriage and unfortunately is soon found murdered, the obvious suspect being Dr Burton. To add a twist, the real murderer makes a solemn confession of the crime to Eileen's brother, a priest. The brother believes that he is bound by the confessional bond, so in order to save Burton he confesses to the murder. Dr Burton is released and Eileen's brother takes his place on the gallows. However, just before her brother is hanged, the real murderer confesses and the brother is saved as well.

The action of the priest in taking on the punishment due to another person has theological significance. One Christian understanding of the atonement places Christ in the same position.

The topical reference of the film was highlighted by the closing sequence in which Eileen and Burton are married behind the altar (in a Roman Catholic church) - this position and others (beside the altar, or perhaps in the vestry), reinforced the public position of the Roman Catholic church at the time of the wedding.

The Man from Kangaroo (1920) provides a strong contrast to the common image of a country parson. Snowy Baker played the role of John Harland, a country parson, who had been a boxer. He has to deal with a gang of brutal thugs led by Red Jack Braggan. Things go against John Harland until Red Jack stoops to kidnapping his sweetheart, Muriel. John Harland doesn't even think of turning the other cheek after this and soon Muriel is safe in the arms of the boxing parson.[8]

A parson provided a very clear contrast to the other 'baddies'. The hero not only wore white (hair and clerical collar), but had the moral force of God on his side. The villain, Red Jack Braggan (red being a symbol for the devil) did not have a chance.

In *Around the Boree Log* (1925), a semi-documentary, some of the poems of John O'Brien, the nom de plume of Father Patrick Joseph Hartigan, are presented in pictorial form. It has been variously described as a 'sentimental journey' through the bush society of Australia of the 1870s to 'Catholic propaganda'.

Peter Malone comments that "The film, made in Goulburn, dramatised the poems in silent tableaux with verse captions highlighting the traditions of the Irish Catholic family and the priest, climaxing with the contrast between the old bush schools and the Goulburn colleges of the '20s and the parish church with the city churches and cathedrals."[9]

The story of *For the Term of His Natural Life* (1927) was well known. The first film was made in 1908, the second in 1911 and the third in 1927, with American Norman Dawn as the principal director.

The story features two clergymen, the Reverend Messrs Meekin and North. Rufus Dawes takes the blame for a murder and is sentenced to transportation to Van Diemen's Land. Richard Devine is found with the body of Lord Ballasis and promptly arrested. To avoid embarrassment to his family he gives the name of Rufus Dawes. Though the Reverend Mr North knows that Dawes is not guilty, he does not come forward to testify and Dawes to consequently found guilty and sentenced to transportation to Van Diemen's Land.

Eventually, the true guilty party is found out, but unlike the novel in which Dawes perishes with Sylvia, the last scene in the film shows Dawes and Sylvia alive on a raft, seemingly the sole survivors of the cyclone, looking toward Norfolk Island and continued earthly salvation.

FILMS WHICH MAKE USE OF RELIGION

In many films, the main character types are general religious figures usually not aligned to any particular group or Christian denomination.

Specific tasks are nearly always undertaken by another type of general religious character. Unlike the general figure used for some limited dramatic purpose, the characters chosen to perform specific tasks are usually associated with an official church.

I will comment on three types of the "General Religious Figure".

Firstly, **The Hypocrite.** The religious hypocrite is a well-known specimen. One of the most prominent religious characters in the silent period was Dean Maitland.

For the Term of His Natural Life contains two major religious hypocrites: the Reverend Meekin and the Reverend North. Meekin is a hypocrite because he is outwardly pious (he claims to be a true keeper of the Lord's ways), and yet is without compassion. North is a hypocrite because he does everything a member of the clergy is not supposed to do: he drinks, lusts, gambles, and lies.

Secondly, there was **The 'Good' Christian.** Probably the most notable example of this character type is Rufus Dawes in *For the Term of His*

Natural Life. Rufus Dawes is "Good Mr Dawes", a true Christian, because of his actions, not his words. He suffers wrongly and terribly for other people, but can still give help to people in need. One of the other convicts actually tells Dawes that he will see him in heaven, because "you've been good to me - God bless you, you've been very good to me."

John Lee appears as one of the most popular 'good' Christian characters. Lee was sentenced to death in 1885 for murdering his benefactress. Three times they tried to carry out the execution by hanging, but each time the gallows failed to open. His sentence was commuted to life imprisonment and after serving several years, the real murderer admitted to the crime and his name was cleared.

One of the more interesting examples of the good Christian is the Sentimental Bloke - the Australian character, with a heart of gold, a doer of the golden rule. John Tulloch comments about the director, Raymond Longford, that "His conception was of the individual pioneer up against the crushing monopolies as David to Goliath, and that opposition between small, individual, human qualities and huge, impersonal forces is deeply imprinted in the structure of *The Sentimental Bloke*."[10] This 'good Christian' is not a conventional worshipper, his religion is that of mateship and humanity.

Thirdly, we had **The Repentent Sinner**. One example will suffice: *The Life and Adventures of John Vane, The Notorious Australian Bushranger* (1910) recounts the tale of a member of Ben Hall's gang, who surrenders to a priest, spends fifteen years in prison, expiates his sins and emerges at the end "at peace with the world, a living example of the moral lesson, 'often from evil cometh good'".

The second group I mentioned are primarily concerned with specific religious tasks and duties.

