

THE DEVIL'S CHURCH: CONSERVATIVE PROTESTANTISM
AND THE MOVIES, 1915–1955

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ABSTRACT

Few Protestants today consider stepping into a movie theater anathema to their religion. But during the first half of the twentieth century many conservative Protestants avoided movie theaters entirely and church leaders frequently insisted that the faithful refrain from seeing any Hollywood film. Some denominations, such as the Christian Reformed Church and Church of the Nazarenes, established formal regulations prohibiting church members from patronizing movie theaters in the 1920s while Christian colleges and bible schools required students to stay out of movie theaters as a condition of their enrollment. For a time, so common was conservative Protestant abstention from movies that Stephen Paine, Houghton College president and founding member of the National Association of Evangelicals, considered it an identifiable trait of conservative Protestantism. “[H]ere is an area of unpremeditated agreement of spirit,” Paine wrote, “We don’t attend the movies.”

Conservative condemnations of Hollywood began in earnest in the 1910s, so the fact that Paine offered this observation in 1957 provides an indication of how long conservative Protestant hostility toward movies lasted. Although some conservative Protestants began to relax their total ban on movie-going in the 1950s, the vituperative sermons and editorials denouncing Hollywood throughout the first half of the twentieth century had a long-lasting impact on conservative Protestants throughout the twentieth century. For example, at Wheaton College, a flagship evangelical liberal arts school, all students had signed pledge cards that they would not patronize a movie theater until 1968

when the administration finally lifted the ban. And although many did not follow their church's dictates, the formal Manual of the Church of the Nazarene required church members to abstain from movie-going into the 1980s.

The broad conservative Protestant aversion to commercial cinema for at least the first half of the twentieth century was also unique in several ways. They demonstrated no comparable animosity to other modern forms electronic media. On the contrary, they became the predominate religious voices on radio in the 1930s and television in the 1970s. Second, their abstention from movie-going set them apart from liberal Protestant and Catholic clergy who encouraged church members to patronize theaters that exhibited films they deemed morally acceptable.

Despite the fact that abstention from movie theaters uniquely characterized a broad range of conservative Protestants for a time, few scholars have considered this behavior worthy of sustained critical attention. Yet a comprehensive account of a religious body demands that historians of American religion calibrate their analysis to focus on the debates our subjects considered crucially significant. This dissertation examines the widespread conservative Protestant abstention from commercial movies, focusing on a period between 1915 and 1955 as the time when this posture had been most prevalent.

To illumine this frequently overlooked history, I drew upon a wide range of conservative Protestant periodicals, sermons, pamphlets, and books published by conservative Protestant leaders and publishing houses, many of which frequently returned to this issue. Zondervan, to name just one prominent evangelical publishing house, produced nineteen books between 1938 and 1955 that addressed the problem of movies.

Additionally, vivid denunciations of commercial cinema appeared regularly in conservative periodicals such as the *Moody Bible Institute Monthly*, *The King's Business*, *The Sunday School Times*, *The Gospel Herald*, *The Herald of Holiness*, *The Banner*, and others. By critically reading a broad range of materials from Baptists, Methodists, Mennonites, Pentecostals, as well as materials from the Christian Reformed Church and the Church of the Nazarene, I identified consistent attitudes toward commercial cinema across a broad body of conservative Protestants.

This research informs my argument that conservative Protestant hostility toward cinema both reflected and modified longstanding Christian anti-theatrical prejudices. In reacting to the establishment of the Hollywood film industry in the 1910s, conservative Protestants reiterated arguments that had been established by church fathers in the second, third, and fourth centuries. At the same time twentieth century conservative Protestants adapted those critiques to reflect their modern anxieties about the lost public prominence of the church and their anxieties about the new culture of consumerism burgeoning after World War I.

This project offers a historical account of a broad period in the twentieth century when a dominant religious body found its cultural authority slipping just as new commercial interest established a dominant position in American culture. During the span of the first two decades of the twentieth century moving pictures evolved from an intriguing gimmick to a familiar ritual of entertainment for millions of people. Public enthusiasm increased exponentially as Hollywood studios in the 1910s began manufacturing exotic movie stars and sublime theater spaces to complement their thrilling feature films.

As audiences flocked to the movies conservative Protestant attitudes toward the commercial film industry soured. They had been distressed about the increasing prominence of amusements during the nineteenth century and moving pictures provoked those arguments anew. More substantially, as Hollywood studios began to self-consciously adopt the modes of popular American theater they ignited previously dormant reserves of outrage among conservative Protestants.

Conservative Protestant detestation of the commercial film industry should also be considered against the backdrop of nineteenth century revivalism when the Protestant body expanded and many come to view Protestant hegemony as a feature of America's heritage. But in the last quarter of the nineteenth century Protestant clergy found their authority undermined as Darwin's evolutionary theory and German higher criticism challenged Protestant biblical interpretations. Soon thereafter a massive influx of Jewish and Catholic immigrants challenged Protestant social dominance. As H.L. Menken put it, "Every day a new Catholic church goes up; every day another Methodist or Presbyterian church is turned into a garage."

Additional social transformations also weakened Protestant hegemony in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In colleges and universities, specialists trained in the methods of modern scholarship gradually replaced clergy who had founded and presided over many institutions of higher learning. At the same time, modern industry, advertising, and mass media shifted additional cultural authority to modern consumers. Conservative Protestants who had mobilized their troops to defend their beliefs from challenges from the academia found themselves ill-prepared to engage in a fight against so many cultural revolutions.

By the mid-1950s, splinters within conservative Protestantism became more pronounced and many of them—particularly from the younger generation—began to challenge the thick walls of separatism that the previous generation had built to defend against some aspects of cultural modernity. Although conservative Protestants by the 1950s began to confront their community’s long-standing abstention from commercial cinema, the incessant jeremiads from the first half of the century fortified a mistrust of the film industry that has continued thereafter. In this study, I provide a portrait of a prominent American religious body struggling to counter some of the radical social and cultural changes in the twentieth century.

DEDICATION

No one worked harder to ensure the completion of this dissertation than my wife. Absent her unceasing love and dedication to our family I would have surrendered long ago. This is for Kimberly, my best friend.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

[W]e believe our churches, Sunday-schools, prayer-meetings, and young peoples' organizations are today suffering more, in an intangible, insidious manner, from the moving picture show, than from any other source.

—Reverend C.F. Wimberly (1917)

The commercial moving picture theater is...so vile in its influence that no Christian should ever set foot in a movie theater.

—John R. Rice, *What is Wrong with the Movies?* (1938)

In 1984 seven-year-old Kent Dobson approached his father with a seemingly prosaic request. Kent wanted to see the movie “E.T.,” the Steven Spielberg phenomenon of the time. But when his father dismissed his request with the reminder, “you know we don’t go to movies” the two began a conversation about their family’s religious values and the history of fundamentalist abstention from movie theaters. After Kent’s father attempted to satisfy his son’s protestations, he reflected on the episode in the periodical he edited, the *Fundamentalist Journal*.¹

Perhaps it is not altogether surprising to hear about a fundamentalist shunning the movies—even something as innocuous as “E.T.” The image of the “bible thumper” condemning all forms of entertainment is a long-standing American trope. Yet the figure of the dour fundamentalist seems at odds with the culture of conservative Protestantism

¹ Edward Dobson, “Thou Shalt Not Attend Movies,” *Fundamentalist Journal* (September 1984): 10.

during the last half-century. Christian entertainment today comprises popular music, comic books, video games, and novels ranging from romances to apocalyptic thrillers. Christians produce this media for Christian audiences that have become enthusiastic consumers. The *Left Behind* series topped the New York Times bestseller lists. Contemporary Christian Music has grown into an \$800 million dollar annual industry. And evangelical enthusiasm for Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" helped make the film the third highest grossing of 2004, lodged between "Meet the Fockers" and "Spider-Man 2." On Gibson's film, the president of the Southern Baptist Convention Jack Graham attributed its success to "a providence of God." Thus, to the extent that conservative Protestants believe that God can work through box office receipts, contemporary evangelicals would seem to have harmonized their religious worldview with their engagement with media. So then, why couldn't Kent Dobson see *E.T.* in 1984?

The answer has nothing to do with evangelical antipathy toward technology or mass media because they were often the earliest religious adopters of new media. Paul Rader, the pastor at Moody Church in Chicago, immediately recognized the evangelistic value radio and took to the airwaves in 1922. By 1932 over four hundred local Christian radio programs filled the airwaves throughout the country.² Of them all, the uncontested leader of religious radio was Charles E. Fuller who began broadcasting the *Old Fashioned Revival Hour* in 1937. Millions tuned in to hear the combination of sermons, music and radio show, giving Fuller one of the largest audiences on national network radio.³

² Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York ; Oxford [England]: Oxford University Press, 1997), 130.

³ *Ibid.*, 139.

The story of the evangelical embrace of television followed a similar trajectory. In the 1960s Catholic and liberal Protestant representatives dominated the television airwaves at a time when the government required networks to apportion some of their airtime to religious programming. But when these regulations were lifted in the 1970s evangelicals applied the free-market skills they learned raising money for radio shows to become some of the prevailing religious voices on television.

Conservative Protestants dominated religious radio programming by the 1930s and religious television by the 1970s. By comparison, the moving picture had been a ubiquitous aspect of American culture since the 1910s, yet a large contingent of conservative Protestants insisted on abstention from movie theaters through the first half of the twentieth century and many maintained their informal prohibition well into the second half of the century. As late as 1957, Stephen W. Paine, founding member of the National Association of Evangelicals and president of Houghton College, considered their abstention from movies a prominent characteristic of conservative Protestantism. “Here is an area of unpremeditated agreement of spirit,” Paine wrote, “We don’t attend the movies.”⁴ At Wheaton College in Chicago, a flagship evangelical liberal arts school, incoming students sign formal pledge cards that they would abstain from patronizing

⁴ Stephen William Paine, *The Christian and the Movies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 5.

movies, a pledge that remained in effect for each incoming class until 1968.⁵ And, as I mentioned above, the editor of the *Fundamentalist Journal* opined on his disinclination to patronize movies as late as 1984.

This dissertation examines why conservative Protestants maintained such a uniquely hostile attitude toward motion pictures for a broad period of the twentieth century. Taking into account their reactions to radio and television, it is clear that evangelical rejection of the movies cannot be understood as a dismissal of electronic media. What's more, their insistence on abstention set them apart from Catholic and liberal Protestant leaders at the time who pressured the film industry to "clean up" the movies. By contrast, conservative Protestants mocked liberal Protestants and Catholics for attempting to morally cleanse the film industry and encouraged the faithful to simply abstain from all commercial cinema.

In this dissertation I examine a distinctive and protracted practice by many conservative Protestants in the United States between 1915 and 1955. Bounding a historical period is a tricky proposition. People and events rarely help the historian by arriving and departing on cue. However I propose here that the period between 1915 and 1955 demarcates a distinct historical phase in which conservative Protestants defined, disseminated, and, ultimately, reconsidered their posture toward the film industry.

Nineteen-fifteen marked a significant year for conservative Protestantism as well as the commercial film industry. It was the year that the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (BIOLA) published *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, a collection of ninety

⁵ The movies were not the only form of entertainment mentioned in the pledge. Wheaton students also agreed to avoid card playing and dances. Yet, for reasons that I elucidate throughout in this dissertation, conservative Protestants considered movies dangerous for unique reasons quite apart from every other form of media or entertainment.

essays that defended conservative evangelical orthodoxy and criticized liberal social and theological trends. This multi-volume set of essays led like-minded conservative Protestants to begin identifying themselves as “fundamentalists.” The arguments and ideas collected in *The Fundamentals* had developed during the late-nineteenth century, but this collection provided the nascent movement unity and identity. Nineteen-fifteen also marked a defining moment for the film industry as the nickelodeon era came to an end and the first urban picture palaces began to appear.⁶ The year also bore witness to D.W. Griffith’s “The Birth of a Nation,” a wildly successful and influential film that had also been highly controversial due to its heroic portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan. Griffith’s directorial techniques came to define the classic Hollywood style and “Birth” helped establish the standard feature-length motion picture. The scope of the narrative, costly production, and record-breaking gross of its day made “The Birth of a Nation” Hollywood’s first blockbuster and helped ensure that this new medium would be more than passing fad. In all of these ways 1915 marked the establishment of Protestant fundamentalism and the commercial film industry. Placed side-by-side, *The Fundamentals* and “The Birth of a Nation” also stand out for their distinctions. The former acted as an indignant reaction to a perceived crisis, a rallying cry to defend against encroaching cultural norms. The latter inaugurated the commercialization of mass media and popular entertainment. In the year that fundamentalists drew a line in the sand, Hollywood planted a flag.

⁶ Historians of cinema disagree over when the nickelodeon era ended. Some point to the 1915 release of “The Birth of a Nation” while others identify the transition after the rise of the more extravagant theaters such as the Dewey Theater in 1908 or the Strand Theater in 1914. See Kathryn H. Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 47.

This project concludes in 1955 when, I argue, the unity that conservative Protestants maintained against movie-going began to crumble. Tracing the publication record of Zondervan, a prominent conservative Protestant publishing house, reveals how their attitudes toward commercial cinema changed over time. In the 1930s and 1940s Zondervan led the fight against movies with publications such as John R. Rice's *What is Wrong with the Movies?* (1938), Lester F. Sumrall's *Worshippers of the Silver Screen* (1940), E.U. Harding's *Movie Mad America* (1942), John Carrara's *Enemies of Youth* (1942), Herbert J. Miles' *Movies and Morals* (1947) and over a dozen others. Zondervan published tens of thousands of copies of books and tracts, emphatically reinforcing various arguments about abstaining from movie going. But by mid-century, more moderate leaders like Billy Graham rejected the cultural separatism of the previous generation and sought a public voice with which to speak on matters of culture and politics, and Zondervan's publication record reflected that change. In 1955 Zondervan published J. Edwin Orr's *The Inside Story of the Hollywood Christian Group*, a journalistic account of a group of conservative Protestants who met for fellowship and aimed to spread a revival from within the film industry. That same year, Zondervan published Dorothy C. Haskin's *Twice-Born Stars You Would Like to Know*, a collection of brief biographies about film stars whom Haskin considered to be models of Christian leadership. These texts from 1955 indicated that many conservative Protestants began reconsidering the absolute separatism of the previous generation and yearned to become more engaged with cultural politics.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter two traces the history of Christian antagonism toward the theatrical stage, arguing that conservative Protestant prejudice against moving pictures reflected, in part, a culmination of centuries of Christian antagonism toward the theatrical stage. I identify three historical periods of Christian animosity toward the stage that came to influence twentieth century conservative biases against the movies. I begin with a critical reading of some of the earliest church fathers who planted the seeds of Christian anti-theatrical prejudice that bore fruit for centuries thereafter. The next period relevant to my project was fifteenth century English Anglicans and Calvinists whose vitriol toward the stage combined religious, social, and political arguments. In the last third of the chapter I trace the history of Protestant hostility toward the theater in the American context with particular emphasis in the nineteenth century. The U.S. context introduced a new theme relevant to illuminating the evangelical relationship with Hollywood; namely, the battle between liberal and conservative Protestants over the place of leisure and play in the Christian life. In the nineteenth century, tensions between liberal and conservative Protestantism would eventually impact Protestant attitudes toward motion pictures in the twentieth century.

Perhaps the ubiquity of contemporary evangelical media conceals the transformation that has taken place regarding conservative Protestant attitudes toward leisure and entertainment. But I argue that disagreements between Protestants over the role of leisure in the Christian's life established tropes that would later impact their posture toward commercial cinema. Historians have mostly overlooked the history of Protestant attitudes toward leisure and entertainment, a topic that Protestants extensively

wrestled with from a period that spanned roughly the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. After the Civil War, many Protestant clergymen railed against the amusements of the day—typically the unholy trinity of dance, playing cards, and the theatrical stage. When asked about the need for amusements in 1872, the renowned revivalist Charles Grandison Finney sniffed, “It is our privilege and our duty to live above a desire for such things.”⁷ This position persisted among prominent fundamentalist pastors of the early twentieth century such as A.C. Dixon, J. Wilbur Chapter, William Edward Biederwolf, and Billy Sunday who all produced vivid indictments against amusements. In one of Billy Sunday’s popular sermons in the 1920s the baseball player-turned-evangelist insisted that a proper Christian home could not stock both a bible and a deck of cards and instructed the crowds to return home and pitch one or the other into their furnaces. We do not know how many decks of cards broiled after Sunday left town but his admonition against the popular amusements of his day would not have seemed exceptional. Chapter two identifies two tropes that I argue are necessary to appreciate conservative Protestant rhetoric toward movies in the twentieth century, the long history of Christian theatrical prejudice and the Protestant debates over leisure and entertainment that commenced in nineteenth-century America.

In chapters three through five I analyze the central rhetorical claims that dominated evangelical critiques of the movies and I place these claims within the broader context of religious and cultural trends of the period. Chapter three focuses on evangelical rhetoric about the movie theater space, the site of commercial film exhibition. I examine the early cooperative efforts across Protestant denominations in support of

⁷ Charles Grandison Finney, “Worldly Amusements,” *The Independent*, December 26, 1872.

laws that would limit movie exhibition on Sunday. When Protestants lost this battle in the 1920s conservative Protestants began to focus on the theatrical space itself.

Beginning in the 1910s, tens of thousands of movie theaters began proliferating across the country, even competing with church buildings in town centers. Conservative Protestants remained acutely aware of the competition posed by local movie theaters. In examining the fight over Sunday film exhibition as well as evangelical hostility toward the theater space, chapter three elucidates a central point of conflict between religious conservatism and cultural modernity, the challenge posed by commercial culture to sacred time and space.

Chapter four examines conservative Protestant arguments about the impact of movie-going on audiences generally and children particularly. Prominent psychological and sociological studies from the 1930s heavily influenced their arguments about movies. In fact, liberal Protestants and Catholics employed the same social scientific data to bolster their attempts at film censorship but conservative Protestants dismissed such attempts, insisting that they would fail. Instead, conservative Protestants drew from the same social scientific sources but read the evidence in support of their arguments for abstinence. In this chapter I examine conservative Protestant rhetoric about movie audiences as a means to illumine their broader concerns about spectatorship, children, and the modern family.

Chapter five examines the rising prominence of movie stars in American culture, the final common trope in conservative Protestant condemnation of the commercial film industry of the first half of the twentieth century. Their bias against film stars was both one of the oldest and newest. Christians have expressed antagonism toward actors dating

back to second and third century church fathers who viewed acting as professional dishonesty. Such enmity reflected Platonic notions of the inferiority of mimetic art forms. Church fathers adapted Plato's biases against the theater and then combined it with their theological and supernatural worldview. They argued that acting rejected one's God-given identity and therefore rejected God. In the fifth chapter I argue that conservative Protestants in the twentieth century retained an element of this ancient critique of actors while introducing new concerns made manifest by particular cultural shifts in post-World War I America. Put simply, the stage and the cinema both had actors, but only Hollywood had *movie stars*. The job title "movie star" not only identified a profession, it also described someone's status with respect to public regard, class, and cultural influence. For conservative Protestants, movie stars came to be viewed as conductors of broader cultural developments in the early twentieth century.

In considering the place of the movie star in American culture, I examine a particular point of conflict between Protestant conservatives and modern commercial culture. To begin, conservative Protestant rhetoric about film actors reflected their anxieties about the role of public personalities. Whereas clergy historically had enjoyed a broad measure of authority and influence, the rise of professional classes in the late-nineteenth century led to a reorientation of public influence and authority. Industrial leaders, university faculty, and the scientific community came to assert greater public authority and influence by virtue of an expertise that did not correspond with their religious affiliations. Still, while it had been difficult enough for clergy to turn over the keys to the university, they found it altogether odious to turn over moral authority to movie stars by virtue of their charisma and physical charms. In their writings from 1915

to 1955, conservative Protestant clergy seethed over the cultural influence of movie stars who could seemingly overnight rewrite cultural norms regarding dress, consumer habits, and sex roles. Were that not worrisome enough, conservative Protestants also implicated movie stars in another burgeoning trend of modern life—conspicuous consumerism. Movie stars came to be ambassadors of a new attitude toward consumption and leisure. Moreover, movie stars did not merely model this modern lifestyle, they also marketed it. In magazines and billboard images the popular film stars of the day urged their fans to buy soap, candy, pillows, cigarettes, alcohol, clothing, furniture, appliances, cars and more. Chapter five argues that conservative Protestant attitudes towards actors combined long-standing Christian tropes regarding actors along with changing norms of public authority and the rise of modern consumerism.

