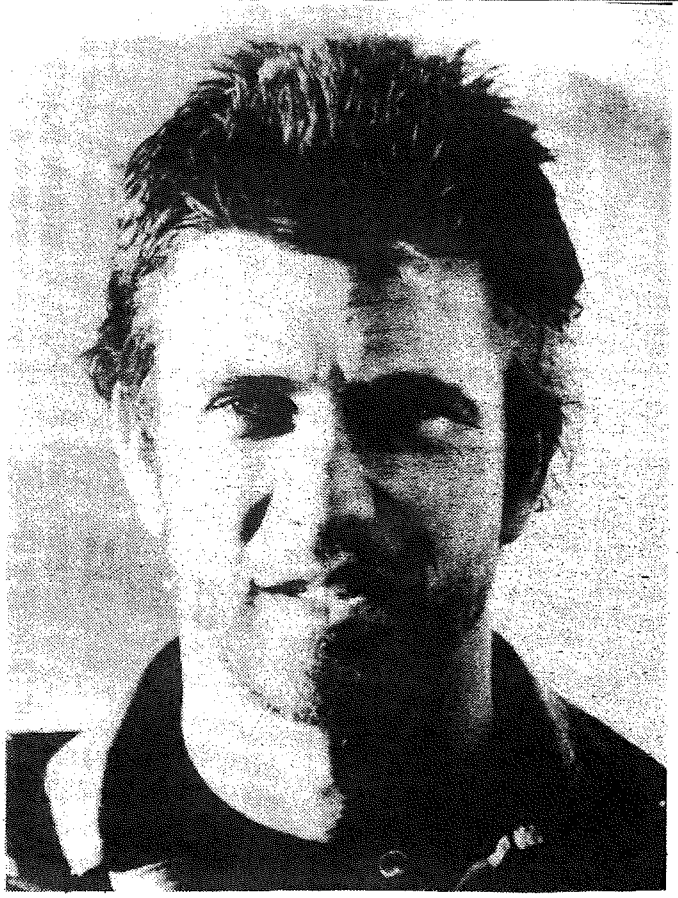
Religion: faithful attraction for Australian film-makers.

Film reflects as well as shapes popular perceptions. So there is something to be learned from the way religious experience has been depicted by Australian film-makers. This survey was written by Church Affairs editor PETER BENTLEY.



"Mad Max" Mel Gibson - "He" keeps coming back

Australia is at least a nominally Christian country. In the 1986 census, 73 percent of the population indicated that their religion was Christian (the next highest religious affiliation was Islam at 0.7 percent).

Thus it would be reasonable to expect that Christianity would have made a significant contribution to the cinematic portrayal of religion in Australia. However, if you tried to gain an impression of Australian Christianity from its representation in feature films, you would come away with a distorted and stereotyped picture.

Mostly the representative of the Christian religion is depicted as a minister/priest (male of course), doing little more than officiating at funerals and weddings, and generally being a repository of ineptitude, bigotry and fanaticism. Perhaps a reason for this inadequate depiction is that many professed Christians have made at best, inept, or no attempt at all to portray themselves and their beliefs.

Only occasionally is there a portrayal of a reasonable religious figure. Even rarer though, is the portrayal of a woman with religious beliefs (especially if the woman isn't a nun). It seems that the price of a woman's belief is confusion about her sexuality.

Strangely though, it was a specifically Christian film, *Soldiers of the Cross* (1900), which is regarded by some historians as the first major work to be produced in Australia and as such, the forerunner of the feature film.

Soldiers of the Cross was made by Joseph Perry, a major in the Salvation Army, involved in its Limelight Department, founded to spread the Army's message through the new medium of cinematography.

Herbert Booth, son of the founder of the Salvation Army, provided the script for the production and preached (lectured) at the screenings. The production was essentially a compilation of film, slides, music and Booth's lecture.

The theme of early Christian martyrdom provided the basis of a captivating production, and presumably the audiences were not too critical of details such as the portrayal of Roman soldiers in Viking costume.

Unfortunately, Perry produced only two more films with the short-lived Biorama Studios, which had been founded in 1909. The studios were closed in 1910 by worried Salvation Army officers, who probably saw the cinema as belonging in the Devil's domain after all.

