

God On My Side

Is God a Republican? Watching *God On My Side* one could take away this impression from the interviews with Christians attending the 63rd National Religious Broadcasters Convention in February 2006.

Having recently returned from the USA I found it possible to reflect a little more on this intriguing and stimulating documentary production from Zapruder's Other Films, a reference to the most famous or perhaps infamous short documentary film in cinematic history. The documentary film is centred by the presenter and co-executive producer Andrew Denton, who is well-known to most Australians for the series **Enough Rope**. I have been fascinated by the film for some time, and earlier this year, I was able to speak to the producer and co-writer of 'God on My Side', Jon Casimir and had a stimulating and genuine conversation about the film, faith contemporary values and morals, and life in general. This reinforced my interest in highlighting this film as an important development in the Australian film industry. A documentary, featuring Australians commenting on the religious ethos of another country, and one that has had a significant effect on Australian church life over the last thirty years.

Andrew Denton introduces the viewer to the context right from the start.

"Welcome to Texas, and the Gaylord Convention Center - home to the 63rd Annual Convention of the National Religious Broadcasters. These are George Bush's people, the evangelical voters who put him over the line, and into the White House. This is a film about how they see the world." (Andrew Denton)

It is an opportunity for Christians to watch how we are perceived - to explore how. As Denton says "... to question where faith can take people.." and have the telescope put on us, or at least a section of American Christianity.

Publicity material for the production highlights three main points for the visit to this major Christian convention.

"First, it would provide a way to look at George W Bush's America through the lens of faith rather than politics. Second, he had heard that a major exhibit at the 2005 convention was the bombed out shell of Jerusalem Bus 19, blown up by a suicide bomber in 2004 - 11 people died and 50 were injured. And third, he thought that in an age where there is such a focus on Muslim fundamentalism, it might be interesting to shine some light on Christian fundamentalism as well. Not to compare and contrast the two. Not to suggest that they are in any way equal. Just to find out what the local version looked like." (*Production notes: God On My Side, Hopscotch Films 2006*)

Jon Casimir explained further that the second point was the initial stimulus, as the original article about the exhibition in Harper's had caught their attention and Denton has said that he "found that idea really curious. I really wanted to find out what kind of person might be attracted to that sort of exhibit."

I first saw *God On My Side* at the 2006 Sydney Film Festival, where it premiered. In fact, I was so intrigued by the film and the audience that I went to the second screening. Some stylistic and editorial changes were made for the cinema release through Hopscotch Films mainly because it was perceived that the original structured format was not suitable for cinema. If you saw the film on ABC television or on DVD, you also viewed it without the original format, which as I put to Jon Casimir, dramatically affected the story telling, and in my view made it poorer. Jon agreed with me, and indicated he would have preferred keeping the original format as well.

The original themes centred around the idea of **the Book**, with the stylistic device of sections or chapters. This was an excellent visually structured approach, which also reinforced the foundational exploration of the place of the Bible for Christians as well.

Continuing the ethos of *Enough Rope*, Andrew Denton allows people to speak for themselves and the editing and weaving of the programme then provides a picture and message. Once home in Australia, Jon Casimir indicated the themes became evident from the variety of footage they had taken. Due the editing and changes mentioned, these 'book chapters' are not as easily identifiable or encapsulating, so it is worth noting below.

Faith - a personal journey

This provided an opportunity to hear comments and ask questions of the ordinary members and stall holders. It made it clear that faith was not an institutional commitment but a personal faith, and the faith of ordinary Christians had an impact on who ended up in the Whitehouse.

America - the belief in America being God's country. For most Australians who now live in a country where religious beliefs are rarely prominent, this theme helped to explain the synergy between faith and nationalism.

George - especially the endorsement of George Bush and the Republican Party. While the film does not say that evangelicals run the country, it certainly showed how conservative evangelical Christians provided the support for his election, and continued to support George Bush with prayer.

Andrew Denton raised questions about this support and support for American policies, and generally it was seen as quite logical, apart from necessary that faith would play a part in a person's political life.

Brian Godawa, Hollywood screenplay writer and active Christian (and one of those clearly not supportive of George Bush's politics, helpfully summed this up in the film:

"What most people today mean by the separation of Church and State is your religion cannot influence your political involvement whatsoever, which is ludicrous because atheists get to do that, Buddhists... Every other belief system that exists seems to be allowed to influence their decisions. Why couldn't Christians do that as well? The stereotype is, if you believe your Christian faith should influence your political involvement then that means you want to set up a police state and force everybody to become a Christian. That's the ridiculous stereotype that simply isn't true."

Israel - the focus on support for Israel

"The biggest booth by far on the convention floor belongs to the Israeli Tourism Ministry. Last year the centerpiece of their exhibit was the wreckage of Jerusalem Bus 19, blown up in a suicide bombing in 2004, in which 11 people died." (Andrew Denton)

This section was particularly focussed on the presence of the Israeli representatives and people, and the positive responses of Christians to questions asking about the need for the USA to support Israel.

The Rapture - a look at the many groups focussing on the end times, usually connected with a perception of future unfolding events in Israel, and hence the follow on part to the section on Israel itself.

And finally, the conclusion centred on the Bible - **the Book of Books**. An apt chapter heading, highlighting the uniqueness and exclusive orientation of the Bible, a theme that was considered throughout (more later on this).