Defining Terms

In writing about “conservative Protestants” I have conflated Christian bodies that scholars often identify as “evangelical” or “fundamentalist.” These terms defy precise definition because their meanings have changed over time, both among scholars and among Protestants who identify with these labels, but I offer herein some of the essential distinctions between these terms and then explain how I employ these terms throughout this project.

In modern parlance “fundamentalism” has come to refer to any extreme right-wing religious movement and scholars have applied the term “evangelical” to a wide range of Christian bodies in Protestant history. Evangelicalism dominated nineteenth century Protestantism and was characterized by a spirit of revivalism, greater autonomy regarding one’s religious and moral character, and optimism about moralizing the nation

by spreading Christian faith. These evangelicals enjoyed broad influence in political, cultural, and intellectual life. But toward the end of the nineteenth century a culmination of cultural, scientific, and academic trends challenged evangelical dominance and influence. Some progressive Protestants sought to align their religious doctrines with these intellectual and cultural developments. In response, a subset of evangelicals adopted the descriptor “fundamentalist” to align themselves with the set of theological propositions that they considered sacrosanct, among them the substitution atonement of the crucifixion and the belief that the Bible recorded the literal and inerrant truth of God’s word. By the 1920s, some fundamentalists began to call for separatism from religious denominations that they considered apostate. Significant to my project, the fundamentalist impulse toward separatism expanded beyond church membership to include separatism from cultural trends they found alarming.

Contemporary scholars of evangelicals and fundamentalism debate the utility of these terms and how much they reveal and conceal about Protestantism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Joel Carpenter in *Revive Us Again* warned against the overly broad use of these terms when he argued that casting a broad range of Protestant movements “as fundamentalists belittles their great diversity and violates their unique identities.”⁸ Keeping this cautionary statement in mind, I use the term “conservative Protestant” throughout this dissertation to identify a broad coalition of Protestants who maintained a similar stance on movie-going during the first half of the twentieth century. Unlike scholars who have attempted to define essential boundaries of fundamentalism,⁹

⁸ Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism*, 4.

⁹ See, for example, Ernest Robert Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970). George M. Marsden,

my research leads me to argue that a wide body of like-minded Protestants shared overlapping anxieties about commercial cinema even as they diverged in other respects. Despite the theological and historical distinctions that defined the unique identities of Baptists, Pentecostals, Mennonites, the Reformed Church, and Nazarenes, many of them concurred with one another in their demands to avoid commercial cinema entirely. What's more, their prohibition against movies distinguished the conservative Protestant position from Catholics, who proposed a rating system to identify movies appropriate for their faithful, and from liberal Protestants, who attempted to "clean up" the movies by staffing local censorship boards. Both Catholics and liberal Protestants pushed Hollywood to abide by a production code that outlined the limits of acceptable standards, as they saw it. By comparison, conservative Protestants regularly ridiculed Catholics and liberal Protestants for attempting to make commercial cinema more morally acceptable. They bristled at the underlying assumption that America could be moralized with legal sanctions and political gamesmanship and they called on the faithful to avoid any engagement with cinema. Whereas scholars such as Ernest Sandeen identified particular theological stances as defining nineteenth and twentieth-century fundamentalism, my work considers fundamentalism as part of a broader body of conservative Protestantism that existed in great tension with modern cultural trends.

In this project I trace a prominent behavioral trait that dominated among conservative Protestants during the first half of the twentieth-century. For this reason, I employ overlapping terms such as conservative Protestant, evangelical, or fundamentalist when describing the objects of this inquiry. Though this project may lose something by

Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

employing such a broad category as conservative Protestant, I argue that spanning across multiple denominations and traditions reveals a dominant area of overlap between Baptists, Methodists, Mennonites, Nazarenes, Pentecostals, the Christian Reformed Church, and others. Although it would be overreaching to presume that all conservative Protestants refrained from going to the movies in the first half of the century, my research persuades me that this reflected a common characteristic for many.

Before concluding this section on terminology, I should note that when I describe “movies,” “film,” and “cinema” I mean to focus solely on mainstream Hollywood productions. I recognize that the history of American film is more broad than Hollywood features. Nevertheless, when conservative Protestants wrote about “the movies” it was understood that they meant nationally distributed Hollywood productions exhibited in commercial movie theaters. When they spoke of “the movies” it was assumed that they meant the commercial industry. I employ their convention throughout this dissertation.

Sources and Methodology

The research for this dissertation drew on books, pamphlets, periodicals, sermons, and archival materials produced by conservative Protestants during the first half of the twentieth century. By critically examining these texts, I identified several prominent rhetorical themes of conservative Protestants regarding movies and the film industry. I then placed their rhetoric into the context of relevant cultural developments between 1915 and 1955, producing a study of rhetoric and cultural history of conservative Protestant engagement with the film industry.

One prominent source in my research was Zondervan Publishing House, today regarded as a well-established publisher of evangelical bibles, novels, and non-fiction.

From 1936 to 1958 Zondervan Publishing House published nineteen books and pamphlets that addressed the movies.¹⁰ This steady stream of material vehemently condemning the movies played a significant role in disseminating and influencing conservative Protestant attitudes toward the film industry. Several Zondervan texts were popular enough to be reprinted five or more times. I have located most of these by searching Zondervan's publishing history, surveying Zondervan advertisements during this period, and speaking with Jim Ruark, Zondervan's resident historian, about the Publishing Houses' anti-film texts from this era. Of the Zondervan books about movies, the most prominent was John R. Rice's *What's Wrong with the Movies?* initially published in 1938. The Baptist clergyman Rice was a prominent figure in fundamentalist conferences and revivals and one biographer described his periodical *The Sword of the Lord* as "perhaps the most influential Baptist periodical" during the 1950s.¹¹ Rice's *What's Wrong with the Movies?* remained in print for decades, selling approximately 100,000 copies at Zondervan and later in Rice's own publishing house, Sword of the Lord Publishers. What's more, Rice's work influenced other conservative Protestant leaders, many of whom quoted Rice directly or, in some cases, lifted passages from *What's Wrong with the Movies?* without acknowledging their source.

In addition to the Zondervan's texts, I have delved into the publishing records of other fundamentalist publishing companies and prominent periodicals. Pentecostal Publishing Company, WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Fleming H. Revell, and

¹⁰ "Zondervan Publishing House" was the original name of the company. They underwent several name changes and today are known simply as "Zondervan."

¹¹ Howard Edgar Moore, "The Emergence of Moderate Fundamentalism: John R. Rice and 'the Sword of the Lord'" (Ph.D., George Washington University, 1990), 7.

Moody Press all published books during this period excoriating Hollywood and discouraging conservative Protestants from patronizing local theaters. These arguments also appeared in conservative Protestant periodicals such as *The Sunday School Times*, *Our Hope*, *The King's Business*, and *Moody Bible Institute Monthly*. By drawing on a broad range of evangelical and fundamentalist presses and periodicals, my research leads me to conclude that the rhetorical tropes I examine herein had been representative of a broad body of conservative Protestants.

The range of texts brought to bear in this project also reveals something about the denominational range of conservative Protestants who refrained from patronizing movie theaters in the first half of the century. Some of the most vocal critics were Baptists, such as Rice and John Roach Straton. But similar attitudes were expressed by Pentecostals, some branches of the Mennonites, the Church of the Nazarene, and the Christian Reformed Church. Their repeated demands to abstain from movie-going also reflected a geographically disperse body. Straton criticized movies from his church in New York City while Rice began his career in Texas and ultimately settled in Tennessee. Zondervan published anti-movie texts from several midwesterners, such as Paul S. Rees, a pastor in Minneapolis and Herbert J. Miles, a Baptist pastor in Springfield, Missouri. And evangelist Harry Vom Bruch reported that he could “smell Hollywood” as a resident of Long Beach, California. The conservative Protestant attitudes under examination here came from all over the United States, although a plurality of my primary sources seemed to come from the Midwest.

Religion and Media: A Literature Review

Over the last thirty years, much of the scholarship examining conservative Protestantism and media has emphasized one of two themes, the first framed in the context of the culture wars and the second offered as what I call an accommodationist model. In this literature review, I note some of the major scholarship on these two tracks, consider what they have accomplished as well as obscured, and suggest how my project might provide a useful reconsideration of conservative Protestant and media.

The concept of the culture wars, from a titular book by sociologist James Davison Hunter in 1991, identified a polarized American body, divided along issues such as abortion, gun control, and separation of church and state. Scholarship focused on religious protests and boycotts of popular culture, such as public Christian protests against Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, often framed their study in the context of the culture war which, in this example, pitted conservative religion bodies against the liberal media.¹² Juxtaposed with this view has been a body of scholarship on evangelicalism and media during the last thirty years which has emphasized an accommodationist model. This model identifies evangelical creativity, keen sense of the marketplace, and entrepreneurial spirit by exploring periods when evangelicals have adopted mass media in order to spread their religious message. This theme appeared most prominently in the studies of televangelism since the 1980s. Jeffrey K. Hadden and Charles E. Swann's *Prime Time Preachers: The Rising Power of Televangelism* (1981)

¹² A few examples include: Charles Lyons, "This Film Is Blasphemy: Religious Opposition to *the Last Temptation of Christ* (1988)," in *The New Censors: Movies and the Culture Wars* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997). Lisa K. Scheffler, "A Study in Cultural Conflict: The Controversy Surrounding Martin Scorsese's *the Last Temptation of Christ*" (M.A. Thesis, University of North Texas, 1995). Thomas R. Riley, "Religion, Popular Film, and Cultural Conflict: The Case of Martin Scorsese's *the Last Temptation of Christ*" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Utah, 1998).

was one of the earliest scholarly treatments on the subject, and was soon joined by Razelle Frankl's *Televangelism: The Marketing of Popular Religion* (1987), Steve Bruce's *Pray TV: Televangelism in America* (1990) and Stewart Hoover's *Religious Television: Controversies and Conclusions* (1990), to name a few. Quentin J. Schultze's *American Evangelicals and the Mass Media* (1990) retained some of the same themes but expanded the scope of inquiry to include book publishing, magazines, Christian music, and radio. In his introduction Schultze went so far as to argue that evangelical enthusiasm for media "shaped the American system of mass communication." Emphasizing evangelical influence on media in the 1980s and 1990s reflected the increased prominence of the religious right in American politics. And, to be sure, the attention paid to evangelical adoption of mass media acted as a useful corrective against certain prejudicial accounts of evangelical history. Scholarship emphasizing evangelical ingenuity with mass media usefully challenged an outdated definition of conservative Protestants as wholly "anti-modern." In fact, when it came to incorporating modern technologies to spread their religious message, evangelicals displayed a resourcefulness that surpassed most other religious bodies.

Although the accommodationist model and the culture wars model have been common in scholarship of religion and media, much of the scholarship about conservative Protestants in the last two decades either ignored evangelical positions on cinema or retained the culture wars model that reinforced conservative Protestant hostility toward media and popular culture. Few scholars of religion and media have considered why conservative Protestants who embraced radio and television expressed such antipathy toward cinema for much of the twentieth century. By contrast, scholars of

film history and religious studies have taken great interest in liberal protestant and Catholic engagement with cinema during the first half of the century.¹³

This is not to say that there has been no attention paid to conservative Protestants and commercial cinema during the first half of the twentieth century. William D. Romanowski examined aspects of this topic in several works, first in a 1995 article in the *Christian Scholar's Review* tracing the history of pronouncements against movies within the Christian Reformed Church. In that article, Romanowski recognized how significant this topic had been for early-twentieth century conservative Protestants when he wrote that "for some avoiding the worldly amusements was the essence of what it meant to be Christian Reformed."¹⁴ The following year, he considered the relationship between the film industry and Protestantism more broadly in a full-length treatment, *Pop Culture Wars: Religion and the Role of Entertainment in American Life* (1996). In both his article and book, Romanowski's central thesis has been that Protestants have been overly committed to distinguishing between high and low culture and rejected movies on the basis that they represented a low art form. In my analysis of conservative Protestant texts

¹³ On mainline Protestantism and cinema see: Anne Morey, "'Sermons in Screens': Denomination Incursions into Hollywood," in *Hollywood Outsiders: The Adaptation of the Film Industry, 1913-1934* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). Also, R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 220-31. The story of Catholics and Hollywood during the interwar period has often focused on the Legion of Decency. Representative scholarship includes: Lester J. Keyser and Barbara Keyser, *Hollywood and the Catholic Church: The Image of Roman Catholicism in American Movies* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1984). James M. Skinner, *The Cross and the Cinema: The Legion of Decency and the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures, 1933-1970* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1993). Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). Frank Walsh, *Sin and Censorship: The Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). William D. Romanowski considers evangelicals but is primarily interested in attitudes toward movies by mainline Protestant and, to a lesser degree, Catholic leadership in his *Pop Culture Wars: Religion and the Role of Entertainment in American Life* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

¹⁴ William D. Romanowski, "John Calvin Meets the Creature from the Black Lagoon: The Christian Reformed Church and the Movies 1928-1966," *Christian Scholar's Review* 25, no. 1 (1995): 49.

during the early twentieth century, I found that Protestant distinctions between high and low culture was more sporadic and uneven. For example, John Rice was an influential critic of the movies, but he also discouraged Christians from patronizing elite pursuits such as ballet dancing and the opera. The categories of high and low culture have been a driving concern within the field of popular culture studies, but I did not find that conservative Protestants routinely made such a distinction. I would argue that an overriding concern with “high” and “low” forms of art was one factor in how conservative Protestant judged leisure pursuits but not the decisive characteristic.

Another denominational study, John Douglas Lepter’s 1996 dissertation, “A Root Metaphor Analysis of Nazarene Discourse Regarding Media Attendance,” analyzed media attendance attitudes by clergy and laity of the Church of the Nazarene.¹⁵ Both Romanowski’s and Lepter’s studies have provided important data and analysis about religion and film from the context of particular denominations. In my present study, however, I hope to build on their work by considering the issue of movie attendance not within a single denomination but as an attitude pervasive across a broad swath of conservative Protestants. Romanowski and Lepter examined attitudes that were not unique to specific denominations but rather reflected a stance that distinguished, to a large degree, the split between liberal and conservative Protestantism in the early twentieth century.

Lastly, the recent work of Terry Lindvall acts as a useful balance for my work. Lindvall, in *The Silents of God* (2001) and *Sanctuary Cinema* (2007), has expanded historical knowledge of early twentieth century religion and cinema by drawing attention

¹⁵ John Douglas Lepter, "A Root Metaphor Analysis of Nazarene Discourse Regarding Media Attendance" (Ph.D., University of Kentucky, 1996).

to the history of film exhibition within Protestant churches.¹⁶ Like Romanowski, Lindvall expands the historical record by providing a more thorough picture of Protestant engagement with cinema in the early twentieth-century. Though these scholars have made important contributions and influenced my work, I focus herein on a broader body that Romanowski examined, and a different body of Protestants from Lindvall altogether. My dissertation exhumes the attitudes and behaviors of a distinct subset of Protestants, without any illusion that my work encompasses the whole range of Protestant engagement with cinema across the twentieth century.

That stated, I argue that my research provides a useful corrective to much of the scholarship about conservative Protestants and cinema. The quantity of Protestant writing from 1915 to 1955 about commercial cinema reveals how contentious this issue had been among conservative Protestantism. However, many cultural histories of twentieth century evangelicalism and fundamentalism have failed to note the intensity with which conservative Protestants made their case against commercial cinema nor the prominence of their position in sermons, pamphlets, periodicals, books, denominational synods and Christian colleges. When scholars of evangelicalism and fundamentalism make note of conservative Protestant hostility toward commercial cinema they often fold conservative Protestant avoidance of movie theaters into a longer inventory of conservative Protestant cultural asceticism. For example, in his history of the Brethren in Christ, Carlton O. Wittlinger wrote that “the Brethren regarded the early motion picture as a menace and classified it with games of chance, the dance, the theater, horse-racing

¹⁶ Terry Lindvall, *The Silents of God: Selected Issues and Documents in Silent American Film and Religion, 1908-1925* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2001). Terry Lindvall, *Sanctuary Cinema: Origins of the Christian Film Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

and ‘all other vain amusements.’”¹⁷ And sociologist Christian Smith noted of early twentieth century fundamentalism:

What separated God’s faithful remnant from the degenerate—besides doctrinal purity, of course—became simply that true Christians did not dance, smoke cigarettes, chew tobacco, drink alcohol, gamble, wear makeup, ‘bob’ their hair, attend the theater, play billiards or cards, or wear immodest clothing.¹⁸

While it is true that conservative Protestants of the early twentieth century decried various social trends and leisure activities such as dancing and card playing, what many scholars have failed to appreciate is the singular attention that conservative Protestants placed on movie-going. Beginning in the 1910s, conservative Protestants across the country began calling for abstinence from all motion pictures. Formal declarations in some denominations soon followed. In 1928 a Synod of the Christian Reformed Church declared movies “one of the most destructive forces in our country,” and encouraged total abstinence for church members. That same year the General Assembly of the Church of the Nazarene endorsed an absolute prohibition against movie-going while Christian colleges and bible schools insisted that students avoid movie theaters as a condition of their enrollment. And pamphlets, sermons, and editorials routinely identified the commercial film industry as one of the most serious dangers in America. A 1931 Zondervan text was hardly unique in calling moving pictures, “perhaps the *greatest religious menace of this generation*.”¹⁹ I argue that in order provide a more

¹⁷ Carlton O. Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience: The Story of the Brethren in Christ* (Nappanee, Indiana: Evangel Press, 1978), 344.

¹⁸ Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 9.

¹⁹ William Masselink, *I and the Children Thou Hast Given Me: A Treatise on Our Covenant Youth and Worldly Amusements* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1931), 200. Italics in original.

comprehensive account of a religious body, scholars of religion must take care to calibrate our analysis to focus on the debates our subjects considered crucially significant. In providing an extended analysis of a topic that conservative Protestants deemed so prominent at the time, I hope to provide a richer picture of this dominant religious movement over the course of half of the twentieth century.

Lastly, because the scholarship on conservative Protestant abstention from commercial cinema has been sparse, this dissertation might serve to redress some misconceptions in the scholarly literature. One misconception has been that conservative Protestant hostility toward Hollywood arose because of the film industry's associations with Jewish studio heads and communist sympathies. Randall Balmer, for example, considered evangelical reticence toward film "due at least in part to...its 'communist' sympathies."²⁰ However, my research indicates that conservative Protestant expressed extreme hostility toward commercial cinema long before the rise of communism. Likewise, I did not find anti-Jewish prejudice a substantial aspect of conservative Protestant rhetoric on cinema, an issue I address further in chapter five.

Another scholarly misconception has been that conservative Protestant criticism of cinema had been primarily concerned with film content. In his book *Selling the Old-Time Religion*, evangelical historian Douglas Carl Abrams wrote that the first concern evangelicals had with movies was the "content and imagery on the screen."²¹ Along the same lines, *The Mennonite Encyclopedia* states that Mennonites avoided the cinema

²⁰ Randall Herbert Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory : A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, Expanded ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 65.

²¹ Douglas Carl Abrams, *Selling the Old-Time Religion: American Fundamentalists and Mass Culture, 1920-1940* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 90.

because “Moving pictures were an embellished form of photography that accentuated sex, violence, crime, pleasure, and greed.”²² But my extensive research has led me to conclude that conservative Protestants did not become chiefly concerned with film content until the 1960s and 1970s. During the first half of the 20th century, conservative Protestants writing about commercial film showed very little knowledge of or emphasis on film content.

Thesis

In this dissertation I argue that the commercial film industry so vexed conservative Protestants because it represented so many of their cultural anxieties. Conservative Protestants expressed outrage at movie stars who became international role models while engaging in all manner of activities they deemed immoral. And they blamed Hollywood for undermining traditional forms of authority, by which they meant clergy and parents. As one irate minister noted, “No one in public life can compete in popularity with the movie stars, not even the President of the United States!” They associated movies with loosening standards of courtship and marriage, expanding public interest in amusements, and ushering in the era of commercial consumerism.