Other early films did not take the sympathetic standpoint of the Salvation Army films towards religion, and indeed enraged Christian groups by portraying clergy in scandalous situations. *The Silence of Dean Maitland* (1914, also remade in 1934), *The Church and the Woman* (1917) and *The*

Monk and the Woman (1917) were perhaps the prelude to the real-life clergy scandals which erupted on the television screens in the 1980s.

Two significant films in the 1930s were the Charles and Elsa Chauvel film *In the Wake of the Bounty* (1933) and the Beaumont Smith classic *Splendid Fellows* (1934), both of which reveal a great deal about religious attitudes at the time.

In the Wake of the Bounty followed the mutiny on the *Bounty* to the arrival of the mutineers on Pitcairn Island (actually, of those who had chosen to go with Fletcher Christian). The last part of the film was a documentary about the descendants of the mutineers in the 1930s. The Chauvels filmed on Pitcairn Island expressly for this purpose.

There is a major religious dimension to the film. The conversion of John Adams, who was the sole surviving mutineer when the community was discovered 20 years after the mutiny, is shown as being "saved" by the power of the *Bounty* bible.

Adams is depicted as the preacher/patriarch of the community. Ironically, one of the most important religious details about the Pitcairn community is missing from the film - the fact that Adam's descendants had all been converted to Seventh-day Adventism in the 1880s. (They remain Adventists to this day).

The suppression of that fact betrays a prejudice which was to be chillingly evident in attitudes toward Lindy and Michael Chamberlain fifty years later - attitudes so well captured in *Evil Angels* (1988), about which more anon.

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The other film, *Splendid Fellows*, contains much fascinating material for the cultural historian. The film celebrates the great Melbourne Centennial air race from London. One of the major characters is the "flying parson", the Reverend Arthur Stanhope.

The parson does not compete in the air race, but arranges for the construction of his dream plane, which is used by the other major characters. These pilots become "Splendid Fellows" for their heroic actions in saving the parson and another man (who receives his sight back from God), who had crashed in the Outback on their way from Melbourne to welcome the flyers.

The parson had been a fighter pilot in World War I, but gave away all the "slaughter and the shooting down of human souls" in order "to save instead of destroy". He is depicted in a series of short scenes travelling through the Australian bush performing the rites of passage and providing material comfort for isolated communities.