Large American conventions can be intriguing places of converging faith, consumerism and entrepreneurial activity., Brian Godawa aptly noted, that "It's like Jesus and the money changers. You come in here, and you see the goofiest Jesus trinkets being sold. You know, Jesus cookies, and, you know, scripture cookies, and Jesus chains, and necklaces, and stuff. And in some ways, we reduce Christianity to a consumer product, which is a real negative. But on the other hand, at least they have something they believe in, that they want the world to accept, and they're trying to reach out to the world, and communicate that through it, and you can't knock 'em for that."

There are many fascinating characters in the film, and they were often met simply in the usual way of meeting people - finding them on the floor of a meeting or around the convention areas. Other interviewees, Jon Casimir explained were obvious from the convention handbook. This meant that they stood out for their intriguing ministry and story, or fitted in with a particular area they wished to explore, like Doug Batchelor and prophecy ministry.

Some figures are clearly used as explanatory leaders, helping to convey broader ideas in the film, or provide nuanced comment. Jos, a stall holder working with radio reaching people in the Arabic lands is an excellent example of this. He provided a European viewpoint on American Christianity, Zionism, and especially Islamic and Christian faiths, on which he comments:

"This is where fundamentalism started. It's a Christian term. We should not confuse the terms. I don't think it's helpful to compare Christian fundamentalism with Muslim fundamentalism because they have a very different outcome. An average Christian fundamentalist would not condone killing for the sake of religion. The average Muslim fundamentalist can go back to the sources of his own religion and say "Our prophet was willing to kill for this or that situation, for that reason, so we are entitled to do the same". " (Jos, Arab Vision)

Phil Cooke, who produces television commercials for people like mega church leader Joel Esteen, as well as running a successful communications business, was chosen for this ground breaking work in contemporary communication, and theology and emphasis on change. If you want to follow him up he provides a regular e-newsletter about change and Christian communication at www.PhilCooke.com

Another clear candidate for Jon was Hollywood actress Jennifer O'Neill. As Andrew introduced her in the film (voice-over): "Jennifer, a veteran of eight marriages and more than 30 films, including 'Rio Lobo' and 'Summer of '42' would like to see Hollywood put its weight more firmly behind God. " (Andrew Denton)

She had a very worldly Hollywood lifestyle before becoming a Christian, as she explains at one point, "I have always believed in marriage. You can tell by how many times I was married. But I have been married nine years now. Is it perfect? No. It takes work. But if you have God at the centre and your husband's here and you're there and you're both going towards God, you'll grow closer together. I now have the tools to know in my heart and without a doubt that my marriage is going to last my lifetime because that's my choice." (Jennifer O'Neil)

The McDuff brothers, a singing trio of evangelists was simply chosen because they were great story tellers and communicators, and in the DVD, they, along with Doug Batchelor and Jennifer O'Neil feature in extended interviews.

A major overall theme which is focussed on toward the end is the question of who is right - it is the continuation of the title *God On My side* and in a way asks how can anyone claim this? The biblical reference used for the title is from Romans: "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31)

Certainly from my discussion with Jon Casimir, an underlying theme, arising particularly from the viewpoints of the writers was a questioning of the view frequently presented in the documentary that there is an exclusive truth (and this truth is found in the Christian faith).

The questions, Andrew's manner and style, and the ethos of the documentary are all undertaken in a respectful and generous manner, but there are limits to this approach, as it could provide an impression of benign tolerance. It could also imply that all beliefs are equally wrong or simply deluded? I was left wondering about the place of judgement in a world of relative tolerance.

Certainly we need more consideration of the fundamental issues which the Church is grappling with today; namely questions like, are there some beliefs which are foundational and essential for the faith, and which religious beliefs are not only inadequate, but actually wrong?

This theme actually connects all the specific themes in the film. For example near the end Andrew Denton puts the following point to the McDuff brothers - "Your faith is so deep, so heartfelt, so absolute. How can you be sure that you're right?

The 'lead' brother in answering tells of his conversion and that his personal experience with the Lord. While others talk about a theory, 'he knows what he knows because he knows.' The McDuff brothers have the last spoken word (apart from some amusing end lines in the credits), and this is used to summarise the main word in the documentary. He says simply: "Because. That's not the word of God."

There is however also a sting in the tail, with the simple presentation of a final biblical reference: *"This is my commandment: that ye love one another as I have loved you."* (John 15:12)

Jon explained to me that they wanted to use that verse because of their perception that there was "Not as much love in the room as there should have been." (Jon Casimir interview: 26 February 2008). I also see it as a contrast with the seeming intolerant 'last word'.

Still, the use of this verse is a challenging point. How do we shape up in terms of love, remembering this is Christian love?

This is a reminder for us that our Christian speech must match our action, but it is also a reminder that we need to know what Christian love is. Love may mean we are compelled to tell someone or some church, like our own church, what we believe is wrong and to plead for correction. It is also a reminder for all of us that we need to continue to seek to understand the love that Jesus talks about. A love so deep, sacrificial and abiding that people are profoundly changed and keep changing.

One fascinating comment from Jon Casimir was that Andrew Denton obtained two Personal Promise Bibles, one for each of their wives. These are bibles that insert a person's name in the 'general' promises throughout the bible. I encourage people to pray that these bibles will be well used.

Peter Bentley

Note: first published in ACCatalyst: Volume 1, June 2008