Yet conservative Protestant bias against movies amounted to more than a feeling of cultural displacement. I argue that the conservative Protestant emphasis on abstaining from the movies both reflected and updated longstanding Christian anti-theatrical prejudices. Moreover, my research indicates that fundamentalists and evangelicals in the early twentieth century had been more concerned with the practice of movie-going rather

²² "Motion Pictures," in *The Mennonite Encyclopedia: A Comprehensive Reference Work on the Anabaptist-Mennonite Movement*, ed. Cornelius J. Dyck and Dennis D. Martin (Waterloo, Ontario: Herald Press, 1990), 603.

than the content of individual films. This study provides a portrait of a prominent religious body as it wrestled with the cultural impact of an equally prominent media form in the United States.

CHAPTER TWO

THE STAGE

For the show always leads to spiritual agitation, since where there is pleasure, there is keenness of feeling giving pleasure its zest... [T]he whole entirely out of keeping with the religion of Christ.

—Tertullian (circa 200 AD)

This alien influence which the movies have enthroned over America has perverted the character of our people; it has dried up the sources of spiritual strength; it has plagued us with the pagan spirit of materialism and sexuality.

—Dan Gilbert, *Hell over Hollywood* (1942)

Introduction

Reverend C. M. Washington did not want Christians to patronize the movies. In his pamphlet “Should Christians Support the Movies?” published in the 1940s, he put forward testimony from police, teachers, judges, social scientists, journalists and clergy across Christian denominations that recounted scandalous stories of young people whose movie going led them to a life of juvenile delinquency. Less those stories fail to stir his readers, Washington concluded with this story:

An angel, flying on some errand of mercy, met Satan, who was dragging away a monk, clad in full canonicals. The angel stopped the adversary, and demanded the release of the prisoner, saying that his very robes showed that he was a holy man, to whom Satan could have no claim. “But he is mine,” was the emphatic reply. “I found him on my premises; I caught him at the theater!”

After story upon story of public authorities and true-crime sensationalism, the demonic anecdote toward the end of the booklet seemed out of place. Yet the idea that the movie theater was a demonic abode did not originate with Washington. In fact, he copied the

story, word for word, from *Popular Amusements*, a book written by the Reverend Jonathan Crane in 1870 to discourage Christians from patronizing live theater.²³ Washington's copy and paste of an anecdote from a nineteenth century critic of the stage indicates how seamless was the transition from the Christian anti-theatrical bias to the anti-cinematic bias among conservative evangelicals. What's more, Washington was hardly unique. Other conservative Protestant critics of motion pictures in the first half of the twentieth century drew their rhetoric from condemnations of the theater stage.

Some of the earliest clergy to launch unrestrained attacks against the movies made clear the inspiration they drew from anti-theatrical texts. The booklet "The Moving Picture: A Careful Survey of a Difficult Problem," written by a Methodist reverend in 1917 concluded: "With some slight modifications, every point of objection raised against the theatre, may be justly applied to these popular places."²⁴ And the Christian Reformed Church official report on "Worldly Amusements" in 1928 insisted that "There is no essential difference between the playhouse and the movie theater" and encouraged "total abstinence" from both.²⁵

In this chapter I highlight some of the themes and historical periods when Christian anti-theatrical prejudices would come to inform conservative Protestant antagonism toward the movies. This chapter argues that twentieth century rhetoric against movie theaters and movie stars was not a novel trope. Rather, many Christians

²³ J[onathan] T[ownley] Crane, *Popular Amusements* (Cincinnati: Hitchcock and Walden, 1870).

²⁴ C.F. Wimberly, *The Moving Picture: A Careful Survey of a Difficult Problem* (Louisville: Pentecostal Publishing Company, 1917), 16.

²⁵ "Worldly Amusements in the Light of Scripture," ed. Report of Committee and Decisions of Synod of Christian Reformed Church (Synod of the Christian Reformed Church, 1945 (reprint from the 1928 report)), 36.

have had a turbulent relationship with the stage across two millennia and these tensions passed from early church fathers to English puritans to nineteenth century American evangelicals.

Though the focus of this chapter is on Christian antagonism toward the stage, I note several complicating factors. First, condemnation of the stage was not unique to Christians. As one historian put it, “prejudice against actors has reared its head in every civilization throughout history.”²⁶ Second, at no point in Christian history was there a consensus view regarding the stage. The theater has always been contested territory for Christians and the clash would only intensify with the arrival of the moving picture. Lastly, while this chapter provides necessary historical context, it also acts in some ways as a foil for what is to come. Christian condemnation of the theater served as a launching point for much of their criticism against movies from the 1920s to the 1950s, but many Christian critics of the movies asserted that this new medium was a far more serious danger. These issues will be explored more fully in the upcoming chapters. Here I consider bias against the theater in order to establish a confluence between rhetoric of theater and of film.

Ancient Bias

In some ways, the bias against the theater can be traced back to ancient Greeks even though they were not themselves prejudiced against the stage. On the contrary the Greeks venerated the theater, making it a foundation for their civic and religious culture. In the fifth century B.C.E., Greeks traveled to Athens twice annually in order to engage

²⁶ Mendel Kohansky, *The Disreputable Profession: The Actor in Society* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1984), 7.

in a host of rituals dedicated to Dionysus, the god associated with wine, ecstatic revelry, and fertility. The Athenian festival involved street processions with singing, dancing, ceremonial clothes and ritual sacrifices, followed by several days of theatrical productions in which playwrights competed to win dramatic awards. The ancient Greeks fused the theatrical and the religious. The dramatist's competition began with an animal sacrifice for Dionysus, beside a statue of Dionysus, within a theater honoring Dionysus.

Because of the religious nature of these productions, Greeks held actors in high regard. The Greek authorities carved a proclamation into the stone face of the Dionysian theater that actors deserved preferential treatment, such as exemption from military service, "in order that they may hold the appointed celebrations in honor of the gods at the proper season, and be released from other business, and consecrated to the service of the gods."²⁷ To the Greeks, dramatic actors were high priests engaging in important religious and civic ritual. Yet ancient Greece may have been a high point for public deference to stage actors. Indicative of how attitudes would come to change, the Greek word for actor was *hypokrites*, from which we derive our word hypocrite. Though the ancient Greeks did not use the word as a pejorative (its original meaning was probably "answerer," because the actor answered the chorus) the word soon came to refer to one who pretended to be something that he was not.

After reaching such heights in Greek culture, esteem of actors under the Romans fell precipitously as the relationship between religion and the theater diminished. For Romans, theater became a center for social and political gatherings. The types of entertainments found in the theater changed as well. As T.D. Barnes described in his

²⁷ Quoted from *Ibid.*, 13.

history of Roman theater in the second century CE, “something closer to vaudeville displaced serious drama from the public stage.”²⁸ Romans replaced the classical Greek comedies and dramas with pantomimes and mimes who performed excerpts from tragedies set to music and dance, and Roman citizens adored gladiatorial games until they were banned in the fourth century.

As acting went from being a profession closely aligned with religious ceremony to being a form of mass spectacle, Romans accorded actors none of the social status that they had enjoyed under the Greeks and even stripped actors of many of the rights accorded to average Roman citizens. For example, actors could not vote or hold public office and they could be publicly flogged or executed for various unspecified offenses. Though a few favored performers enjoyed protection and economic reward by the ruling class, Romans generally looked down on the profession. Christian leaders at the time implemented even more restrictive measures against the theater. One council in 305 C.E. made it a crime for women to lend their garments for use in theatrics. Nine years later, another council excommunicated church members who performed in plays. Other councils forbade church members from having any interaction with the theater and banned theatrical productions on the Sabbath and other sacred days.²⁹ Theater historian Jonas Barish hypothesized that the bias against the theater grew when the Romans detached it from religious ceremony. Where Greek drama was a combination of theatrics

²⁸ T.D. Barnes, "Christians and the Theater," in *Roman Theater and Society*, ed. William J. Slater (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 167.

²⁹ Elbert N[evius] S[ebing] Thompson, *The Controversy between the Puritans and the Stage* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), 20-21.

and religion, Roman theaters were empty spectacles, existing only as an amusing diversion. As Barish wrote,

one result of the gradually eroding link between religion and theater was to turn the theater, a source of pleasure, adrift from its moorings in morality, and thereby inspire a guilt such that the Romans, recoiling from their own pleasures, came to persecute the purveyors of them even as their addiction to them intensified.³⁰

Barish's Freudian hypothesis of Roman citizenry is beyond the scope of this project. For my purposes it is enough to affirm that the Greek religious festivals and the Roman antipathy toward dramatic performers provided context for, and fed into, early Christian attitudes toward the stage and of actors. Christians perhaps had reason enough to disassociate from the Roman spectacles on the grounds that some of their brethren had been martyred in entertainments for Roman crowds. But Christian antipathy toward the stage ran deeper than that. Many of the early church fathers who penned denunciations of the theater compared it with pagan rites and demonic power, and expressed distaste for the acting profession which they considered nothing more than celebrated dishonesty. Unlike the Greeks who blurred the distinction between dramatic arts and religious rite, church fathers identified no overlap between Christianity and the theater.

Two of the earliest records of Christian denunciation of the stage were by Tatian, an ascetic missionary in the second century, and Tertullian, a well-educated Christian convert writing in the late-second and early-third century. In his *Address to the Greeks*, Tatian ridiculed Greek philosophy, education, and culture and deemed it inferior to Christian philosophy. Within that context, Tatian briefly assessed the theater and established several lines of criticism that would echo among Christian critics of the stage for centuries, and would resurface in twentieth century evangelical antagonism of the

³⁰ Jonas A. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 41.

silver screen. Tatian saw the theater as useless at best and offensive at worst. He asked, disdainfully,

What advantage should I gain from him who is brought on the stage by Euripides raving mad, and acting the matricide of Alcmaeon; ... And why should I admire the mythic piper? Why should I busy myself about the Theban Antigenides, like Aristoxenus? We leave you to these worthless things.³¹

Along with the futility of the theater, Tatian's *Address to the Greeks* also evinced his bias against actors. He considered the actor's skills to be abnormal, asserting that he had no "desire to be affected in sympathy with a man when he is winking and gesticulating in an unnatural manner." Tatian further considered acting to be dishonest and deceptive. As he put it the actor was "one thing internally, but outwardly counterfeits what he is not." In its brief reference to the theater, *Address to the Greeks* left the overriding impression that Tatian found the theater of little value to Christians. But he planted the seeds of bias against the stage that would flower in later Christian condemnation of the stage and screen.

A half-century after Tatian's lament the church father Tertullian produced *De Spectaculis*, a more extensive and damning critique of the stage. Though there was some overlap between Tatian and Tertullian, the two struck different tones. Where Tatian was dismissive, Tertullian was condemnatory. Where Tatian found the theater meritless, Tertullian identified mortal danger. Tertullian also made direct use of Christian theology in his condemnation of the stage. To him, acting was not only a lie against the audience but an insult against God since actors represented themselves on stage as something other than their God-given natures. "The Author of truth hates all the false," Tertullian wrote

³¹ All Tatian quotes from J. E. Ryland's translation. Accessible at Peter Kirby, "Tatian's Address to the Greeks," www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/tatian-address.html.

in *De Spectaculis*, and he declared that actors, by changing their appearance, voice, and identity, “desire...to make Christ a liar.”³² To be sure, Tertullian’s antagonism toward acting was not always consistent. For example, he warned that there was no distinction between committing a sin and acting out the portrayal of a sin. As he put it, “What you reject in deed, you are not to bid welcome to in word.” To Tertullian, portraying a murder on stage was no different than committing an actual murder. But this seemed inconsistent with his critique of acting as dishonest. Tertullian seemed to acknowledge the artifice of the stage at times while elsewhere asserting that there was no difference between staged behavior and genuine crimes. Somehow, acting was a falsehood to Tertullian that drew the same judgments as reality.

Barish noted another inconsistency in *De Spectaculis*. While Tertullian denounced actors for portraying immoral characters he made no concession for actors who portrayed more honorable personalities. If portraying a murderer endorsed genuine murder, why would playing a hero or martyr not endorse moral themes? But if Tertullian was aware that his arguments left these open contradictions he did not address them. Evidently, portraying any role was problematic because theatrics were, by their nature, deceptive. As Barish put it,

Tertullian seems to think of acting as involving an escalating sequence of falsehoods. First the actor falsifies his identity, and so commits a deadly sin. If he impersonates someone vicious, he compounds the sin. If he happens to impersonate a noble soul he is aggravating the crime another way, by pretending to be someone so unlike himself. [E]ach of these...simply multiplies its fraudulence and adds to the gravity of the offense.³³

³² All Tertullian quotes come from S. Thelwall’s translation. Accessible at ———, “Tertullian's the Shows, or De Spectaculis,” www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/tertullian03.html.

³³ Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, 46-47.

Other than describing acting as a dishonesty and the immorality of portraying sin, Tertullian established another point of criticism against the stage that would have lasting impact—the theater’s pagan origins. *De Spectaculis* linked each category of entertainment in the Roman theater—circuses, gymnastics, sporting events, tragedies and comedies—to some aspect of pagan worship. “The sin of idolatry clings to the shows,” he asserted, “in respect of their origins, their titles, their equipments, their places of celebration, their arts.” The association with paganism led Tertullian to be the first Christian to associate the theater as the abode of the Devil, an association that would be reaffirmed by centuries of Christian critics of the theater and later the cinema. In chapter twenty-six of *De Spectaculis*, Tertullian told of a Christian woman who, after patronizing a theater, returned home possessed by an evil spirit. The spirit was reprimanded for possessing the body of a Christian woman and the demon defended itself by explaining, “I found her in my domain.” The suggestion that the theater was “the Devil’s church” seemed to implicate the very space of the theater. While Tertullian’s arguments were not always consistent his conclusions were emphatically clear. For this reason and those described above Tertullian found the Roman theater “utterly unsuitable” for Christian patronage.

One final point Tertullian raised in *De Spectaculis* is noteworthy as it reverberated in later Christian texts. Tertullian expressed concern that the Roman spectacles encouraged an excessive amount of emotion in the audience. During productions crowds would “fly into rages, and passions, and discords.... Then there are curses and reproaches, with no cause of hatred; there are cries of applause, with nothing to merit them.” Tertullian warned that the feelings of “rage, bitterness, wrath and grief” that one

might experience in the theater would lead to “spiritual agitation,” and so instructed his Christian readers that “all passionate excitement is forbidden us.” But Tertullian, like many future Christian critics of amusements and leisure also attempted to temper the view that Christianity was joyless. In the closing of *De Spectaculis*, Tertullian made clear that Christians who renounced their theater patronage would not be taking up an austere lifestyle. As he explained,

If the literature of the stage delight you, we have literature in abundance of our own—plenty of verses, sentences, songs, proverbs; and these not fabulous, but true; not tricks of art, but plain realities. Would you have also fightings and wrestlings? Well, of these there is no lacking, and they are not of slight account. Behold unchastity overcome by chastity, perfidy slain by faithfulness, cruelty stricken by compassion, impudence thrown into the shade by modesty: these are the contests we have among us, and in these we win our crowns. Would you have something of blood too? You have Christ's.

It seems curious that Tertullian would expend so much energy throughout *De Spectaculis* denouncing every aspect of the Roman theaters only to make the point, in the end, that Christianity offered if not equivalent then at least comparable offerings. Passages such as these suggest that despite Tatian and Tertullian's myriad arguments against the theater, their antagonism toward the theater reflected their sense that they were actively competing with pagans for devotees. Tertullian took great pains to distinguish between Christianity and the pagan theater, which he framed as the distinction between “God's church and the devil's church.” But he imbedded in this distinction the concession that both Christianity and the theater offered churches of a sort. The view that theaters competed with the church, robbing it of potential adherents, transitioned fluidly into twentieth century conservative Protestant criticisms of the cinema.

While Tatian and Tertullian penned the earliest Christian arguments against the theater, the anti-theatrical genre quickly added new voices. Subsequent Church fathers

such as Augustine and John Chrysostom offered lengthier and more nuanced critiques of the theater. Augustine, for example, spoke highly of ancient Greek tragedies and comedies, which he found less offensive than the Roman entertainments of his day. Additionally, it is important to note that there were a variety of opinions about the theater among early Christians. The very fact that the church fathers felt it necessary to write such heated admonitions indicates that not all Christians were equally condemnatory. Tertullian's story of the Christian woman who required an exorcism perhaps inadvertently indicated that Christians did patronize the theater. While not an exhaustive investigation of Christian rhetoric toward the stage in late antiquity, this consideration of *De Spectaculis* outlines some of the earliest Christian rhetoric against the stage that would come to influence centuries of Christian antipathy of the theater and later the silver screen. Twentieth century conservative Protestants employed some similar arguments, including Tertullian's bias against actors, his concerns about the excessive emotionalism of spectators, and his correlation of the theater and enemies of Christianity. Each of these points will be expanded in the following chapters.

The Reformation and the Stage

After centuries of little comment by Christian leaders on the theater, the second major period of anti-theatrical prejudice arose in sixteenth and seventeenth century England. Scholars date the reasons why anti-theatrical rhetoric increased rapidly during this period after centuries of unconcern. In Elbert N.S. Thompson's study, *The Controversy Between the Puritans and the Stage* (1903), the author argued that prejudice against the theater arose in Elizabethan England out of class tensions and public health fears. The rise of vagrancy became a civic concern in England by the 1530s and

vagabonds came to be associated with all manner of lawlessness, thievery, and games of chance, as well as with promoting trifling amusements such as minstrel shows. At the same time sixteenth century Europe was decimated by waves of plagues. In London, one in five residents was struck down by a single plague lasting only between 1563 and 1564. Thompson pointed to anxiety about public disorder, crime, and fear of plague as the sparks that enflamed the ire against theatrical performers. These concerns led to increased public interest in shutting down theaters as a means to control the spread of disease and maintain public order.

However, William Ringler's study of attacks on the stage during the mid-sixteenth century scrutinized the available evidence and disputed the notion that the British authorities were especially hostile against the theater, arguing instead that the rise of anti-theatrical prejudice during this era was the result of class tensions. Although the Lord Mayor ordered theater houses shut down in 1564, Ringler pointed out that the Lord Mayor also closed down other public assemblies such as schools and colleges in order to suppress the spreading plague, suggesting that his action against the theater were a public health concern and not indicative of a particular bias against the stage. Ringler instead identified the year 1577 as the start of the anti-theatrical bias in England. Prior to this date, he identified no appreciable antagonism to the drama primarily because there were no public theaters, and thus very few opportunities for many people to become exposed to drama. But when The Theater, the first public theater opened in London in 1576, following by The Curtain Theater in 1577, theatrical productions came to play "a prominent role among the amusements of a large portion of the people."³⁴ This new

³⁴ William Ringler, "The First Phase of the Elizabethan Attack on the Stage, 1558-1579," *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (1942): 413.

prominence also affected the kinds of plays that were written and produced. Theater owners were not interested in offering the high-class theatrical productions that would attract a small number of upper-class patrons. Rather, they wanted to draw the largest possible audiences in order to maximize revenue and so attracted the masses by providing light-hearted amusements, ribald comedies, and thrilling dramas to attract larger crowds.

The appearance of clerical admonitions aligns with Ringler's observation that hostility toward the stage arose in response to the opening of the first public theaters. The first prominent religious assault on the theater in Elizabethan England was a sermon preached by "T.W." (likely Reverend Thomas White), in 1577. Published as *A Sermon Preached at Pawles Crosse* (Paul's Cross), White tied the theater and the plague together not in civic terms, as London authorities had done, but in theological terms. His argument was a straightforward tautology: the reason for the plague was sin, "the cause of sinne are playes: therefore the cause of plagues are playes."³⁵ *A Sermon Preached at Pawles Crosse* was also the first recorded lament by a clergyman about Sunday theater exhibitions—an issue that would become a major theme in Christian condemnation of the stage and the screen, which I consider in chapter two.

One month after *A Sermon Preached at Pawles Crosse*, a sermon by John Northbrooke was published, helpfully titled, *A Treatise wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine playes or Enterluds with other idle pastimes &c. commonly used on the Sabboth day, are reproved by the Authoritie of the word of God and auntient writers*. Northbrooke drew heavily from the early church fathers and reasserted some of the arguments made by White. Both agreed that paying admittance to public theaters wasted money and that

³⁵ Quoted in Russell A. Fraser, *The War against Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 13.

theatrical performances on Sundays were dangerous for keeping people away from church services. And although Northbrooke defended the use of plays in schools as an educational device, he repeated the bias against actors that had been established by earlier church fathers.