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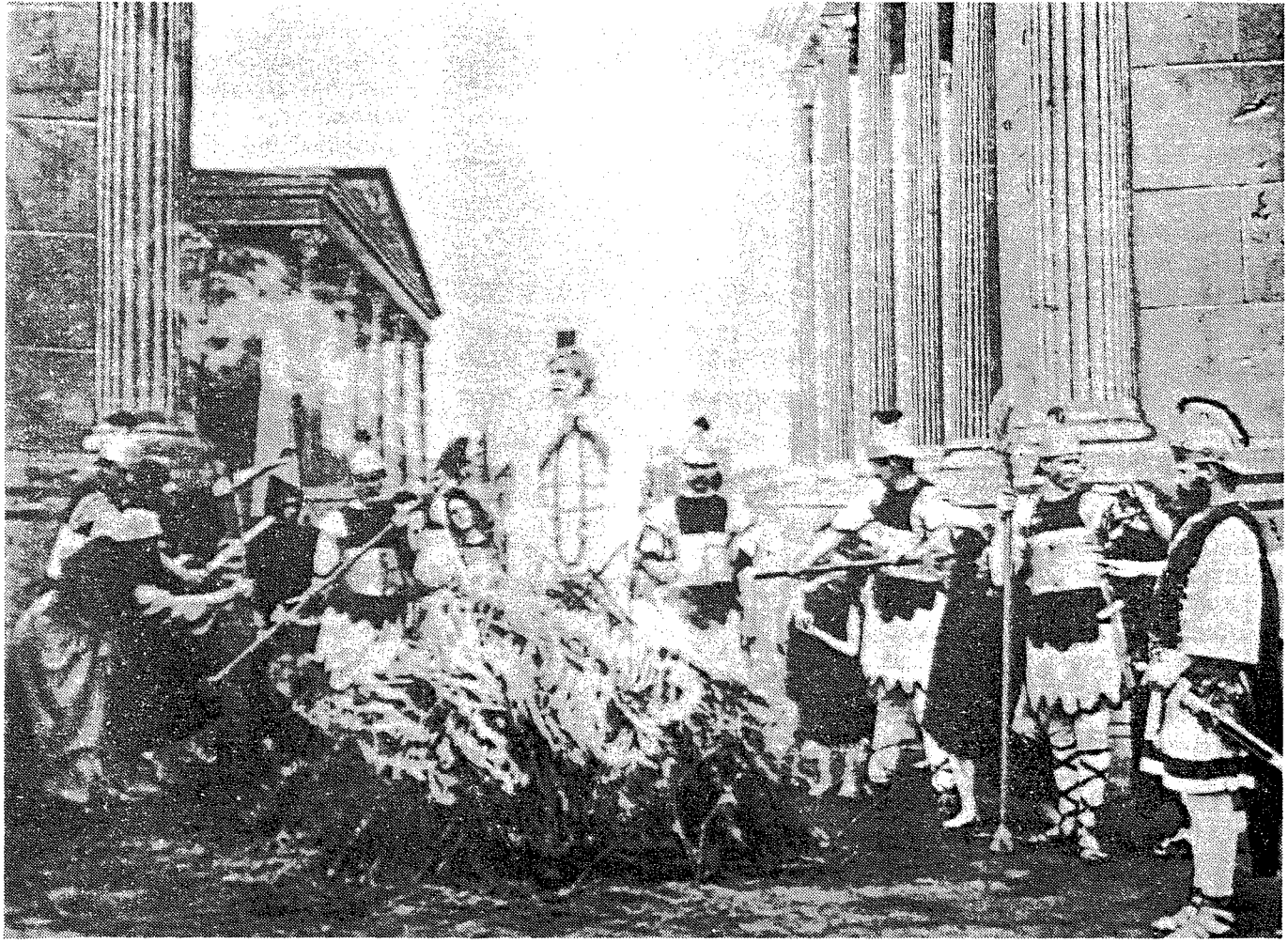
From the end of the 1930s until the late 1960s, the Australian film industry was in a depressed state. The most significant religious film made during this time was the film by World Wide Pictures (a department of the Billy Graham organisation) *Shadow of the Boomerang (1960).* The film was made as a followup to the Billy Graham crusade to Australia in 1959.

Like the Russians in the Stalin era who sought to honour Pushkin by erecting a statue of Stalin reading a book by Puskin, this film, despite its title, was actually about Americans - a brother and sister. The brother's racist attitudes are dispelled after listening to one of Graham's sermons. He is soundly converted!

But congruent with the slow flowering of the Australian film industry from the late 1960s onwards, a new interest in religious themes became evident in cinematic productions, and the next two decades witnessed a proliferation of films of this genre.

One of the earliest introduced a multicultural dimension: in *Squeeze a Flower* (1970), Walter Chiari continued his Catholic persona (from *They're a Weird Mob,* 1966), but expanded it as a member of a religious order.

The most overtly religious film of the 1970s was of course, *The Devil's Playground*, which looked at school/seminary life for Catholic boys



The starting point - from "Soldiers of the Cross" (1900)

in the 1950s. This film followed on from the director's (Fred Schepisi) earlier short film, *The Priest* (in *Libido*, 1973).

The themes of repressed and anguished sexuality, enforced celibacy, strictures of Catholic morality and clerical life are potentially sensationalist, though Schepisi handled them with artistic skill.

These films confirmed interest in religious themes, because during the 1980s there has been a proliferation of written material about Catholic childhoods and religious lives. Still, the portrayals of the dark side of religious experience often became mere stereotyping. The Reverends in *The Getting of Wisdom* (1977) are cold religious figures. No love is depicted and certainly none is available for Laura Ramsbotham.

At least the Methodist minister, Mr Neville, in *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* (1978) has a modicum of Christian character, but his worries and Christian reflections are never fully developed. Only those people who had read the Keneally novel would be aware of his inner conflict.

In *Hoodwink* (1981), the subject of Christians witnessing in prisons becomes entangled with a love affair between the minister's wife and the hoodwinking prisoner, who is pretending to be blind.