The Marrying Clergy. One of the main duties of clergy in Australia is the conducting of the legal and religious rite of marriage. In 1901, 96.25% of marriages were conducted by Christian clergy. Judging from the number of Australian films where clergy seemingly miraculously appear to marry people, it would seem that a major purpose of cinema clergy is to prevent fornication.

Probably the most well-known wedding scene of the silent era is that performed in *The Sentimental Bloke* (1919). It contrasts the formality of the parson with the informality of the Bloke.

The Bloke sees the minister as "The queer ole Pilot Cove, Wiv silver 'air an' gentle ways, Dressed in 'is little shirt wiv frills an' bands." It is evident that the Bloke is not a regular attender of church affairs. He is in church only because this is where 'your duty is done'.

This theme continues at the reception where the minister is seated beside the couple. He has to speak "a little piece" about marriage being like a boat in the sea - it has its ups and downs. After finishing he is suitably applauded. This is the end to all the minister's duties; he has performed the state function of marriage celebrant, given some post-marriage counselling and probably even gave thanks to God for the wedding supper.

The Bloke and Doreen soon make their exit and after waving them away, the rest of the guests make their way back to continue the party. The one notable exception is the minister, there is now a vacant spot where he sat. The minister is no longer needed and anyway it is likely

that the stereotype of the restrained clergyman would have prevented him from continuing to join in the celebrations.

Ashes to Ashes. Death is a major opportunity in the life of a religious person. Even the people who claim 'no religion', may end up on the receiving end of a member of the clergy. The granting of last rites or prayers before death also featured in silent films.

Other religious professionals. A prison chaplain appears in *A Coo-ee from Home* (1918), there are also other films using characters from Roman Catholic religious orders and soldiers of the Salvation Army.

What little there is of other faiths appears to be stereotyped. *The Bells* (1911) and *Environment* (1927) display the characters of the shifty and money-hungry Jew.

THE USE OF CHURCH BUILDINGS

In *Jewelled Nights* (1925), Louise Lovely actually had a mock church built for the wedding scene. One writer comments, "it was more than her adherence to the Hollywood example that encouraged such production extravagance: real churches proved reluctant to house a 'fake' wedding and Lovely did not want the film identified with a particular denomination."[11]

These comments raise interesting questions. What does a 'real church' look like? Do people discriminate between denominational churches in any real way? Many churches, particularly those in an episcopal tradition are built with similar designs. It would be difficult to design a church which did not contain some elements common to several

denominations. Louise Lovely's church seemed to emerge as a cross between an Anglican and a Roman Catholic church.

One interesting example of a very different use of a church was provided in *Yachts and Hearts*, or *The Opium Smugglers* (1918), which was a story about a villain who smuggled and circulated drugs through a cabaret set-up. Special effects were apparently used with great effect because "when warning was given of a police raid, it could be rapidly transformed into a church, much to the confusion of the police."[12]

CONCLUSION

First of all, Australian films of this period reflected the domination of institutional Christianity. For example, it would have been difficult to portray a wedding without a Christian minister, because as already noted, nearly 100% of weddings during this period were performed with church rites.

Secondly, the types of religious figures portrayed represent the dominant forms of Christianity in Australia at the time. Usually the forms of Christianity displayed were those with which the majority of the population were associated. The basic categories were: Roman Catholic, Anglican (Church of England) and Protestant.

Thirdly, males dominated the public face of the religion, just as they dominated most sections of public life. It appeared natural to portray only males in the clerical roles, because it was a male arena. Few women had any active public role in Australian religious circles during this period. The question of the ordination of women was not even on the agenda for most denominations until the 1960s.

Finally, religion in the silent period was mainly used for functional purposes. Religious characters spent most of their screen time performing the tasks with which the population associated them: the rites of passage (particularly marriage and funerals), social welfare obligations, evangelism and various forms of ritual worship. Religious characters also made excellent figures of contrast, especially if a significant contrast is needed. Who better to expose as a hypocrite than a clergyman?

The reliance of film makers on stereotyped religious functions and tasks meant that the portrayal of religious characters was usually limited. Film makers showed little interest in issues of substance; they were more concerned with using religion to facilitate the story line.

ENDNOTES

1. Given the length of this paper it is not possible to debate the meaning of the words 'religious' or 'religion', but during the silent film period, religion and Christianity were often equated. In 1901, some 97% of Australians claimed affiliation with a branch of Christianity.

2. These figures are based on my reading of plot summaries of nearly one thousand films, and also my notes from viewing over four hundred Australian feature films in the last three years.

3. See Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, *Australian Film 1900 - 1977* (Sydney: Oxford University Press/Australian Film Institute, 1980).

4. Limelight was the "name borrowed from the gas-heated lime block used as the light source in the projectors". See 'Salvationists and the Silver Screen', Part 1, in *The War Cry*, 13 April, 1991, p. 3.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *The War Cry*, 20 April, 1991, p. 3.

7. Pike, *op.cit.*, p. 126.

8. Pike and Cooper, *op.cit.*, p. 126.

9. Peter Malone, 'Discovering an Australian Spirituality', *Compass Theology Review*, Vol. 17 (Summer 1984), p. 28.

10. John Tulloch, from 'Legends on the Screen', in Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan (eds), *An Australian Film Reader* (Sydney, Currency Press, 1985), p. 44.

11. Ina Bertrand (ed), *Cinema in Australia: A Documentary History* (Sydney: NSW University Press, 1989), p. 100.

12. Pike and Cooper, *op.cit.*, p. 104.