After White's and Northbrooke's sermons, the number of written attacks against the theater grew more numerous and vehement. Historian Edmund S. Morgan characterized the condemnations against the theater from 1577 to 1633 as "more intense and more articulate than that of other men who denounced the stage before and after them."³⁶ The hostility peaked when Puritans gained control of Parliament and shut down all English theaters in 1642, an act which one history of the period described as the Puritan's first victory.³⁷ Although the success was short lived—the English monarchy had the theaters reopened in 1660—the anti-theatrical rhetoric of this period defined new boundaries of Christian criticism against the theater that remained a constant among some Protestant communities through the invention of moving pictures.

Christian critics of the theater during this period condemned it for being an unsuitable form of recreation. Northbrooke's *Treatise* differentiated between appropriate leisure activities and the theater. To him, "honest games and pastimes are allowable, but we ought to vse them as we doe sleepe and other eases of the body, and to be taken after such time, as we haue laboured inough in weightie matters and serious affaires."³⁸ Proper

³⁶ Edmund S. Morgan, "Puritan Hostility to the Theatre," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 110, no. 5 (1966): 346.

³⁷ Will and Ariel Durant, *The Age of Reason Begins: A History of European Civilization in the Period of Shakespeare, Bacon, Montaigne, Rembrandt, Galileo, and Descartes: 1558-1648*, vol. VII, *The Story of Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), 192.

³⁸ John Northbrooke, *A Treatise Wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine Playes, or Enterluds with Other Idle Pastimes* (London: Reprinted for the Shakespeare Society 1843 (from the earliest edition, about A.D.

recreation, according to these opponents of the stage, should invigorate the mind and body and prepare one to return to one's responsibilities refreshed. They found none of these qualities in the stage. Rather than rejuvenate and refresh, the theater, they argued, left the audience emotionally drained and exhausted.³⁹

Religious condemnation of drama during this period also considered the theater a waste of time and money. J. Norden's *Progress of Piety* (1596) objected to plays as diversions in which the public "lose their time" and "consume their thrift."⁴⁰ These concerns about squandering one's income was not entirely original, since the church father John Chrysostom back in the fourth century had considered theater-going a "waste of time [and] useless spending of days."⁴¹ But the shift from feudalism to capitalism during the Renaissance produced a new class of merchants for whom time and wealth had become more prominent concerns. In fact, they condemned the professions of playwright and actor on similar grounds, reasoning that their theatrical profession deprived the community of workers who could be put to more essential use.

Puritans ultimately established the high mark for hostility against the stage in the seventeenth century, but they did not initially foment the fury. While some Puritans were vehemently antagonistic to the stage, they were not alone, as sixteenth century Christian criticism of the theater came from Anglicans and Catholics as well. In fact, the Anglican

1577)), 45. Ringler, "The First Phase of the Elizabethan Attack on the Stage, 1558-1579," 406-07. raises questions about Northbrooke's value as a representative source. However, the issues that I draw from Northbrooke—the Sunday competition and the suitable forms of recreation—were common themes among Christian criticism of the stage during this period.

³⁹ See William Prynne, *Histrio-Mastix. The Players Scovrge, or, Actors Tragædie* (London: Printed by E.A. and W.I. for Michael Sparke, and are to be sold at the blue Bible, in Greene Arbour, 1633), 947-48.

⁴⁰ Thompson, *The Controversy between the Puritans and the Stage*, 106.

⁴¹ Fraser, *The War against Poetry*, 52.

author Stephen Gosson wrote some of the earliest anti-theatrical texts, *The School of Abuse* (1579) and *Playes Confuted in five Actions* (1582). What's more, though many of the anti-theatrical texts of the time appear rigidly moralistic to modern readers, Ringler reminds us that "Any sincerely religious or even serious-minded Englishman of the sixteenth century held as stern ideas of public and private morality as the most rigid Puritans."⁴² Ultimately, it is difficult to determine how much of the anti-theatrical vehemence in the late sixteenth century was led by Puritans since, to the dismay of historians, the authors of many of these pamphlets did not think to include a statement of religious affiliation.

However, Christian hostility toward the stage in the sixteenth and seventeenth century culminated with a definitive anti-theatrical tome *Histrion-mastix*, by the identifiably Puritan author, William Prynne. Prynne, born in 1600, studied law at Oxford University as a young man but later became a militant Puritan who spent much of his adult life writing anti-Anglican tracts. In 1624 he began to gather every source of criticism against the stage in order to produce *Histrion-mastix*, an eleven-hundred page brick proffering every conceivable Christian criticism that could be lobbed against the theater. Unfortunately for Prynne the initial reception to *Histrion-mastix* was not sympathetic, to say the least. The monarchy took offense to a passage that referred to female actors as "notorious Whores," concluding that it had been meant as an insult against Queen Henrietta Maria, who acted as a hobby. Prynne, found guilty of sedition and fined 5,000 pounds, had his ears partially clipped and was imprisoned for life. These judgments might have discouraged a more discreet writer, but not Prynne. From prison

⁴² Ringler, "The First Phase of the Elizabethan Attack on the Stage, 1558-1579," 417.

he wrote and published further diatribes against the Church of England resulting in another judgment in 1637. This time what had been left of his ears was completely removed, his nose was slit, and the letters “SL” (for “Seditious Libeler”) were burned onto each side of his face. Prynne’s example makes it awkward for one to complain about the hardships of writing a dissertation, though his story concluded in remarkable triumph. Three years after his second trial, Puritans gained control of England’s Parliament and had Prynne released. In 1642 he looked on as Parliament closed every theater in England, just twenty-six years after the death of William Shakespeare.

Histrio-mastix has two notable flaws. First, his bias against the stage led him to poorly conceived assumptions. For example, Prynne assumed that Tertullian’s injunction against the theater indicated that Christians in the third century abstained from patronizing Roman theaters. “By this logic,” Barish chided, “Prynne’s contemporaries would have to be reckoned the most abstemious playgoers in history.”⁴³ In fact the arguments about theater-going and, later, movie-going were a reaction to the very popularity of the medium among Christians. Prynne’s second flaw was a tendency toward outrageous exaggeration and arduous repetition. As Barish observed, Prynne seemed to want to “crush the opposition under the tonnage of his prose.”⁴⁴

Nowhere is this more apparent than on the issue of gender and sexuality, which Prynne mentioned throughout *Histrio-mastix*. In fact, although *Histrio-mastix* leaned heavily on the anti-theatrical writings of the Church fathers, the most notable distinction between Prynne’s opus and the admonitions of earlier Christian authorities was the

⁴³ Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, 87.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 84.

emphasis on the dangers of sexuality and gender disorientation from the theater. Prynne returned to the issue throughout his text, writing at one point that

the wanton gestures; the amorous kisses, complements, and salutes; the meretricious songs and speeches; the lascivious whorish Actions; the beautifull faces; the ravishing Musicke, the flexanimous enticements, the witty obscenities, the rhetoricall passages, the adulterous representations

are nothing more than “fiery darts of Satan” meant to “kindle a very hell of lusts within your soules.”⁴⁵ The early church fathers decried sexual content in the theater but Prynne pushed further than most, making sexuality a central theme in his condemnation of the stage. For example, Prynne and other Christian opponents of theater drew particular inspiration from the biblical injunction in Deuteronomy 22:5, insisting that men and women not wear garments appropriate for the opposite sex. Male actors at the time commonly portrayed both sexes and dressed accordingly, which incited Christian critics to condemn actors for behaving in ways that were considered womanly.

In the second century, Tatian had disparaged the actor for “giving himself excessive airs of daintiness and indulging in all sorts of effeminacy” But Prynne put far greater emphasis on what they considered the distinctly unmasculine manner of stage performers. He devoted nearly a hundred pages of *Histrion-mastix* to the topic of actors dressing as women, arguing that men who dressed as women on stage “vnman, vnchristian, vncreate themselves” resulting in an identity that is “neither men nor women, but Monsters.”⁴⁶ In a later section where Prynne described the dangers of patronizing the theater he returned to this theme of masculine and feminine identity, arguing that not only were male actors made effeminate by dressing as women on stage, but that male patrons

⁴⁵ Prynne, *Histrion-Mastix. The Players Scovrge, or, Actors Tragædie*, 374-75.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 172.

of the theater were made less masculine by watching stage plays. Patronizing the theater “effeminates mens mindes, mens manners, and makes them womannish both in their mindes, their bodies, speeches, habites, and their whole deportment.”⁴⁷ Not only were male actors in danger of having their masculinity disrupted on the stage, but watching a performance put the audience in danger of succumbing to the same transgression.

Many historians, having delved deeply into Prynne’s opus, seemed to leave the exercise nurturing a personal grudge against the author for having produced such a protracted, repetitive, and numbingly vitriolic text and have taken pleasure in mocking the work. Thompson described it as a “quaint, dumpy little volume of some eleven hundred pages.”⁴⁸ Edmund Morgan called *Histrion-mastix* “tedious” and “repetitious” and noted that Prynne was “ludicrously unfamiliar with the plays he denounced.”⁴⁹ And Jonas Barish described Prynne as a “megalomaniac” who was “driven to...lunatic exaggeration,” and *Histrion-mastix* as “an exercise in pathology.”⁵⁰ But historian David Leverenz offered a more sympathetic and, for my present purposes, a more useful reading of Prynne. He noted the significance of the fact that Prynne wrote scathingly of men acting as women and of women acting as men, not only on stage but within the larger cultural context of Prynne’s seventeenth century England. As Prynne put it:

...as our English Ruffians are metamorphosed into women in their deformed frizled lockes and haire, so our English Gentlewomen, (as if they all intended, to turne men outright and weare the Breeches, or to become Popish Nonnes) are now growne so farre past shame, past modesty, grace and nature, as to clip their haire

⁴⁷ Ibid., 546b - 47.

⁴⁸ Elbert N[evius] S[ebing] Thompson, *The Controversy between the Puritans and the Stage* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1903), 162.

⁴⁹ Morgan, "Puritan Hostility to the Theatre," 340.

⁵⁰ Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, 84, 87.

like men with lockes and foretops, and to make this Whorish cut, the very guise and fashion of the times, to the eternall infamy of their sex, their Nation, and the great scandall of religion.⁵¹

Leverenz highlighted Prynne's anxieties of social and sex-role confusion in order to explore what he referred to as the "Puritan frame of oppositions." Puritan condemnation of the theater was indicative of their dichotomous worldview, in which everything was organized into good and evil. Puritans highly regarded reason and logic and condemned the opposite, feelings and emotion. To the former they associated men and the latter, women. They linked male leadership and authority with God and the church while they associated the theater with female irreverence, self-indulgence, and, finally, the devil. By reading Puritans like Prynne in the context of the wide-scale economic and social upheavals of the seventeenth century, Leverenz asserted, we can better appreciate their instinct to affirm and preserve traditional sex roles. As he put it, "Prynne transfixed everything, the stage or the king, in the perspective not only of righteousness but of a new sense of human roles: dualistic, not just hierarchic, either justifying God or enacting the devil's will."⁵² As shall be apparent in subsequent chapters, the desire of Puritans to establish unshakeable binaries in the face of cultural upheaval foreshadowed conservative Protestant assaults on cinema in the first half of the twentieth century.

New England, Same Puritans

Some Puritans found England no longer hospitable and eventually settled in the New World in order to establish "a city on a hill" that might act as an exemplar of

⁵¹ Prynne, *Histrio-Mastix. The Players Scovrge, or, Actors Tragædie*, 201.

⁵² David Leverenz, *The Language of Puritan Feeling: An Exploration in Literature, Psychology, and Social History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1980), 37.

Christian community. Suffice to say, the city that they envisioned did not include any theaters. Puritans made every effort to quell theatrical productions and managed to hold off the institution throughout the seventeenth century. They were aided by the remoteness of some New England towns and the challenges of pioneer life that left little time to patronize theaters. In 1687, Increase Mather produced “A TESTIMONY Against several Prophan and Superstitious CUSTOMS, Now Practised by some in New-England.” Mather’s lengthy essay closely aligned with the rhetorical lineage traced in this chapter. In fact, Mather opened his testimony with a quote by Tertullian and also referred his readers to the writings of “Mr. Prin in his large and Elaborate Discourse on that Subject.” Lest his audience lack the time for a full accounting of *Histrion-mastix*, Mather offered an abbreviated list of five reasons for avoiding the theater. First, he asserted that the theater had pagan, and thus Satanic, origins. (Unable to resist, Mather retold Tertullian’s story of the woman who had become demonically possessed at the theater—the demon’s domain.) Mather’s second point echoed his first in reminding his readers that Christians had a responsibility to denounce anything associated with Satan. Third, actors were condemned for dramatizing sin, which was a criticism both of actors and of the content of their theatrical productions. Fourth, Mather argued that theatergoers have experienced everlasting ruin by patronizing the theater. Fifth, Mather pointed to the history of Christian thinkers who inveighed against the theater, including Clemens Alexandrinus, Lactantius, Chrysostom, Tertullian, and others, as evidence that avoiding the theater was in line with Christian orthodoxy.⁵³ This final argument highlights the

⁵³ Increase Mather’s “A Testimony Against Several Prophan and Superstitious Customs, Now Practised by Some in New-England” is available at www.covenanter.org/IMather/increasemathertestimony.htm. Accessed February 19, 2008.

extent to which Christians like Mather saw the bias against the theater as a Christian inheritance. Christian history provided a plethora of hostile condemnations against the stage waiting to be mined by colonial clergy. And Mather's five points stuck close to arguments that Christians had made for centuries, including the demonic origins, the immorality of acting, and the moral dangers to the audience.

Of course there were also Christians throughout history that evinced no particular animosity toward the theater. And Mather's chastisement perhaps indicated that not all Puritans intended to avoid the theater, though religious authorities for a time managed to effectively tamp down the few attempts to mount stage productions. When a few Harvard College students deigned to put on a theatrical performance in 1690, the wayward youth discovered that Calvinists make for tough theater critics. After opening night, as theater historian Hugh F. Rankin darkly intoned, "there is no notice of a subsequent performance."⁵⁴

As I noted above, the Puritans were not unique in their condemnation of the stage. Christian critics against the theater had an ally in William Penn, the founder of the Pennsylvania colony and a member of the Society of Friends, also known as the Quakers. The Frame of Government of Pennsylvania in 1682, the first constitution of that colony, regarded the stage with the rhetorical flourish that Increase Mather would have commended. Stage-plays were described as "offenses against God," and placed on a list of menaces that included incest, sodomy, rape, whoredom, treason, murder, and sedition. The Pennsylvania constitution advised that stage-plays, along with bear-baiting, cock-fights, and other public activities that might "excite the people to rudeness, cruelty,

⁵⁴ Hugh F. Rankin, *The Theater in Colonial America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), 5.

looseness, and irreligion” were to be “respectively discouraged, and severely punished.”⁵⁵

Penn wrote a further denunciation of the stage in 1699 that asked rhetorically, “How many plays did Jesus Christ and his apostles recreate themselves at? What poets, romances, comedies, and the like did the apostles and the saints make or use to pass their time withal?”⁵⁶ Despite a bias against the stage every equal to that of the New England Puritans, the Quakers had far less success prohibiting stage-plays because the public theater had defenders among British royalty. The crown rebuffed Quaker attempts to ban the theater in 1682, 1700, 1706, and 1711. Nevertheless, many Pennsylvanians remained hostile to theatrics into the eighteenth century. When a local manager announced plans to build a theater in 1759, Quakers utilized their penchant for religious cooperation by gathering 200,000 signatures to oppose the plan, a list that included German Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Baptists.⁵⁷ Eighteenth century colonial Protestants may have vehemently disagreed with one another on matters of theology, but opposing a new theater offered a rare opportunity for ecumenism.

Luckily for theater patrons, the success of the clergy was limited to certain pockets of the early colonies. One theater historian mistakenly asserted that “Nowhere in the Western world did the theatre find a reception more hostile than in the thirteen colonies.”⁵⁸ But this presumed that Quaker and Puritan hostility toward the theater replicated throughout all the early colonies. In fact, hostility toward the theater was

⁵⁵ A copy of the Frame of Government of Pennsylvania can be read at <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/states/pa04.htm>. Accessed February 19, 2008.

⁵⁶ Rankin, *The Theater in Colonial America*, 4.

⁵⁷ Heather S. Nathans, *Early American Theatre from the Revolution to Thomas Jefferson: Into the Hands of the People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 15.

⁵⁸ Kohansky, *The Disreputable Profession: The Actor in Society*, 136.

strongest among Puritan New Englanders and Quaker Pennsylvanians, but traveling actors found more receptive audiences outside of these areas. The Dutch who settled in what would become New York were more amenable to the stage because most Dutch colonists immigrated for economic, not religious reasons.⁵⁹ One of the earliest records of municipal support for the theater occurred in 1699 when the governor of the Province of New York granted a license request for an actor hoping to put together a theatrical production. The evidence is unclear whether the show was produced, but the granting of permission was notable. During the eighteenth century, makeshift theatrical products were regularly available in New York and the province enjoyed its first permanent theater in 1767. That theater, open to the general public, could seat several hundred patrons, and primarily attracted the well-to-do. These developments in New York indicate that colonists interested in seeing theatrical productions needed only to travel beyond the reach of certain Protestant clergy. Outside of New York, one's best bet would have been the South.

Southern Comfort

The theater found an inviting home in the southern colonies. Like the British nobility, southerners adopted a more sanguine attitude toward theater which harmonized with the lifestyles of plantation owners who, flush with wealth and free time due to their land holdings and slave labor, enjoyed such leisure pursuits as fox-hunting, gambling, horse-racing, boating, and concerts. This relaxed attitude toward leisure may have been due to their economic circumstances but the southern disposition might also have been

⁵⁹ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 203.

less inhibited than New Englanders. According to Foster Rhea Dulles' history of American recreation, southern plantation owners enjoyed "the most leisured and pleasure-loving society America has ever known."⁶⁰

The southern colonies were generally welcoming of theatrical productions. The first mention of a play being written on American soil took place in South Carolina when Anthony Aston arrived in Charleston in 1703 and reportedly wrote a play "on the Subject of the Country."⁶¹ Shortly thereafter, two actors in 1716 Virginia commissioned the construction of a theater, the first in the colonies. And in 1736, the local residents of Charleston so appreciated a brief theatrical run of *The Orphan, or the Unhappy Marriage* that they too constructed a new theater and instituted a subscription service for regular patrons. By the mid-eighteenth century, professional acting troupes began to arrive from overseas, appearing in southern and middle colonies, as well as New York. On March 5, 1750, the Murray and Kean Company in New York City performed Shakespeare's *Richard III*. The same company took this production to Williamsburg, Virginia the following year, where local citizens built a theater especially for the troupe. Other acting troupes arrived in Williamsburg in subsequent years, performing *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, among other stage plays.

The construction of theaters, proliferation of acting troupes, and increased public interest in the theater did not go unnoticed by Christian critics of the stage at the time. New England Puritans who had successfully shunned the theater for a century reasserted their authority by passing legislation banning theatrical entertainment. The General

⁶⁰ Foster Rhea Dulles, *A History of Recreation: America Learns to Play*, 2d ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1965), 57.

⁶¹ Glenn Hughes, *A History of the American Theatre, 1700-1950* (New York: Samuel French, 1951), 3.