There are some unusually well-developed Christian scenes and the conflict is well acted, though the affair does seem to develop a bit too quickly. Perhaps not all minister's spouses are the victims of such profound sexual inactivity and have to take the opportunity of "knowing a man" when the possibility arises.

Strikebound, the 1984 dramatisation of the 1936 Korumburra mine strike, betrays a typical filmic superficiality when dealing with religion. The key people involved in the film are both depicted as having a faith - Wattie Doig's is in communism, while his wife Agnes, is in the Salvation Army.

Agnes is depicted as an Army officer who is actively involved in the regular meetings and outreach events of the Army. When Wattie becomes involved with the strike, Agnes does all she can to help. For the latter part of the film Agnes does not wear her uniform. Is this meant to symbolize the conflict between Christianity and communism? The film does not make this clear, though committed communists would have been quite aware of the conflict in Spain which began at the time being depicted in the film.

Earlier in the film, there is a significant scene which perhaps illustrates to Agnes the distinction between the aims of their different faiths. Wattie is present at the founding of the local Communist Party branch and Agnes is in the (near-by) Salvation Army Hall for the weekly praise meeting. The following scenes cut from communist meeting to Christian, culminating in a battle between the two groups to out-sing each other. The Salvationists sing "Onward Christian Soldiers" and the communists sing "The Red Flag". It is the communists and strikers who are depicted as the agents of real change in a real world. This represents a stereotypical view which refuses to see any support in the Christian tradition for social justice.

Yet while it is true to say the sin of facile stereotyping of religious, and particularly Christian experience, is very evident in Australian film, fortunately there are exceptions.

The most shining example is surely *Evil Angels*. While it contains exactly those elements which film producers love to caricature, including a deeply religious family who belong to a little known denomination, in the Chamberlain case the reality of the situation was simply too powerful and to well known to allow for the usual distortion.

It was because of its portrayal of the Chamberlains as real people, that *Evil Angels* became the triumph it was recognised to be at the 1989 Australian Film Institute Awards.

After that, are Australian filmmakers likely to recognise the rich vein of human experience among ordinary Christian people, waiting to be tapped? I doubt it. The stereotypes are too popular and easy - and unfortunately not altogether undeserved.

Moreover, if we are looking at the portrayal of religion on film it needs to be recognised that while there is much knocking of the institutional church, there is a much more open attitude towards religious experience in a broader context.

Thus, among the most notable and probably the most enigmatic religious films this century was the controversial and widely acclaimed *Bliss* (1985). Based on the novel by Peter Carey, the film leaves the viewer pondering many questions about life and death. Is Harry really in hell? Did he die and was he sent back to earth for some task? Is hell really like an elephant on your car?

Certainly Harry's discussion with the Reverend Des provides a scene of torture worthy of hell. The Reverend Des falls into the category of stereotyped figures of religious ridicule, but then *Bliss* is a parable in which stereotypes are to be expected. The Rev Des is not the raving preacher of *The City*, *Three in One* 1957, or *The Mango Tree* (1978); rather he is the inept, faithless minister of religion - a worthy successor to the Reverend who gave his name to *Peterson*(1976).

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Another hauntingly enigmatic film, *The Tale of Ruby Rose* (1987), also has a religious dimension. Roger Scholes, the director, is a Christian film-maker, although he does not present overtly Christian messages. Scholes tells the story of Ruby, a young woman with a fear of the dark and how she overcomes this fear.

Another film in this genre is *The Navigator*, a facinating story about a group of 14th-century miners in Cumbria, who embark on a quest at the instigation of a visionary child. If they can spire on the top of the great cathedral they will avert the plague.

The struggle between good and evil, with the good emerging triumphant has certainly been a major theme in contemporary Australian film. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Mad Max trilogy. Perhaps Max is the true representative of religion for Australians. He has suffered, but conquered in the end. He is not the God of the clergy and the institutional church. He is the God dimly felt and inarticulately sought by ordinary people who would not see themselves as religious.

Max's wanderings into the desert and out of the desert mirror the way religious themes keep coming back into Australian film. Somehow we feel safe with him and we join in the ritual command: "Pray that he's out there...somewhere!" He must be, or people would have stopped talking about him by now. ■