

Peter Bentley

Press Service International Columnist
August 2021

The USA and Religion

The USA has long fascinated me, and I have embarked on a series of reflections on culture in the USA, using American film or television as a prompt. This is the fourth article and considers religion, though in the USA context of Christianity, because the Christian faith has been the dominant religious movement and the prime source of inspiration for the media.

In The Beginning

I thought it was worth starting with this two-part mini-series that looks at the era of the foundation of the USA. *Saints and Strangers* (2015) is a respectful consideration of the puritans and their journey and settlement in Plymouth and the development of thanksgiving. This series links into the theme of American entrepreneurship and religious expansion and helps to illustrate the wider development of these themes in the American church over time as the blessing of endeavours becomes central.

This can be coupled with the film *American Gospel* (2018), a documentary that explores the contemporary development of the blessing or success movement that has mostly left out any understanding of difficulties and failures, the latter being profoundly evident in the theology of the Pilgrim fathers. More information about the film and the theology of prosperity or 'word of faith' is found in the article by Nic Lee. [The American gospel | ChristianToday Australia](#) The full documentary itself could do with a good amount of editing, as it labours its main point, so it is helpful for Nic to mention the shorter version available on YouTube.

The Development of new religious movements

The 19th century witnessed a proliferation of religious groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints (Mormons); the Christadelphians and the Seventh-day Adventists. They contributed to American religion and culture often in entrepreneurial ways, but also by having distinctive religious features. In a very contemporary and media savvy way, the Seventh-day Adventist church used the Mel Gibson directed film *Hacksaw Ridge* (2016) as the foundation of an evangelistic campaign as the key character was an Adventist and 'conscientious supporter'.

A prominent emphasis on the family in most religious groups has helped with the development of films that have been family oriented. There have also been lateral series like the controversial HBO production *Big Love* (2006-2011) that was about members of a continuing polygamous religious group.

The Staple of Horror Times

Themes about possession, Satan and evil spirits have been a key fixture, as they can utilise Hollywood's supernatural interest with a popular Christian context. Prominent films that others have been influenced by include Rosemary's Baby (1968) and *The Exorcist* (1973). A later under-rated film *Deliver us from Evil* (2014), is worth viewing for its contemporary consideration, and Eric Bana playing real life cop Ralph Sarchie.

In a way, it is surprising that Christian directors and companies have not explored horror and evil more in their films, rather than leaving it mainly to Hollywood.

Expansion of the Christian film industry

When technology had developed to a reasonable cost point, and the use of this technology was seen as 'good', some Christian organisations from the 1950s moved back into film development, often to enhance or promote their evangelistic efforts. Another significant period of development has been the last two decades, where again with the move to more cost-effective production, has enabled local churches to make films. One of the most notable churches has been Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany Georgia. Alex and Stephen Kendrick founded Sherwood Pictures and began involving local members in the production, including the senior pastor in the acting. The message in Sherwood films is overtly Christian and based around their desire to encourage traditional Christian faith and family relationships within life-affirming situations. They are films about relationships; God, our neighbour, the family, often with a focus on men, encouraging them to re-examine their relationships.

Sherwood Pictures have produced four films since 2003; *Fireproof* was the No. 1 independent film in the USA in 2008, a fact mainly reflecting the sizeable Christian market, but also the growing interest in family friendly films. Their film about fatherhood *Courageous* was the highest grossing new film for its opening weekend in 2011.

The success of their films has moved them into more established commercial arrangements, and the Kendrick Brothers have since produced *War Room* (2015) and *Overcomer* (2019) through their own production company, in association with Hollywood companies.

The End Times

While there are denominations and religious bodies that have focussed on the end times, the USA is a country where there is a sizeable Christian group keenly interested in the end times. This market has enabled many Christian films to be developed as well as secular films.

The Rapture (1991, M) is a Hollywood movie and one of the more intriguing in this context. Starring David Duchovny and Mimi Rogers it provided an adult focussed consideration of sin, repentance, concluding with the rapture.

Left Behind. The initial series of three video films (2000, 2002 and 2005) prompted further interest in the Christian apocalyptic market, partly due to the large sales of the book series. Hollywood re-did part of the first film (*Left Behind*, 2014) and included Academy Award winner, Nicolas Cage as the main character. While this latest version is quite hammy at times, it illustrates the fascination with the rapture, and Hollywood's connection when they perceive money can be made.

Other films that have gained wide attention and viewing have been based around heaven.

The Shack (2017). This was always going to be a difficult book to bring to the screen because of its visual focus in the imaging of heaven. Not-with-standing the theological controversy of the book, the film was a faithful adaptation, starring everyman Australian actor, Sam Worthington.

And two films that need to be highlighted for their consideration of the future in terms of someone who has claimed to experience it for real; *Heaven is for Real* (2014), and *Miracles from Heaven* (2016)

It was difficult to choose films or series on this theme as there are so many in the Hollywood context, as well as the Christian film genre. It should not be surprising that religion, and in particular the Christian faith has been a central element in secular productions. Christianity is a significant cultural context for the USA in general, but when Hollywood realised there was money to be made in religious pictures like the great epics of the 1950s and 1960s, the gates were opened to more varied production. The film that consolidated this for a new generation was *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Whether this is an irony, or a particularly good thing depends on where your love resides.

Peter Bentley

[Archival Website for Peter Bentley – A digital record of the work of Peter Bentley from 1983 to the present. \(pkbentleyarchive.com\)](http://pkbentleyarchive.com)