Court of Massachusetts outlawed theater of all kinds. The House of Representatives in Pennsylvania in 1760 threatened a £500 penalty for taking part in a theatrical production. And in 1762, New Hampshire refused admittance of an acting troupe in Portsmouth because of concerns that stage plays “influence...the minds of young people, and greatly endanger their morals by giving them a taste for intriguing, amusement and pleasure.”⁶² Despite this flurry of political maneuvering, public support for a ban against the theater was beginning to weaken. In the sweep of events leading up to the Revolutionary War, clerical prohibitions against the stage seemed to be on a sinking boat, unwilling to accept the inevitable. Some clergy made a final attempt to restrain the deluge but support for the theater crested. The laws banning the theater were sometimes ignored, unenforced, or overturned, such as a monetary penalty Pennsylvanians passed on January 1, 1760, which was repealed eight months later.⁶³

The fight over the theater in Pennsylvania was indicative of the changing religious demographics. Despite Quaker efforts, Anglican merchants rose to power in Pennsylvania by the mid-eighteenth century and defended elite social activities such as stage productions and dance assemblies. By the mid-eighteenth century those willing to defend the stage became more vocal and defenders of the theater began to openly defend their profession. Actors and theater owners had become increasingly sensitive to their public image and made efforts to improve their professional reputation. It was no accident that Shakespeare’s works were so frequently performed by the earliest theater troupes. Many companies, aware that their profession could trigger backlash from

⁶² Arthur Hornblow, *A History of the Theatre in America from Its Beginnings to the Present Time* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1965), 24. Kohansky, *The Disreputable Profession: The Actor in Society*, 139.

⁶³ Nathans, *Early American Theatre*, 16.

clergymen, increasingly shaped their public image by emphasizing the artistic qualities of the theater by performing Greek classics and Shakespeare's works.⁶⁴ Actors also used the stage to openly defend their profession. During the mid-eighteenth century, actors across the colonies concluded the theatrical evening with a poem, which began

Much has been said at this unlucky time,
To prove the treading of the stage a crime.
Mistaken zeal, in terms oft not so civil,
Consigns both play and players to the devil.
Yet wise men own, a play well chose may teach
Such useful moral truths as the parsons preach;
May teach the heart another's grief to know,
And melt the soul in tears of generous woe.⁶⁵

Defenders of the theater also emphasized the moral and educational themes in their productions. When a stage company arrived in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1761, to perform *Othello*, they advertised the play as "MORAL DIALOGUES, IN FIVE PARTS, Depicting the Evil Effects of Jealousy and other Bad Passions, and Proving that Happiness can only Spring from the Pursuit of Virtue." The presentation earned enough support that the town built a make-shift theater and allowed the company to stay on for a season.⁶⁶ These approaches succeeded in making inroads into most colonies by the mid-eighteenth century although a few pockets of resistance remained. Buoyed by their success in Newport, the troupe performing *Othello* journeyed to Providence where the Rhode Island Assembly passed an act banning theater construction and stage plays. So

⁶⁴ The irony of using Shakespeare to confer elite status on the stage was that Puritan hostility toward the theater was introduced during Shakespeare's life, and peaked shortly after the bard's death in 1616. Yet by the eighteenth century, Shakespeare's plays were increasingly coming to be identified as classics. For a chronicle of how reception of Shakespeare changed over time, see Jack Lynch, *Becoming Shakespeare: The Unlikely Afterlife That Turned a Provincial Playwright into the Bard*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Walker, 2007).

⁶⁵ Hornblow, *A History of the Theatre*, 102.

⁶⁶ Rankin, *The Theater in Colonial America*, 93-96. Capitalization in original.

that they could be as clear as possible, “the act was ordered to be proclaimed throughout the streets of Providence by beat of drum.”⁶⁷ Some regional clashes remained but momentum was clearly with the theater. By the nineteenth century, the American theater became more diverse and ubiquitous and the battle shifted so that they were not primarily between clergy and actors, but between clergy and clergy.

Protestant Defenders

Events during the second half of the nineteenth century had the most direct impact on Protestant reaction to cinema in the early twentieth century. In particular, three developments at this time impacted Protestant rhetoric about the theater. In the first place, the efforts of the theatrical community came to fruition as the theater stage came to be understood as a legitimate art form and stage actors went from being community pariahs to being artisans, even national treasures. The great English actor Henry Irving was the first in his profession to be knighted. According to theater historian Benjamin McArthur, when Queen Victoria bequeathed the honor in 1895, the event “bestowed a new eminence on the player’s profession and opened the way for other actors to be similarly honored in the following years....”⁶⁸ The second relevant shift to occur during the nineteenth century was the increase in immigration and subsequent rise of cities. Chicago, which had just seventeen houses in 1833 transformed into a metropolis of 1.7 million by the turn of the century.⁶⁹ The modern urban environment made possible new,

⁶⁷ Hornblow, *A History of the Theatre*, 110-13.

⁶⁸ Benjamin McArthur, *Actors and American Culture, 1880-1920* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984), 137.

⁶⁹ Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 735.

cheap, and plentiful entertainments. The third major development of the nineteenth century, and the one most relevant for my purposes here, was that some Protestants became more vocal in their defense of the dramatic arts—directly confronting for the first time the long-standing strain of anti-theatricalism within Christianity. In order to appreciate how this came about, and the long-term ramifications, it is important to first consider the tensions within evangelical Protestantism in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In the decades leading up to the Civil War, the Protestant drive to spread their message and mold America into a Christian nation led to a rapid expansion of churches, religious organizations, publications, colleges, and bible schools. It also drove Protestant engagement with social reform, reflected in a variety of post-Civil War prohibition and temperance organizations, among others. This fervor continued during and after the war. In 1865, according to the historian Robert T. Handy there were approximately five million Protestants in the United States, out of a population of thirty-two million. What they lacked in a statistical majority they made up for in cohesion, organization, and commitment to, as Handy put it, “evangelize and Christianize every aspect of American life.”⁷⁰

However, the unified body of Protestants that had been so optimistic about transforming society began to crack in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. New approaches to interpreting the Bible as a document produced in a particular historical context challenged traditional Christian understandings of their scripture. And Darwin’s

⁷⁰ Robert T. Handy, "The Protestant Quest for a Christian America 1830-1930," in *Trends in American Religion and the Protestant World*, ed. Marty E. Marty, *Modern American Protestantism and Its World* (Munich: K.G.Saur, 1992), 56-57.

theory of evolution seemed to confront the biblical narrative of human origins. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, some Protestantism began to fold these new scientific and historical discoveries into their religious worldview, such as the popular Congregational minister Henry Ward Beecher (1813-1887). Beecher embraced new scientific and historical discoveries and spoke earnestly in favor of abolition and women's suffrage. In an 1872 sermon, he spoke of "the providence of God...rolling forward in a spirit of investigation that Christian ministers must meet and join."⁷¹

But some Protestants felt that this new "spirit of investigation" needed to be tempered by foundational biblical truths. This movement of conservative Protestantism defended their beliefs in the divine creation of human beings, God's central place in their lives, and the sacred biblical scriptures. Many also began to embrace an apocalyptic worldview known as premillennial-dispensationalism which taught that the second coming of Christ would be imminent. For some, this fed a pessimism about the nation's future but also encouraged their fervor for evangelism, reflected in Dwight L. Moody's famous quip, "I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said to me, 'Moody, save all you can.'"

The different approaches by various Protestants to the prominent religious, historical, and scientific developments of the late-nineteenth century had wide-ranging implications. As one scholar noted: "[T]he conflict between conservative and liberal Protestants at the turn of the century came to represent two mutually exclusive interpretations not only of the Bible, but of human history and cultural development as

⁷¹ Quoted in Jon R. Stone, *On the Boundaries of American Evangelicalism: The Postwar Evangelical Coalition* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 56.

well.”⁷² One aspect of the growing divide between liberal and conservative Protestantism was their differing attitudes toward amusements, broadly, and the theater, specifically. Despite the conspicuous animosity of some, Christians had always reflected differing opinions toward drama. Yet until the nineteenth century very few clergymen defended the stage outright. This changed in the mid-nineteenth century as some liberal Protestants came to view the stage as a social challenge that could be tackled the same way that they had been tackling poverty, prostitution, and saloons. It was in this vein that Frederic W. Sawyer in 1847 offered the first full-throated defense of the theater against Christian antagonizers. Sawyer’s *A Plea for Amusements* defended leisure broadly, drawing on biblical perspective as well as social and psychological ones. When he addressed the problem of the stage, he conceded that some dramas was as hazardous as its critics suggested but he put the blame on the Christian body for allowing the theater to deteriorate into a moral morass. Rather than continue an ineffective campaign of condemning the theater from a safe distance, Sawyer argued, religious leaders ought to take up the challenge of cleansing the theater. More forcefully, he considered it the church’s responsibility to do so, writing that

Theatres, in some shape, are just as much a fixture in all large cities as are the church and the school-house. They will continue to send forth their influence as regularly and as long as the latter do. It is for Christians to say what shall be the character of that influence....They must take hold manfully and reform them. Satan has had the management of the drama long enough: it is now time that it should pass into other hands.⁷³

Sawyer, rather than blame Satan or human sinfulness for the theater’s nature, held Christians partially responsible for the moral collapse of the theater. He wrote, “The

⁷² Ibid., 61.

⁷³ Frederic W. Sawyer, *A Plea for Amusements* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1847), 241.

theatre was, in that manner, cast adrift, without one saving religious influence before or behind the scenes. What could be expected of it under such circumstances? Is it not a wonder that it is no worse?"⁷⁴ Sawyer reflected a perspective among some liberal Protestants of the era who believed that Christianity could mend the theater as though it were a faltering social institution. He compared the theater to a mode of instruction, like books and lectures, and advised that "the church should never be pledged...against any thing that is not wrong in itself."⁷⁵ Thus, liberal Protestants began to see the theatrical stage as ripe for reformation. Rather than repress the instinct to theatrics they sought to moralize it. Rather than close down theaters, they sought to christen them.

This provocative text did not go unanswered and in the second half of the nineteenth century numerous clergy began to weigh in on this issue from both sides. Some supported Sawyer's position, including an 1884 sermon reprinted in the *Christian Herald and Signs of Our Times* that called on Christians to "take this dramatic element and...harness it for God."⁷⁶ Another defender from this liberal perspective was Washington Gladden, a Congregationalist minister and prominent social reformer. Gladden wrote essays on the topic of Christianity and amusements in 1866 and again in 1885 in which he suggested principles which might guide people (particularly parents and teenagers) on selecting proper Christian entertainments.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Ibid., 237-38.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 239.

⁷⁶ Talmage, "Are Theatres Improving?," *Christian Herald and Signs of Our Times*, no. 19 (1884): 293.

⁷⁷ Washington Gladden, *Amusements: Their Use and Their Abuses* (November 26, 1866). Gladden, *Amusements: Their Use and Their Abuses*, Washington Gladden, "Christianity and Popular Amusements," *The Century Magazine* XXIX, no. 3 (1885).

But many conservative Protestants vehemently disagreed, insisting that the theater could never be moralized because it was inherently corrupted and corrupting. They called on Christians to avoid the theater just as church fathers and Protestant leaders had done for centuries and they categorized the theater along with gambling and drinking—social ills that could not be “cleansed” but instead needed to be avoided, fought against, and eradicated. These conservative Protestants brought forward the long-standing Christian bias against the stage and called on a Christian prohibition against attending the theater in the hopes that the institution would wither and fade. The pamphlet, “Theatrical Amusements inconsistent with Christian Morals” written by Thomas Smyth in 1854 exemplified their position. Smyth made clear that he regarded “the theatre as a moral evil” that was without doubt “opposed to the spirit and genius of christianity [sic].” That being so, Smyth could see only one proper response to the stage.

...if every one who, on principle, ought to be opposed to the theatre, would abstain from its exhibitions, it would go down at once, for want of support, and we should have the building, at first dedicated to sensualism, purified and consecrated to some religious, or charitable institution.⁷⁸

What is most evident in Sawyer’s extensive treatment and Smyth’s pamphlet is that both men were motivated by a desire to improve society. They simply proffered solutions at odds with one another. Sawyer wanted the church to engage the theater and to create a more moral institution while Smyth viewed the theater as a social malady that required elimination, not decontamination. Both men aimed to produce a more Christian nation, but disagreed as to whether this could be achieved by gently insinuating Protestantism itself into popular institutions like the theater, or whether Protestants would

⁷⁸ Thomas Smyth, *Theatrical Amusements Inconsistent with Christian Morals* (Charleston: John Russell, 1854).

need to eliminate institutions that posed a challenge to their faith. Many conservative Protestants in the mid-nineteenth century increased their vehement opposition to the theater in reaction to those who would take a more moderate position regarding the stage. Reverend Herrick Johnson in 1882 insisted that “the reformation of the theater is out of the question” because “the stage, as an institution, ‘*has within itself the seeds of corruption, and it exists only under a law of degeneracy.*’”⁷⁹

Despite the fact that both sides hoped to improve society and drew on their Christian tradition as a means to achieve that end, conservative and liberal Protestants grew further apart on a broad range of theological and social issues. As some clergy called on the Christian body to moralize leisure and amusements, conservative Protestants drew a line in the sand. The 1876 *Doctrine and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* threatened to expel church members who patronized the theater. Following suit in 1889, the Baptist Association also adopted a resolution prohibiting church members from patronizing theaters.⁸⁰ And concerns about amusements and the theater extended beyond the evangelical base within the Methodist and Baptist denominations. Ellen G. White, one of the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, weighed in on the controversy regarding the stage as well. Like many conservative evangelicals of her time, White ruled out attending theatrical performances, which she considered “Among the most dangerous resorts for pleasure.”⁸¹

⁷⁹ Herrick Johnson, *A Plain Talk About the Theater* (Chicago: F.H. Revell, 1882), 18. Italics in original.

⁸⁰ On the Baptists Association resolution, see McArthur, *Actors and American Culture*, 130. Note that McArthur incorrectly dates the Methodist Episcopal threat of expulsion to 1877. However, it is *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* of 1876 that first records the threat of expulsion for church members who visited theaters.

⁸¹ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies of the Church*, 9 vols., vol. 4, 352-53.

By the early twentieth century, questions about “amusements,” which typically included theater, dance, and card-playing, remained a widespread topic of sermons and publications that both sides returned to frequently. *Everybody Magazine* in 1904 published essays by eight clergymen representing different Christian traditions on the question, “May the Christian dance, play cards, and attend the play?” Typical was the position by Robert S. MacArthur, the Baptist representative, who felt that church members ought to discriminate questions of amusements for themselves. MacArthur also took a moment to knock unnamed clergy whom he felt “have erred greatly by their indiscriminate denunciation of all amusements.”⁸² But the extensive attention in *Everybody Magazine* hardly settled the issue among Protestants—or even, for that matter, among readers of *Everybody Magazine*. A subsequent issue published letters that ranged from supporting a moderate stance on amusements to strong condemnation by those who felt that “the theatres, the dances, and card-parties are and have been a detriment to the growth and development of a strong and vital Christian character.”

It is tempting to conclude that the differences of opinion reflected a clean split between liberal and conservative Protestants, but this was not always so. Henry Ward Beecher embodied progressive liberal Christianity in the mid-nineteenth century.⁸³ Yet in his *Addresses to Young Men*, he warned that Christians who patronized the theater would first be greeted in hell by “the hideous shrieks of those whom thy hand hath

⁸² Newman Smyth Cardinal Gibbons, B.P. Raymond, E.B. Kephart, C.H. Parkhurst, Robert Stuart MacArthur, J.B. Remennsnyder, Bishop David H. Greer, “May the Christian Dance, Play Cards, and Attend the Play,” *Everybody Magazine* X, no. 5 (May 1904): 695-701.

⁸³ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 22-26.

destroyed.”⁸⁴ As historian George Marsden observed, “In the pulpit, liberals could not easily be distinguished from conservatives on such practical points, and practical morality was often for American Protestants what mattered most.”⁸⁵ Even among conservative evangelicals there was a range of opinions. Some of the most well-known and influential attended and even supported the theater. According to historian Douglas Carl Abrams, C.I. Scofield, the author and theologian who popularized premillennial-dispensationalism in his *Scofield Reference Bible* was known to attend the theater, as did the editor of the fundamentalist periodical *Our Hope*, Arno Gaebelein.⁸⁶ The greatest fundamentalist defender of the theater was Bob Jones Sr., a revivalist and founder of the titular university. Jones was both a prominent leader within fundamentalism of the interwar period and also atypical in his appreciation of the arts. His support of museums, opera, and the theater reflected his belief that the arts were a significant aspect of personal refinement. Bob Jones University reflected its founder’s interest in high culture and offered a theater program early in the school’s history. On June 2, 1930 the college sponsored its first theatrical production, *The Merchant of Venice*. This was followed up in subsequent years with *Hamlet* and *Taming of the Shrew*. Jones, more than any other evangelical of his period, manifested the prevailing cultural attitude of the time about the value of classical drama, although most other conservative Protestants at the time were more circumspect.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Quoted in Foster Rhea Dulles, *America Learns to Play* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1940), 89.

⁸⁵ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 26.

⁸⁶ Abrams, *Selling the Old-Time Religion: American Fundamentalists and Mass Culture, 1920-1940*, 81.

⁸⁷ Daniel Lynn Turner, "Fundamentalism, the Arts, and Personal Refinement: A Study of the Ideals of Bob Jones, Sr. And Bob Jones, Jr." (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1988), 302-13.

Protestants at the turn of the nineteenth century may not have agreed on whether, or which, amusements were appropriate for the faithful but they all seemed to agree that amusements were worth extensive deliberation. In 1904 John Wilbur Chapman, a protégé of Dwight Moody, was invited to a revival to speak on the topic “The Christian’s Relation to Amusements and the World.” In his sermon Chapman commented on the frequency with which Christian congregants petitioned for his advice on amusements: “People say to me very frequently, ‘Can I not be a Christian and dance?’ or ‘Can I not be a Christian and play cards?’ or again, ‘Isn’t it possible for me to be a Christian and yet go to the theater?’”⁸⁸ Evidently the questions were so common that some clergy felt pressure from their congregants to settle such matters. A 1905 pamphlet entitled “The Worldly Christian’s Trinity: Cards, Theatre, Dance” was written anonymously by a pastor who clearly felt put upon by the topic: he signed his name “A Harassed Pastor.”⁸⁹

The topic of amusements was also prominent further north. In 1905, the pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago, A.C. Dixon, dedicated three chapters of his book *Present Day Life and Religion* to the weighty theological issues of prayer, atonement, and the doctrines of heaven and hell before taking five chapters to address “amusements,” “theatre,” “dance,” “the card table,” and “novel reading.”⁹⁰ Evidently, present day life at the Moody Church involved more reflection on leisure than atonement. The conversation continued at the American Sunday-School Union, which offered a prize in 1915 for the

⁸⁸ J. Wilbur Chapman, *The Christian's Relation to Amusements and the World* (Warsaw, Indiana: Reub Williams and Sons, 1904), 8-9.

⁸⁹ A Harassed Pastor, *The Worldly Christian's Trinity: Cards, Theatre, Dance* (Boston: Watchword and Truth, 1905).

⁹⁰ A. C. Dixon, *Present Day Life and Religion: A Series of Sermons on Cardinal Doctrines and Popular Sins* (Chicago: The Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1905).

best manuscript on the subject, “Amusements: How Can They Be Made to Promote the Highest Well-Being of Society?”⁹¹ As the topic of revivals, sermons, and a multitude of Christian pamphlets, books, journal articles, amusements generally, and cards, dancing, and the theater particularly, were extensively debated across American Protestantism from the second half of the nineteenth century and into the first few decades of the twentieth century.

But by the 1920s the debates over amusements that had been such a prominent concern among Protestants in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century began to recede. It was not that evangelicals had come to agreement on this issue or that they had exhausted interest in it. Rather, it was that a new form of entertainment had so rapidly spread across the American landscape that it seemed to eclipse all other forms of leisure and become the central focus of debate on the issue. The moving picture rose from novelty to everyday entertainment in little more than two decades. Movie theaters spread out from the cities into most towns throughout the country, so that in the early 1930s movie theaters nationwide sold roughly 90 million tickets *each week* out of a national population of 150 million. Protestants who had spent decades debating the merits of the stage swiftly pivoted to the silver screen.

Not content to merely draw on the long-standing Christian anti-theatrical prejudice, conservative Protestants in the early twentieth century professed that movies were a far more serious danger than the stage had been. Over and over they insisted that the moving picture, in comparison to the stage, was the more pernicious enemy. One

⁹¹ The American Sunday School Union awarded second prize to Robert Whitaker, *Laughter and Life: A Christian View of Amusements* (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1915). First prize went to Howard Palmer Young, *Character through Recreation* (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1915).

1917 Methodist pamphlet stated that the moving picture show “*out-theatres* the theatre.”⁹² And *The King’s Business*, a periodical published by the conservative evangelical BIOLA University, could not make this same point often enough. A March 1917 editorial lamented that “the moving picture stage is worse than the regular stage.” The following month they insisted that “the theatre at its worst was never as demoralizing as the movie shows which are so largely taking its place.” And two months later they wrote: “Bad as the theatres are, the movies are immeasurably worse.”⁹³ This perspective was indicative of many conservative Protestant bodies of the period. A Mennonite pamphlet in 1921 insisted that “The stage effects are evil but the movie is the greater transgressor.”⁹⁴ Meanwhile, an official examination of “worldly amusements” by a synod of the Christian Reformed Church concluded that the movie’s “influence in some respects is more baneful than that of the regular theater.”⁹⁵ A book published by Zondervan in 1931 described the moving picture as “perhaps the *greatest religious menace of this generation*.”⁹⁶ Another published by Moody Press in 1936 lamented that “The stage is bad enough, God knows, but the screen is far worse in its effects.”⁹⁷

Christian protestation against the stage developed over a period of seventeen hundred years, from the early church fathers to the late nineteenth-century conservative

⁹² Wimberly, *The Moving Picture: A Careful Survey of a Difficult Problem*. Italics in original.

⁹³ "Demoralizing Effect of the Theatre," *The King's Business* VIII, no. 3 (March 1917): 195. "Morality of the Modern Theater," *The King's Business* VIII, no. 4 (April 1917): 294-95. "Is the Drama Morally Corrupt and Corrupting?," *The King's Business* VIII, no. 6 (June 1917): 485.

⁹⁴ Clayton F. Derstine, *Hell's Playground: Theaters and Movies* (Eureka, Illinois: 1921), 24.

⁹⁵ "Worldly Amusements in the Light of Scripture," 36.

⁹⁶ Masselink, *I and the Children*, 200. Italics in original.

⁹⁷ J.E. Conant, *Is the Devil in Modern Amusements?* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1936), 29.

evangelicals. But by the 1910s, they would recalibrate their ire to focus on the menace of the movies. What made the movies such a palpable menace to so many conservative Protestants from 1915 to 1955 is a question I explore in each of the subsequent chapters.

Conclusion

The early church fathers recoiled from the pagan religious elements of theater, leading them to correlate the devil and the theater. They also established a bias against the acting profession, which they associated with dishonesty and duplicity. Centuries later as the theater became a public entertainment, Elizabethan Protestants, particularly Puritans like William Prynne, rekindled those old hostilities, reasserted the arguments of the church fathers, and added new condemnations. They made efforts to shut down Sunday theatrical showings so that potential congregants would not be tempted away from the church service, and they expressed grave concern about the sexual blurring that occurred on stage, accusing performers of distorting the distinctions of dress and relations on which Puritans placed great emphasis. In the early American colonies, Protestant attitude toward the theater became more varied, as different denominations claimed disparate postures. This came to a head in the mid-nineteenth century as Protestantism divided over issues theological and cultural. To consider all of the long-standing philosophical and social underpinnings that buttressed the Christian prejudice against the stage would extend beyond the scope of this project. As context for the issue of conservative Protestant engagement with motion pictures in the first half of the twentieth century, this chapter points toward two arguments that I develop over the next three chapters. First, conservative evangelical anxiety toward motion pictures drew on arguments that had been nurtured for centuries of anti-theatrical prejudices. Second, their

hostility toward motion pictures was not mechanical repetition of centuries-old condemnation of the stage. To the contrary, Protestant denunciation of cinema would surpass the enmity (if not the page-count) expressed by William Prynne in the seventeenth century.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SPACE

Stage playes are the very Devil's owne peculiar pompes, Play-houses his Synagogues; Players, his professed Masse-priests and Choristers; Play haunters his devoted servants, as himselfe professeth....

—William Prynne, *Histriomastix* (1632)

With enormous rapidity Satan has dotted our country with moving picture houses.... They are palaces of sin, perils to all classes. In them virtue is laughed at, sexual irregularities are condoned. Crime is the mainspring of their existence. They are palaces of Satan that unfit millions for the Palace of God.

—Clayton F. Derstine, *Hell's Playground* (1921)

Early Exposure

There was little in the birth of cinema to indicate that it would soon become such a terrible concern for conservative evangelicals. When the first moving pictures appeared at the end of the nineteenth century, the films provided about a minute of visual stimulation with images of trains entering stations or circus animals performing their acts. Patrons viewed them by peering through a peep-hole at the top of a large box, where a loop of still images created the illusion of movement. Shortly thereafter, inventors re-engineered machines to project the flickering images up on a wall making it possible for groups of people to watch films together. Films soon grew longer and were often styled like brief documentaries such as a runaway horse filmed in New York City's Central Park, a mother bathing her child, or firemen filmed while rescuing the residents of a

burning house. From this beginning the nascent film industry resembled journalism more than the theatrical stage and what most impressed the first film audiences was not the content of the films as much as the technologies that made them possible. The ability to capture and project moving images amazed audiences and one's religious viewpoints, no matter how staunchly observed, did not obstruct the ability to appreciate this new technological marvel. At the turn of the century one Presbyterian minister from South Carolina wrote that he was "very much interested in the moving photographs," and opined about the "age of wonder" that offered such opportunities.¹

Many Protestants quickly recognized the potential for employing moving pictures for use in some aspect of missionary assignments. Charles Taze Russell, the founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, produced the earliest and most ambitious Christian film production. Russell's production synchronized moving pictures with lantern slides and music for an eight-hour production that traced the history of the world beginning with Adam and Eve. The production was a critical and popular success that Russell traveled throughout the United States touring his multi-media tour-de-force. A local newspaper in Virginia in 1914 declared it the "most remarkable presentations of the teachings of the Scriptures ever seen in Norfolk."² Other evangelical bodies found other uses for the medium, such as evangelistic vehicles that could be exhibited around the world.

¹ Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 195.

² Quoted in Terry Lindvall, "Sundays in Norfolk: Toward a Protestant Utopia through Film Exhibition in Norfolk, Virginia, 1906-1926," *Unpublished*: 11. For further analysis of Russell's production, see Richard Alan Nelson, "Propaganda for God: Pastor Charles Taze Russell and the Multi-Media *Photo-Drama of Creation* (1914)," in *Une Invention Du Diable? Cinema Des Premiers Tempts Et Religion*, ed. Roland Cosandey, Andre/ Gaudreult, Tom Gunning (Lausanne: Editions Payot, 1992).

Others found uses for cinema more close to home. In 1925 William Jennings Bryan would become nationally known for defending the fundamentalist position in the Scopes Trial in Tennessee. Before the public bruising his image received in that trial, Bryan was a popular conservative preacher who had run for president and championed social causes. In 1920 Bryan lent his name and reputation to support the making of a documentary-style film defending prohibition.³ Although plans for the film eventually collapsed when the producer failed to raise the necessary funds, Bryan was part of a wide spectrum of Protestants who considered the medium of film the greatest “material influence for good or bad” that exists today, as an editorial in the *Christian Herald* stated in 1922.⁴ Bryan, like many Protestants, believed he had an obligation to support movies he deemed morally agreeable.

For a few decades some clergy experimented with showing films at the church, although film historians have only recently begun to unearth the history of churches that exhibited commercial motion pictures. Enthusiasm for the technology, narratives that catered to Christian audiences, and the possibility of social improvement led some to support local film exhibition in the first decade of the twentieth century. As early as 1906, a Baptist Church in Virginia advertised its exhibition of “Edison’s Moving Pictures,” charging twenty-five cents for adults and fifteen cents for children.⁵ The idea caught on and churches around the country began experimenting with moving pictures, exhibiting films with appropriate religious themes on Sunday evenings and prayer

³ “Col. Bryan May yet Slay Rum in Movie,” *New York Times*, June 3, 1920, 18. “Tells How Bryan Movie Collapsed,” *New York Times*, June 4, 1920, 10.

⁴ Rae D. Henkle, “The Puzzle of the Pictures,” *The Christian Herald* (September 16, 1922): 647.

⁵ Lindvall, “Sundays in Norfolk: Toward a Protestant Utopia through Film Exhibition in Norfolk, Virginia, 1906-1926,” 10.

meetings. In historian Terry Lindvall's study of Protestant churches and movie-going in Virginia, the author found that "churches in Norfolk had undertaken an active moving picture program by 1920."⁶ Throughout rural America, itinerant exhibitors carried films and projection equipment from town to town, often setting up in churches, YMCA's, schools, and other public spaces. The most successful of whom maintained strong relations with church leaders.⁷ In 1920, the periodical *The Moving Picture Age* published a series of articles by Roy L. Smith advising churches on how to establish moving picture spaces, maintain projection equipment, and select films. ("We have found," Smith helpfully advised, "that the comedy that appeals to the adult will not always appeal to the child."⁸) Church leaders typically selected films based on their spiritual or education value, although some churches saw commercial films as a means to fill up the pews.⁹

No everyone was pleased that churches were being turned in to screening houses. Reuben Torrey, who served as dean of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles in 1912, derided clergy for using movies as a crutch for filling pews. Had the gospel "lost its power to draw" so that it needed help from the movies, Torrey asked? And Harry Ironside, known as "the archbishop of fundamentalism," decried churches that exhibited movies as

⁶ Ibid.: 13.

⁷ Charles Musser and Carol Nelson, *High-Class Moving Pictures: Lyman H. Howe and the Forgotten Era of Traveling Exhibition, 1880-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

⁸ Roy L[emon] Smith, *Moving Pictures in the Church* (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1921), 22.

⁹ For further consideration of Protestant filmmaking and church exhibition sites, see Fuller, *At the Picture Show*, 85-97. Joseph Lewis Bridges, "A Historical Study of Cooperative Protestant Religious Film in America from 1914 to 1972" (Dissertation, University of Southern California, 1975). Vincent Rosini, "Sanctuary Cinema: The Rise and Fall of Protestant Churches as Film Exhibition Site, 1910-1930" (Dissertation, Regent University, 1998). Lindvall, *The Silents of God: Selected Issues and Documents in Silent American Film and Religion, 1908-1925*.

sellouts who would trade their birth-rite for a musical and a minstrel-show.¹⁰ For early fundamentalists, the better response to the movie world was not to partner with it but to compete with it and overcome it. Fundamentalists saw nothing to be gained by using their churches to display movies, but it would be a moot point soon enough. By the 1920s, the flirtation between churches and film exhibition began to come apart. Several reasons led to this decline. For one, the film industry had undergone significant changes after World War I. Films in the 1920s had become feature length productions, which clergymen found difficult to employ as part of a Sunday evening service. Other challenges were economic and technical. Early nitrate films were extremely flammable and required expensive safety precautions beyond the means of most churches. And still more challenges came from the marketplace: commercial theater owners complained about churches providing free movies since they drew away paying customers.¹¹

It is this last point that foreshadows some of the growing tension between church leaders and the film industry. Religious animosity toward the movies increased as movies became a centralized industry overseen from corporations first in New York City and then in California. Christians who had initially expressed enthusiasm for the technology and who saw only possibility in the medium became increasingly hostile toward an industry that controlled distribution, exhibition, advertisement and, most alarmingly, modeled their product after the theatrical stage. Christians continued to recognize that the medium of film offered valuable opportunities for evangelism and education, but they grew increasingly alarmed at an industry that became coupled with

¹⁰ Abrams, *Selling the Old-Time Religion: American Fundamentalists and Mass Culture, 1920-1940*, 72-73.

¹¹ Rosini, "Sanctuary Cinema". Also see Fuller, *At the Picture Show*.

movie stars and sensationalism and, most problematic of all, attracted previously unimaginably large crowds. The ensuing conflict between churches and the film industry focused first on the theater buildings, and mainline and fundamentalist clergy united against the movies. United, that is, to stop theaters from Sunday showings. This fight to force movie theaters to close on the Christian Sabbath represents a brief period of collaboration between mainline and fundamentalist Protestants with regard to the commercial film industry.

The Sabbatarian Movement

In 1905, a vaudeville theater owner in Pittsburgh opened one of the first theater spaces exclusively to exhibiting moving pictures. He started the theater, christened the “Nickelodeon,” after observing that the brief moving pictures in between vaudeville acts were proving more popular than the live performances. Over the next few years, thousands of nickelodeons with names like the Theatorium, Dreamland, and Majestic spread throughout the country, with widely divergent characteristics. Some were converted store fronts with a few dozen available chairs. Others were old vaudeville halls and opera houses that could seat several hundred patrons. The theaters attracted a wide audience that included working class, middle class, immigrant populations, and children.¹² By 1910, there were approximately 10,000 nickelodeon theaters operating throughout the United States, attracting 26 million Americans *each week*.¹³ As one historian commented, “The nickelodeon was not simply a phenomenon of the teeming

¹² David Robinson, *From Peep Show to Palace: The Birth of American Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 93.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 90.

ghettos of the New Yorks and Philadelphias but a mass enterprise that swept across the United States in the years between 1905 and 1910.”¹⁴

As movies became more popular, Protestant leaders began to express increasing alarm over Sunday exhibitions—often the most popular day of the week to patronize the theater. For many, Sundays were the only day off from work as well as the day after payday. As audience attendance increased on Sundays, a Sabbatarian movement which had previously focused on closing saloons and vaudeville stages turned toward movie theaters. In New York City in 1907, according to film historian Charles Musser, “a war was waged...around the issue of the Sunday shows.” Police arrested theater managers and the city revoked exhibitor licenses in order to control commercial business on Sundays. The following year, the mayor shut down every movie theater in the city on Christmas morning. Theater owners, believing they had the support of the public and the law, fought back. Yet the combined weight of ministerial authorities and local law enforcement succeeded in forcing movie theaters the shut down in New York City on Sundays. Laws against presenting movies on Sunday held in New York until 1919, after which theater owners were required to wait to start running their projectors on Sunday until 1:00 PM—in other words, after church services were over.¹⁵

Such clashes were not unique to New York, though regional differences played a large role in the support or opposition to blue laws. Such statutes throughout the country were designed to curb commerce and leisure on Sundays, although the definitions of these terms differed from state to state. Moreover, local police, judges, juries and

¹⁴ Douglas Gomery, *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States*, *Wisconsin Studies in Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 29.

¹⁵ Musser and Nelson, *High-Class Moving Pictures*, 191-92.

government officials exercised leeway in prosecuting or overlooking offending theater owners as well as leisure-seeking citizens.¹⁶ Local fights over blue laws also revealed local tensions in class, religion, and race. In Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1914, the supporters of blue laws were comprised of Protestant establishment, including clergy, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, as well as politicians, whereas defenders of Sunday film showings were, according to a local newspaper at the time, "composed mostly of the working class of people and persons directly or indirectly connected with the Worcester playhouses and moving picture places."¹⁷ Allowing movie theaters to run on Sundays was not just an issue of competing commercial interests between theaters and churches. Defenders of blue laws saw the issue as part of a larger concern about the view of the United States as a Christian nation. In 1926 when two theater owners in New Jersey challenged their state's blue laws the local chapter of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan bought ads in a local paper to express their opposition to the theaters.¹⁸ While the fight over Sunday movie exhibition spread throughout the country, the makeup of supporters and detractors differed between local communities.

Much of the strength of the Sabbatarian movement lay in the unity among various Protestant bodies. Gregory Waller's historical study of early movie-going in Lexington, Kentucky, noted that that city's Sabbatarian movement initially combined support by

¹⁶ On the distinctions between blue laws throughout the U.S., see Harry Hirschman, "Blue Laws Differ Greatly among the Various States," *New York Times*, October 2 1927. Waldo Walker, "'Blue Laws' Remain to Frighten Us," *New York Times*, June 24, 1928. Gustavus Myers, "Our Blue Laws Giving Ground before Attacks of Liberals," *New York Times*, November 29, 1931.

¹⁷ The Worcester Telegram, February 5, 1914, quoted in Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 208.

¹⁸ "Sunday Films Fought in Plainfield by Klan," *New York Times*, August 15 1926.

white as well as black churches, and mainline as well as evangelical Protestants.¹⁹

Although they came together in vigorously protecting Sundays from non-Christian activities, fundamentalists and mainline clergy disagreed about the dangers of cinema. For example, in 1914 at the Union Church in Massachusetts, Francis Poole made clear that although he supported the Sabbatarian movement, “it is not moving pictures that we oppose,” he said, but rather a commercialized Sunday.²⁰ But Baptist leaders in Lexington, Kentucky, also Sabbatarians, passed a resolution calling moving pictures

the outstanding evil of the day, injurious and very degrading to all that is moral, high and holy. They encourage and magnify all the things that are immoral; they emphasize shooting, killing, gambling, divorce, elopements, unfaithfulness in the home life, free love, appealing to the sex [sic] and such like.²¹

By the 1910s, liberal and conservative Protestant attitudes toward movies began to diverge, but there was strong agreement that Sundays should be protected from commercial encroachments. A 1921 article in *The Christian Advocate*, a Methodist periodical, insisted that “the moving picture men will lose...for they are wrong, and the wrong cannot finally win.”²² However, the tide was beginning to turn in the favor of theater owners and the movie-going public. By the 1930s, citizens groups and business owners exerted strong pressure on their elected representatives to protect commercial pursuits on Sundays. Prominent clergy found themselves on the wrong end of public

¹⁹ Gregory A. Waller, *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 128-35. For more on blue laws in the South, see Ownby, *Subduing Satan*, 176, 93, 209.

²⁰ Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will*, 208.

²¹ Quoted in Waller, *Main Street Amusements*, 230-31.

²² Quoted in Mary Patrice Thaman, *Manners and Morals of the 1920's: A Survey of the Religious Press* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1954), 108. According to Thaman's study, both Baptists and Methodists in the north and south criticized Sunday movie exhibitions; however, Southern Baptists “express their opinion” in “more strident” language (109).

opinion and religious leaders were unable to marshal enough influence to hold the line against Sunday movies. In Baltimore, a bill to defend Sundays from encroaching commercialization was put up for public referendum during the political primaries of 1932 and endorsed by the Catholic archbishop, the Episcopal Diocese, and the Baltimore Federation of Churches. An *Associated Press* article at the time reported that “[i]nterest in the blue law question far overshadowed the political aspects of the primary.” Nevertheless, voters “by the largest vote ever given a proposal...repealed its 200-year-old Sunday observance laws.”²³ Americans who wanted the right to shop, see sporting events, and patronize the movie theaters, and their voices were joined by some clergymen who also began to express public criticism of blue laws. In quick succession, laws forbidding movie exhibition began to fall across the country.²⁴ It is at this point where liberal and conservative Protestant positions toward the movies diverged.

Parting Company

Although disagreements over theology began to distinguish liberal and conservative Protestants in the nineteenth century, many fundamentalists remained

²³ "Home Rule for Baltimore: State Assembly Repeals Blue Laws--Liberal Sundays Possible," *New York Times*, April 4 1931. "Archbishop Curley Calls Films Immoral: Movies Salacious, Maryland Prelate Holds, Opposing Operation on Sunday," *New York Times*, March 14 1931. "Hoover Defeats France in Maryland Primary; Baltimore Repeals Sunday Laws by Huge Vote," *New York Times*, May 3 1932. W. H. Tammen, "First Open Sunday in Baltimore Today," *New York Times*, May 8 1932.

"Home Rule for Baltimore: State Assembly Repeals Blue Laws--Liberal Sundays Possible.", "Hoover Defeats France in Maryland Primary; Baltimore Repeals Sunday Laws by Huge Vote.", Tammen, "First Open Sunday in Baltimore Today."

²⁴ "Movie Men to Push Fight on Blue Law," *New York Times*, January 26, 1932, "Blue Law Lifted on Movies in Orange [New Jersey]," *New York Times*, October 2, 1930. "Nullify Town's Blue Law: Sea Cliff [Long Island] Voters Defeat Ban on Sunday Movies and Sports," *New York Times*, January 6, 1932. "Atlanta Will Celebrate Wide Open Sunday Today," *New York Times*, October 22, 1933. "Blue Law Fading in Philadelphia," *New York Times*, November 17, 1935. "First Movies on Sunday Fill Maplewood [New Jersey] Theatre," *New York Times*, December 9, 1935. "Blue Laws Smashed All Day in Vermont," *New York Times*, December 6, 1937. "Mississippi Relaxes Blue Law," *New York Times*, May 13, 1942.

aligned with their broad church bodies in the early twentieth century. But in the 1920s, two events led many fundamentalists to insist on separating from their larger church body. First, the circus surrounding the Scopes Trial in 1925 damaged the credibility and public perception of fundamentalism. Then, after a failed attempt by fundamentalist Baptists and Presbyterians to expel liberals from their denomination bodies, many fundamentalists began to call for withdrawal from their home churches to form independent churches.²⁵ The fundamentalist religious worldview had become increasingly incompatible with liberal Protestantism. By the 1930s, according to historian Joel Carpenter, “fundamentalists were becoming a distinct religious community.”²⁶ They embraced an end-times theology known as premillennial dispensationalism which held that the world would grow progressively bleaker until the parousia, the second coming of Christ. Fundamentalism had also lost its intellectual leadership by the 1930s. Liberal Protestantism ascended in political and academic circles while “fundamentalist” became a pejorative associated with culturally backward, anti-intellectual, bible-thumpers.

The differing political and social spheres in which liberal and fundamentalist churches now operated came to be reflected in their discrete positions on movies. Liberal Protestants became driven to use their public influence to pressure the film industry to produce movies they deemed more moral. Many of their efforts to moralize the movies focused on engaging with the viewing public and attempting to raise public tastes. Beginning in the 1930s the mainline periodical *The Christian Century* produced film

²⁵ Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism*, 33-49.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

reviews that highlighted noteworthy films and encouraged Christians to support productions of which they approved. They also believed the role of clergy was to highlight the good while warning against the bad. The reviews and suggestions were ample enough that, as historian R. Lawrence Moore noted, “Adult readers of the *Christian Century* could find ample recommendations to more than sustain a weekly habit of movie-going.”²⁷ Films like *Scarface* (1932), *It Happened One Night* (1934), and *Gone with the Wind* (1939), which pushed social boundaries at the time, all earned strong recommendations by mainline Protestants. *The Christian Century* also pleaded for government intervention in splitting up the monopoly that Hollywood had on the film distribution process, which they also believed would lead to more enlightened cinema. The journal editors called on congress to end “block-booking,” a common industry practice at the time in which the major Hollywood studios required local theater owners to purchase a block of films at one time. If theater owners wanted to exhibit a major new feature they had to purchase it along with a bundle of lesser films. As a business practice block-booking was a profitable way to leverage popular products in order to sell secondary features. However critics of block-booking felt that the practice forced theater owners to purchase less morally responsible films that theaters would otherwise not opt to exhibit. As Moore has noted, *The Christian Century*’s presumption that ending block-booking would lead to the more moral films was poorly conceived. “[T]he argument against block-booking actually trusted the free market to provide effective censorship. Exhibitors...would select films fit for family viewing if liberated from the strong-arm

²⁷ Moore, *Selling God*, 230.

tactics of the producers. That was a long way from clear.”²⁸ Despite their questionable grasp of public tastes, the efforts by *The Christian Century* to raise the standards of films focused on the power of the marketplace. If “we are to go forward in the movement toward better motion pictures,” went one *Christian Century* editorial, “it is essential that we maintain public support of the *excellent ten per cent* of the movies now coming from Hollywood.”²⁹ Mainline Protestant leaders rested their hopes on selective consumerism as the means of improve motion pictures.

Catholic leaders also saw a role for guiding public taste and so Catholic churches in the 1930s often posted lists of movies that were approved and disapproved by church leaders. In 1934, Catholics established the Legion of Decency, an organization that called for national Catholic boycotts of films they deemed immoral. The Legion would supposedly demonstrate the national influence that Catholics could rely on in order to combat the dictates of the film industry. However, it was never clear that films banned by the Legion resulted in fewer Catholics at the box office. Catholic clergy also engaged with the film industry directly and put pressure on studios to accept a moral code of conduct that would guide film production. In 1930, Catholic leaders were instrumental in getting the film studios to institute the Hays Production Code that set guidelines for film content. Among the code’s declarations, “[u]ndressing scenes should be avoided, and never used save where essential to the plot” and “[m]inisters of religion in their character as ministers of religion should not be used as comic characters or as villains.”³⁰ The

²⁸ Ibid., 227.

²⁹ Fred Eastman and Edward Ouellette, *Better Motion Pictures* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1936), iv. Emphasis added.

³⁰ The text of the Production Code is reprinted at <http://www.artsreformation.com/a001/hays-code.html>. Accessed August 23, 2006.

Code ostensibly stayed in effect until 1968 although throughout its history, filmmakers found means to get around some of its stricter injunctions. At first, mainline Protestants applauded Catholic efforts to clean up the movies. But Protestants soon came to resent what they saw as Catholic intrusions on their turf. Both Catholics and mainline Protestants found in the fight over movies an opportunity to claim the mantle of the nation's moral gatekeepers.³¹

By comparison, fundamentalists took note of the efforts by mainline Protestants and Catholics and were altogether unimpressed. A 1922 editorial in the fundamentalist periodical *The King's Business* delighted in reprinting the quip, "to clean up the movies is like going at a leopard with kalsomine."³² In 1925, the *Moody Monthly* asked sardonically, "every picture that is shown here has passed the censor. Has that improved the quality?"³³ It seemed that fundamentalists and mainline Protestants saw the same problem but came to opposite conclusions about how to proceed. Whereas *The Christian Century* wanted to build on the "excellent ten per cent" of commercial films, fundamentalists opposed all commercial cinema because, as one wrote, "85% of the pictures they show are about crime, Western Thrillers [sic], sex or illicit love affairs."³⁴

³¹ For further examination of the tensions between liberal Protestant and Catholic clergy regarding the "clean up" of Hollywood, see Moore, *Selling God*, 228-29. There are several monographs of Catholic engagement with Hollywood and the history of the Legion of Decency. See Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies*. Paul W. Facey, *The Legion of Decency: A Sociological Analysis of the Emergence and Development of a Social Pressure Group, The Arno Press Cinema Program* (New York: Arno Press, 1974). Skinner, *The Cross and the Cinema: The Legion of Decency and the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures, 1933-1970*.

³² T(homas) C(Corwin) Horton, "Clean up the Movies," *The King's Business* XIII, no. 10 (1922): 990.

³³ L. Ray Miller, "May Christians Attend Picture Shows?," *Moody Monthly* 25, no. 7 (March 1925): 317. Also see Clara Winterton, "The Morals of the Movies," *Moody Monthly* 23 (1923): 421-22. "Campaign for Improved Motion Pictures," *The King's Business* XXV, no. 9 (1934): 339.

³⁴ C.M. Washington, *Should Christians Support the Movies?* (Nappanee, Indiana: E.V. Publishing House, n.d.), 32. Italics and capitalization in original.

For mainline Protestants pointing to one good film out of ten was a clarion call that Christians needed to become more actively engaged in redressing the film industry whereas for fundamentalists, nearly nine bad films out of ten proved that the film industry was too saturated with sin to ever be satisfactorily moralized. And some fundamentalist leaders even expressed doubts about the few supposed acceptable films.

J.E. Conant's *Is the Devil in Modern Amusements?* wrote that

The "clean pictures" are simply bait with which the devil attracts church members into the theatre, that he may thus use them as decoys to allure others [sic], who follow their example, toward moral ruin and hell.... Seeing only the "clean pictures" is as much of a sanction of the theatre as an institution, as buying only a lemonade in a saloon would have been approval of the saloon as an institution. It is the simple principle in law of "particeps criminis," which means, "partaker in crime."³⁵

Conant's position on the movies harkened back to nineteenth century Protestants arguing that the theatrical stage could never be cleansed of its immoral content. In his 1869 book, the Methodist Episcopal reverend Jonathan Crane dismissed those who believed that the stage could be reworked for Christian purposes, insisting that "The theater will never be reformed. The truly refined despise it, the wise and the good abhor it.... It must be indecent or die."³⁶ Fundamentalist prejudices against the movies came to reflect these same prejudices.

In fact, the difference between mainline and fundamentalist attitudes toward the movies revealed a deeper division about their perspective on human nature. Mainline Protestants of the 1930s believed that the public could be edified and enriched by improving commercial cinema and by using the government to protect the public from

³⁵ Conant, *Is the Devil in Modern Amusements?*, 40.

³⁶ Crane, *Popular Amusements*, 55.

abusive corporate interests. Fundamentalists, however, argued that movies could never be cleansed. To them, the immoral content of popular cinema reflected the inherent sin of human nature. They rejected political and social pressure on Hollywood because they felt that human nature could not be cleansed. The more graphic the subject matter, the more it appealed to the public. As one fundamentalist put it in 1923, “[i]f a moving picture magnet would ever make good, clean pictures for the betterment of humanity in social reform, education, religion, science, he would soon be in bankruptcy.”³⁷ The popularity of movies reinforced their theology. Fundamentalists had taken a lesson from the failed Sabbatarian movement that mainline Protestants and Catholics did not. Namely, that social reform would not overcome the public’s taste for pleasure.

Fundamentalists were not completely dejected, however. As heirs of the Second Great Awakening and revivalists like Moody, they held out the possibility that individuals who underwent a spiritual conversion would be able to fight the draw of the movies. Or, more accurately, that once converted, the movies would cease to hold any allure. The difference between the mainline Protestant position and the fundamentalist one was one of emphasis. The editors of *The Christian Century* believed that the public could be educated sufficiently to improve the movies. Fundamentalists held that spiritual conversion on an individual level would reduce the audience for Hollywood’s products.

As movies increased in popularity among the general public during the 1930s and 1940s, fundamentalists came to see its role in more narrow terms. Mainline Protestantism was trying to save America while fundamentalists were trying to save their

³⁷ C.H. Jack Linn, *Flirting with the Devil* (Louisville, Kentucky: Pentecostal Publishing Company, 1923), 12. C.H. Jack Linn, “Flirting with the Devil,” 12.

own. For example, when Herbert J. Miles published his book with Zondervan, *Movies and Morals* (1947), he had a narrow sense of his audience.

We do not expect this study to reform the movies, since the leaders of the movie industry are not motivated by Christian principles and therefore cannot be expected to allow Christian ideals to govern the standards for their work....On the same ground, we cannot expect this study to have much influence on non-Christian and worldly people whose moral principles are calloused and crystallized by years of worldly practice. *Our primary purpose is to influence people who are anxious to pattern their moral lives after the example of teachings of Jesus.*³⁸

By the 1930s Fundamentalists were aware that their attitude toward movies was not in line with public tastes. Instead of pushing for progressive reform, they insisted that only a revival of the spirit could turn around the public's base appetites. But while they waited for a national figure to reinvigorate the revivalist era of Dwight Moody or Billy Sunday, they adopted a position of complete separatism from the movies. The fundamentalist prohibition against movie-going was repeatedly stressed in texts from the mid-1910s to the mid-1950s. One of the earliest source I found insisting that Christians stay out of the movie theater was from a 1916 editorial in *The King's Business* which argued that "serious-minded Christian people" ought to heed 2 Corinthians 6:17 with regard to the movies, "and be separate and refuse to touch the unclean thing."³⁹ *The King's Business* returned to the same biblical verse the following year to remind readers that the church would not be able to clean up the movies any better than it had cleaned up the stage. "The true attitude of the church toward the stage and the movies is that set

³⁸ Herbert Jackson Miles, *Movies and Morals* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1947), 15. Emphasis added.

³⁹ "Menace of the Movies," *The King's Business* VII, no. 5 (May 1916): 390.

forth by the Holy Spirit in Cor. 6:17, 'Touch not the unclean thing.'"⁴⁰ Two decades later, John Rice's *What is Wrong the Movies?* reflected the same argument. Rice was "of a deep conviction that the picture theaters are so wholly 'sold out' to sin that no Christian should ever attend one and that it is dangerous and wicked ever to allow a child to attend a picture show."⁴¹ Though Rice's argument that Christians should avoid all movies was not new, his 117-page treatment of the subject in 1938 was the first extensive fundamentalist text on the subject. *What is Wrong with the Movies?* sold over 75,000 copies and has been kept in print continuously from its first publication.⁴² On the topic of movies—and most other topics—he wrote with fiery conviction.

I am thoroughly convinced after long study and investigation that the movie industry is the enemy of God, the enemy of the Bible, the enemy of true churches of Jesus Christ. The movies lead men away from God and away from heaven. They lead men to sin, to unbelief, to outbroken wickedness, and eventually they lead many to hell.⁴³

The insistence on separation from cinema became a consistent theme in the books and pamphlets about movies published by Zondervan Publishing House. From *Questionable Amusements* published in 1937 to Robert Sumner's *Hollywood Cesspool*, a 284-page book, published in 1955, the dominant theme was separation from impurity. As fundamentalism developed as a distinct American subculture in the period between 1915 and 1955, developments within the film industry were equally striking. Movies emerged

⁴⁰ "Morality of the Modern Theater," *The King's Business* VIII, no. 4 (1917): 295.

⁴¹ John R. Rice, *What Is Wrong with the Movies?*, Tenth ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1938), 12.

⁴² On the life and impact and John R. Rice, see Moore, "The Emergence of Moderate Fundamentalism: John R. Rice and 'the Sword of the Lord'".

⁴³ Rice, *What Is Wrong with the Movies?*, 112.

as a powerful commercial industry in the 1920s and 1930s, transformed by Hollywood studios, feature films, movie stars, and extravagant movie theaters. In order to place fundamentalist rhetoric within its cultural context, it is important to appreciate how movie theaters developed during this period.

From Theaters to Palaces

In its nascent stage, movies were typically associated with urban culture. Nearly thirty-nine percent of the industry's revenues came from urban areas in four states—New York, California, Pennsylvania, and Illinois.⁴⁴ And film studios put the majority of their money and advertising into select urban locations, creating flagship movie palaces that prominently opened new feature films. As historian Kathy H. Fuller noted, “[b]y the early 1920s, the public saw the small-town moviegoing experience as second-rate when compared with taking in a show at the big-city picture palace.”⁴⁵ Despite the fact that the film industry focused most of its attention on its urban audience, nearly everyone in the country had the opportunity to take in a movie. From about 1910 to 1920, the number of movie theaters in the country doubled, from 10,000 to 20,000.⁴⁶ And the vast majority of theaters—about 70%—were located outside major cities. This emphasis on the urban market helped reinforce the image that the movies were an urban phenomenon, even though theaters were ubiquitous around the country. Hollywood played up the urban movie experience even though theaters were becoming a part of the national landscape.

⁴⁴ Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, Second ed. (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003), 114-17.

⁴⁵ Fuller, *At the Picture Show*, 99.

⁴⁶ By comparison, today there are fewer than half the number of theaters, though twice as many screens, due to the rise of multiplexes.

Perhaps this is one reason why some fundamentalists came to see commercial cinema as an outsider in their midsts. As they witnessed the rising popularity of theaters in their local communities, fundamentalists did not view theaters as part of their neighborhoods, but instead as unwelcome intruders from the city.

The most extravagant movie palaces were typically located in major U.S. cities while film studios and theater chains left smaller towns to local exhibitors who could not compete with big city theatrical excess. According to Fuller, “the differences between rural and urban movie-going expanded dramatically at the end of the nickelodeon period.”⁴⁷ Nevertheless, theaters in southern and mid-western towns also expanded in the 1920s, taking inspiration from, though never exactly duplicating, urban palaces. Residents of Lexington, Kentucky in 1917 had several options for upscale theater establishments, including the Strand, a 1,600 seat theater with eight-piece orchestra and lobby designed in an “Italian Renaissance style.”⁴⁸ In a one-month period in 1926, movie fans in Canton, Ohio, had a choice of two brand new theaters: the Palace Theater, built at a cost of one million dollars and seating 1,900, and a new Loews theater which opened across the street and could accommodate 2,175.⁴⁹ And in their second study of contemporary American culture in Muncie, Indiana, in 1935, Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd observed that the town enjoyed a “resplendent new [movie theater] with a decidedly ‘big-city’ air”⁵⁰ Movie patrons were both encouraged to view their theaters as

⁴⁷ Fuller, *At the Picture Show*, 98.

⁴⁸ Waller, *Main Street Amusements*, 112. Significantly, the Strand was a whites-only theater. For analysis of black moviegoing in Lexington during the same period, see Waller 161-179.

⁴⁹ Fuller, *At the Picture Show*, 111.

⁵⁰ Robert Staughton Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (New York: Harcourt, brace, and Company, 1937), 260.

a symbol of local pride, but also as an aspect of urban surplus that had made its way to town.

The prominence of movie theaters impacted local communities in various ways. Historian Ted Ownby, in his study of southern culture from 1865 to 1920, argued that “[t]he world created by the movies in many ways denied the distinctiveness of Southern culture.” First, according to Ownby, as theater owners introduced air-conditioning in the 1920s the movie houses brought “an end to a vital part of Southern distinctiveness.” Second, the “extravagant colors” of the South were replaced by “flickering light in a dark room.”⁵¹ Thus, the commercial film industry came to reflect the dictates of mass media by spreading a homogenized form of culture throughout the country.

The names of many theaters also spread a sense of exoticism and fantasy that marked it as other. Some theaters took their names from European cities, the Middle East, or Far East. Other theater names suggested a dreamy, fantastical quality, such as the Dreamland, Aladdin, and Wonderland. According to Fuller, “the name Bijou Dream was adopted for theaters in every urban and small-town setting imaginable.”⁵² By the 1920s, many theaters were owned by national and regional corporations and named after their corporate owners, such as the Stanley and Saenger theater. But regardless of whether theaters had evocative other-worldly names or corporate identities, fundamentalists identified them as interlopers in their communities. Some theater owners attempted to allay community concerns by opting for names that conveyed a sense of domestic trustworthiness, such as the Family Theater or Community Theater. But if such

⁵¹ Ownby, *Subduing Satan*, 197-98.

⁵² Fuller, *At the Picture Show*, 50-56.

names comforted some local communities, there is no evidence that fundamentalist suspicions were so easily subdued.

In fact, the rise of the lavish picture palaces enflamed fundamentalist attitudes against the theaters. Starting in the mid 1910s, as the popularity of movies increased and as studios began to produce more feature length films, movie theaters began to offer more lavish accommodations and surroundings. Theater architecture began to borrow from opulent hotels and estates, or façades inspired by European cities or other glamorously foreign locations. The most extravagant theaters in major cities offered lobbies with flowing fountains, marble columns, crystal chandeliers, statues, tapestries, orchestras and organs besides. Two Loew's theaters in Cleveland, Ohio had lobbies that had been copied from Francis I's sixteenth century palace at Fontainebleau.⁵³ And at the Tivoli, a Chicago movie theater built in 1921, "the foyer was modeled after the Chapelle Royale, designed...for Louis XIV in 1710."⁵⁴ Meanwhile, the auditorium of the Fifth Avenue Theater in Seattle, built in 1926, duplicated the throne room of the Imperial Palace in Peking's Forbidden City at twice the original scale.⁵⁵ And the following year, the lobby in Chicago's Avalon housed a massive aquarium accommodating a thousand tropical fish.⁵⁶ Not to be outdone, Kansas City's Midland Theater purchased the Oriental Room from the Vanderbilts' Manhattan townhouse and reassembled it in their women's

⁵³ David Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1981), 44-45.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 48.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 88.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 76-77.

lounge.⁵⁷ Theater owners and architecture firms competed to outdo one another, constructing picture palaces in which the theater space was as prominent as any film production. Marcus Loew, the owner of the largest theater chain in New York City, understood that the theater itself had become an essential part of the draw. Loew remarked that a “gorgeous theater is a luxury and it is easy to become accustomed to luxury and hard to give it up once you have tasted it.”⁵⁸ Picture palaces provided the trappings of wealth for middle class patrons. As cinema historian Robert C. Allen noted, “many viewers were not particularly interested in what feature film was playing. They were attracted to the theatre by the theatre itself, with its sometimes bizarre architectural and design allusions to exotic cultures.”⁵⁹

Another significant aspect of the picture palaces were the ushers who sold concessions, greeted patrons, and managed the crowds. Ushers were marketed to make each patron feel like a welcomed guest while establishing a sense of authority and safety amidst the indulgent theater décor. In the early years of the picture palaces, they were often chosen among college-aged men, trained to engage audiences politely, but also prepared to eject rowdy patrons. The position carried some authority and respect. The Saenger theater, built on Canal Street in New Orleans in 1927, employed 100 uniformed ushers known collectively as “The Soldiers of Service.”⁶⁰ Built the same year, the Roxy

⁵⁷ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Lary May, *Screening out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 155.

⁵⁹ Robert C. Allen, "From Exhibition to Reception: Reflections on the Audience in Film History," in *Screen Histories: A Screen Reader*, ed. Annette Kuhn and Jackie Stacey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 18.

⁶⁰ Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy*, 36. Also see Gomery, *Shared Pleasures*, 49-50. And May, *Screening out the Past*, 157-58.

in New York City boasted that their “staff of attendants thoroughly organized and drilled under the direction of a retired Colonel of the U.S. Marines, ensures every courtesy.”⁶¹ Ushers were hosts, servants, and law enforcement in one, providing middle class patrons a sense of comfort and safety. The following chapter focuses on the relationship between movies and the expansion of American consumer culture, but it was clear that the theaters and staff at the theaters encouraged moviegoers to take pleasure in consumption.

Fundamentalist responses to all of this were as vitriolic as the theaters were excessive. The evangelist Lester Sumrall, who had been ordained in the Assemblies of God in New Orleans, expressed many of the misgivings that fundamentalists had toward these theaters. In *Worshippers of the Silver Screen*, published by Zondervan Publishing House in 1940, Sumrall focused explicitly on the theater space. He reveals part of his anxiety when he reflects on the diminished place of the church in the public’s mind, writing that “the church, to unnumbered throngs, is a building where birth certificates are recorded and distributed, where marriage ceremonies are performed, and funeral service rites observed. These three occasions are quite sufficient in visiting the church!”⁶² To fundamentalists who could recall the central role that the church played in the previous century, it was a disheartening realization. Sumrall’s sorrow over the lost esteem of the church fed his hostility toward the movie theater. The movie theater had become the central place where the community came together, a duty that had once been reserved for the church. But the problem was not merely that the church had been replaced, it was

⁶¹ Ben M. Hall, *The Best Remaining Seats: The Golden Age of the Movie Palace* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1988), facing page 1.

⁶² Lester F. Sumrall, *Worshippers of the Silver Screen* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1940), 56.

that the church had been replaced by something so hollow. In *Worshippers*, Sumrall offered a mental picture of what patrons experiences when they visited the movie theater that emphasized themes of inauthenticity and delusion.

As we approach our place of amusement, the imposing structure, with ultra-modern lines, draws some words of admiration from us. There is not an array of brilliance to compare with it in the city. Neon lights, colored like a glorious rainbow, blaze in fantastic design across the facade. Over the entrance are a hundred or more dazzling, powerful lamps, to attract our attention. On the side-glass display cases are seen masterly designed pictures created by ingenious [sic] psychologists. These invariably insure the film producer a 'heavy' box office.

As we desire a good seat—and rather private—we leave “the price of a good dinner” with an artificially beautified young woman who resembles a wax doll, at the glass globule, called a box office. Now a stately gentleman, dressed in a gay, green uniform with gold buttons directs us to our plush seat. As we look about the massive auditorium, we see hundreds of people hurrying in. Old fathers, young mothers, boys and girls, rush to get a choice seat.

Soon, hardly without our noticing it, the lights grow dim. Then from a grand organ is heard a delightful Hawaiian lullaby. This has a dreamy effect upon us, casting away the realities of life and preparing our minds for the show.⁶³

Sumrall's visualization of a patron entering the theater cast the space as a hypnotic zone that, due in part to mesmerizing lights and the display case advertising, had spellbound its audience into a state of unwarranted glee. To Sumrall, the popularity of the movies did not express the audience's genuine desires but were the result of mental manipulation. The themes continued in Sumrall's description of the “artificially beautified” box office attendant and concluded with the description of the organ, lulling patrons into a dream-like state all before the first reel. To Sumrall, the movies were all mirage. And like a man in the desert envisioning a cool lake, the movies promised nourishment but delivered further spiritual dehydration.

⁶³ Ibid., 15-16.

The fundamentalist view of movie theaters as interlopers involved theater managers as well. Their writings depicted local owners as outsiders who put profits before responsible business practices, who lacked the values of the community, and who overlooked (at best) or encouraged (at worst) immoral behavior within their theaters. Their attitude toward theater owners was in direct contrast to the attitudes of mainline Protestants, who depicted local theater owners as victims of abusive Hollywood studios. *The Christian Century's* crusade against block-booking was predicated on the theory that that local theater owners would provide more upstanding features if they were not forced, by the studios, to rent a block of films altogether. Fundamentalists, on the other hand, viewed theater owners as complicit in Hollywood's crimes. They presumed that local exhibitors had more in common with Hollywood than with local churches. One 1925 editorial in the *Moody Monthly* asking "May Christians Attend Picture Shows?" answered, in part, with a series of rhetorical questions.

Have you ever seen the manager of any picture show at prayer meeting? Have you ever seen them in Sunday-school, or stirring up a revival, or following the Lord at all? Do they render unto Him homage and obedience to His divine command? Do you find their places of business closed on the Lord's day, and they and their children bowed before Him in church?

The editorialist answered his rhetorical questions with another: "are not the pictures they show chosen with the thought of making the path of life lurid and hectic and evil for the person that comes to see them?"⁶⁴ By presenting these businesses as non-Christians, the *Moody Monthly* made local theater owners the ultimate outsiders. Moreover, the editorial implied that theater owners purposefully exhibited films that directly threatened the well-being of the community, further distinguishing the outsider as a threat to local standards.

⁶⁴ Miller, "May Christians Attend Picture Shows?," 317.

Fifteen years after that editorial Zondervan published “Movies and the Conscientious Christian” by the pastor of First covenant Church in Minneapolis, Paul S. Rees drew a comparison between “legitimate” merchants and local theater owners.

[Consider], for the moment, the man who “retails” the films in your city. Here are a clothing store and a movie theater in the same block. The clothier graduates his prices according to the quality of his goods. Does the movie merchant? In most cases he does NOT. For the same price you may get the best or the worst that the producers have developed.⁶⁵

The perception that theater owners were dishonest merchants was another method by which the commercial cinema was designated an interloper that needed to be avoided. Other anecdotes encouraged the perspective that theater owners were complicit in any immoral activities that might be taking place among the theater patrons. The following anecdote, published in the pamphlet “Should Christians Support the Movies?” provided a revealing critique of theater owners that perhaps started in critiques of the stage, but was revived in condemnation of the commercial movie theaters.

A man took another man’s wife to the theater. The husband waited (at home) until they arrived at the theater, then he took his pistol, went to the theater, applied for admittance. He was asked for money to pay for his ticket. He refused to pay, saying he wanted to go in for about two minutes, just long enough to kill the man that was with his wife.

Word was carried to the stage. A man stated from the platform that there was a man at the window trying to get inside the theater just long enough to kill the man that was with his wife. He said: “I am going to open a side door here so that the man may escape and thus, perhaps, save his life.”

When he opened the side door seventeen men jumped through that door.⁶⁶

Despite the punch-line ending, the story portrayed theater managers as complicit in the moral sins occurring in darkened theater spaces. Fundamentalists saw movie theater

⁶⁵ Paul S. Rees, *Movies and the Conscientious Christian*, Third ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), 15.

⁶⁶ Washington, *Should Christians Support the Movies?*, 18.

managers as outsiders who practiced unscrupulous business practices and were complicit in the moral decline of the communities. But fundamentalists might have been willing to overlook the luxurious theater spaces and the business practices of theater owners except for one thing: movies were outrageously popular. In the 1930s, during a period when church membership was generally decline, and Protestant cultural authority was waning, the film industry was reaching its zenith. Fundamentalist fumed as crowds formed under the neon lights of the theater.

The Church's Doppelganger

After the Sabbatarian movement fizzled, mainline Protestant and fundamentalist attitudes toward the movies diverged. Mainline Protestants denounced some Hollywood practices but the periodical found much to praise in Hollywood's products as well. They had come to accept the movies as a normative aspect of American culture and focused primarily on film content as the primary ground on which to scuffle with Hollywood. Fundamentalists, on the other hand, continued their hostile critique of the industry movies into the 1950s and maintained that Christians should avoid commercial theaters entirely. What drove their critique of the movies was their sense of competition. Scholars of conservative Protestantism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have noted, like Joel Carpenter that fundamentalists "were...intensely audience-conscious, market-driven, and concerned to see immediate returns from their efforts."⁶⁷ Moreover, fundamentalism was the heir of a revivalist tradition of Whitefield and Finney that had tailored theatrical techniques for the purpose of winning souls. Yet their techniques seemed to be failing

⁶⁷ Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism*, 35.

them just as Hollywood had began packing their theaters. At first, fundamentalists reacted to movies with an innate sense of the marketplace. The journal *The Baptist World* in 1917 called on pastors to write in and explain their formula for beating the market.

The “down-town” churches in all the larger cities are facing the keenest competition at their Sunday evening hour. The bright streets have a thousand allurements. We hope no pastor who is successfully meeting this condition will be too modest to let those who are struggling with this new problem have the value of his experience. *The Baptist World* will gladly spread the most effective methods that are reported.⁶⁸

The call was answered by William Bell Riley, a prominent fundamentalist leader in the 1920s.⁶⁹ Riley proudly outlined how he kept his First Baptist church of Minneapolis “overcrowded” on Sunday evenings. First, he informed, the clergy must “prepare a series of sermons...involving subjects of spiritual concern, and yet at the same time of popular interest.” The second step was to engage in an old-fashioned revivalist, “soul-winning service,” and the last step was to include engaging musical selections. Thus, in the mid-1910s, Riley and many fundamentalists of the era believed they could combat the rise of secular entertainment using their hard-won revivalist techniques.

Yet by the late 1930s there was a palpable feeling among conservative clergy that the movies were winning the war. Some complained that the film industry refused to play fairly and acquiesce to religious authorities. Rice wrote that “[p]icture-theater owners...have no scruples about competing with churches and Sunday schools for the boys and girls.”⁷⁰ Fundamentalists were learning a painful truth of the open marketplace:

⁶⁸ *The Baptist World* XXI, no. 7 (1917): 3.

⁶⁹ See ———, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism*, 36-38.

⁷⁰ Rice, *What Is Wrong with the Movies?*, 32-33.

it was much more enjoyable when one was winning. When Hollywood seemed to be on top, fundamentalists cried foul.

Yet fundamentalists continued to focus on competition, a theme that arose continually in their writing about the movies. The Baptist clergyman John Roach Straton, a prominent fundamentalist in New York City, took note of the fact that on Sunday evening in Times Square, 1,817 people attended church while 75,000 enjoyed theaters and movies.⁷¹ “It is a very significant fact,” he wrote, “that this shrinkage in Sunday school and church attendance has been contemporaneous with the opening of Sunday moving picture shows, theaters, etc.”⁷² Many clergymen concluded that if church pews seemed somewhat thin, most likely the rest of their congregants were down the street taking in a feature film. John Rice wrote that

Nineteen million people each week attend Sunday schools in America while seventy-seven million attend picture shows each week. In Sunday school people spend an average of not more than one hour; in moving picture theaters they attend an average of two hours. America, then, spends eight times as many hours a week in moving picture shows as in Sunday schools!⁷³

Although I have not confirmed Rice’s statistics regarding Sunday school attendance, his knowledge of movie patronage was basically accurate. In the 1920s and 1930s, some 70 to 80 million movie tickets were sold *each week*, out of a national population of about 130 million. (By way of comparison, contemporary audiences visit the movie theater about 30 million times a week, even though the American population has more than

⁷¹ Abrams, *Selling the Old-Time Religion: American Fundamentalists and Mass Culture, 1920-1940*, 68.

⁷² John Roach Straton, *The Menace of Immorality in Church and State* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1920), 66.

⁷³ Rice, *What Is Wrong with the Movies?*, 8.

doubled.)⁷⁴ The immense popularity of the movies seemed to mock conservative clergy at a time when their public influence had largely diminished.

But fundamentalists were not paranoid in believing that theaters were consciously encroaching on church territory. As an historian of the 1920s commented, “[t]he movie theater became the most recognizable building in town.”⁷⁵ The theater building was a physical reminder of how secular consumer culture was altering the physical as well as the social landscape in many communities. What’s more, the commercial film industry self-consciously appropriated religious symbols in their structures. The founder of Paramount Pictures Adolph Zukor viewed the development of the movie theater as a process that led to commercialized holy ground. As Zukor narrated the development of the movie theater in the 1930s, the “nickelodeon had to go, theaters replaced shooting galleries, temples replaced theaters, cathedrals replaced temples.”⁷⁶ It was not incidental then that picture palaces drew comparisons with religious space, both in their advertising and in their architecture. Samuel “Roxy” Rothapfel, who made his career building luxurious picture palaces in New York City, advertised his Rialto theater in 1916 as the “temple of the motion picture” and a “shrine of music and the allied arts.” A decade later, Rothapfel built the even more luxurious Roxy Theater, which he billed as “the cathedral of the motion picture.” On opening day, Rothapfel “staged his own version of the Creation, complete with a solitary monk intoning, ‘Let there be light!’” As a reporter from *The New Yorker* commented, “And, by golly, there was light.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, 124.

⁷⁵ Geoffrey Perret, *America in the Twenties: A History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 225.

⁷⁶ May, *Screening out the Past*, 148.

⁷⁷ Naylor, *American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy*, 201.

Much of this was, of course, about the showmen's flair. But some picture palaces consciously drew from religious architecture when designing their grand spaces. In *American Picture Palaces*, author David Naylor commented that the Roxy in Manhattan "might have looked more appropriate in Vatican City than along Seventh Avenue."⁷⁸ And when Albert Ringling, the circus tycoon, commissioned a movie theater in Wisconsin in 1915, the architectural plans for the lobby included a decorative frieze encircling the lobby "at one-third the scale, of the choir gallery of the sacristy in the cathedral of Florence, executed in 1671 by Luca della Robbia."⁷⁹

The evangelist Lester Sumrall most self-consciously cast the movie theater as the church's doppelganger. Sumrall wrote in the opening chapter of *Worshippers of the Silver Screen* that movies were the public's "college for education, *their temple for worship*, their playground for recreation, their popular retreat for social entertainment."⁸⁰ But he was particularly sensitive to how the theater space threatened to supplant the church. As if taking his cue from the Roxy, Sumrall referred to the movie theater as the "motion-picture temple" and the "dark 'place of worship.'"⁸¹ One passage in particular underscored Sumrall's argument.

The cinema, as a thief, has stolen the prestige and support of the church. It has taken its stars and converted them into "glorified high priests." The sermons of these "ministers of darkness" are gun battles, illegitimate love affairs, comical nonsense, mixed with sufficient historical knowledge to deceive the public into believing they are being educated. Their churches are the all brilliant outside and dark inside temple. The hymns are cannibalistic rhythms first used by the head-hunters of the far off jungles,

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 43.

⁸⁰ Sumrall, *Worshippers of the Silver Screen*, 16. Emphasis added.

⁸¹ Ibid., 24 and 54.

now set to soul-devouring words that suggest the baser instincts of humanity into action. Something of unusual interest about these “temples of worship” is that the collection is lifted as you enter!⁸²

To fundamentalists the theater seemed a gross inversion of the church. Hollywood had found a method of evangelism that rivaled the heroes of revivalist Protestantism. What’s more, Sumrall was not only furious that movies had managed to overtake the church, but that they had done so using the very techniques of church worship—with priests, hymns, and temples. They complained that the theater inverted the high motives of the church with the base motives of modern entertainment. Conservative evangelicalism, long driven by commercial sensibilities, found itself losing to an upstart with its own clergy, churches, and hymns. But it would all have been somewhat tolerable if Hollywood had not also stripped them of their congregants.

Conclusion

The introduction of the moving picture in the late-nineteenth century did not initially call up the same debates that Protestants had had over the theatrical stage. But as the commercial film industry began to resemble the theatrical stage, Protestant enthusiasm began to curdle. At first, liberal and conservative Protestants worked together to pressure the commercial film industry to defer to the church’s ownership of the Christian Sabbath. When that approach failed, the differences between liberal and conservative Protestant views toward commercial movies became more apparent. By the 1930s, liberal Protestants focused their energies on raising the moral standards of movies. Fundamentalists meanwhile, ridiculed Catholic and liberal Protestant attempts to clean up

⁸² Ibid., 55.

the commercial film industry. They viewed the popularity of the movies as a symbol of human depravity and insisted that the immediate solution was to avoid movie theaters altogether. The fundamentalist argument that movies would never be morally cleansed and that Christians should abstain from patronizing local theaters recalled so many earlier Protestant arguments about the stage. At the same time, their rhetoric against commercial movies was considerably more fervent and impassioned. In part, this was because of the ubiquity and massive popularity of movie theaters throughout the country. The fact that some churches seemed to be struggling to keep people in the pews was particularly galling to clergymen while movie theaters packed in the crowds. Conservative evangelicalism has always been a populist movement that found itself in the 1930s and 1940s shut out of the market. This is not to say that fundamentalism withered away during this period. But it had lost its national spokespeople, and with them, its national audience. Conservative evangelical attitudes toward the movie theater were driven by their sense of competition. Clergy and movie studios both viewed the early picture palaces as structures encroaching on traditionally religious territory. Whether that was a sign of progress or a national catastrophe depended on who could bring in the larger crowd on a given Sunday.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SPECTATORS

Since...all passionate excitement is forbidden us, we are debarred from every kind of spectacle.... See the people coming to it already under strong emotion, already tumultuous, already passion-blind, already agitated.... [T]heir eyes are ever rolling...there is the united shout of a common madness.

—Tertullian, *De Spectaculis* (circa 200 CE)

Who is teaching the nation sexual *immorals*?

Hollywood!

Who is setting the standard of marriage infidelity and home instability?

Hollywood!

Who stimulates criminal thoughts in our youth,
resulting in an unprecedented crime wave?

Hollywood!

Who has broken down standards of womanly purity?

Hollywood!

Who took sex out of the dark ages
and dangled it before the eyes of our adolescents?

The answer is Hollywood!

What Hollywood is today we will be tomorrow!

—E.U. Harding, *Movie Mad America* (1942)

Introduction

Christian criticism of the stage had long argued that patronizing the theater was morally dangerous to individual patrons, envisioning a process by which theatergoing drained one's moral fount. According to Methodist Reverend J.T. Crane's book, *Popular Amusements* (1870), "When a young man, who has been religiously trained, begins to frequent the theater, quiet observers see that he has taken the first step of a downward course." Other texts had more dramatic flair but the transformation was the same. J.W.

Lowber's *The Devil in Modern Society* (1906), for example, described a mother weeping over her disgraced son: "My poor son has gone to the penitentiary...Oh! That theater! That theater! That was the first step that my son took that led him onward..."¹ Thus, this rhetoric alluded to the notion that patronizing the theater led to moral decline but a thorough examination of this alchemy was left unexamined. Though not clear how this occurred, Christian condemnation of the stage often warned that by exposing oneself to sinful people, ideas, and activity, the theater imperiled one's Christian purity.

Other clergy insisted that Christianity and the stage were inherently incompatible. One pastor wrote of an 1896 anecdote in *The Watchword* about a violinist working in a theater who "instantly decided to leave" upon converting to Christianity and "promised god that...under *no* circumstance would he return..."² Many pastors seemed unable to imagine that a Christian could, in fact, regularly patronize the theater and remain a Christian.

When fundamentalists and conservative Protestants condemned the movies during the first half of the twentieth century they borrowed large helpings from these tropes, reiterating the concern that movies endangered the moral purity of audience members. But conservative Protestant condemnation of the movies added two additional aspects in making their case against the movies. First, they embraced social scientific data about movie going that came to public prominence in the mid-1930s. Sociological and psychological studies of the impact of movie-going on audiences, especially the youngest

¹ J.W. Lowber, *The Devil in Modern Society* (Cincinnati: The Standard Publishing Company, 1906), 19.

² Pastor, *The Worldly Christian's Trinity: Cards, Theatre, Dance*, 24-25. Italics in original.

audience members, were a brick that many critics of the film industry used to bash the medium. But among critics of the movies, conservative Protestants stood out for their refusal to patronize movies. All critics of the movies embraced the same social scientific data about the dangers of excessive movie-going, but Catholics and liberal Protestants used these studies to argue for more religious and governmental interference of the film industry while conservative Protestants used this data to warn against movie-going altogether. The second difference between earlier Christian rhetoric about theatrical audiences and conservative Protestant rhetoric about the movies was their concern about the scope of influence. Of the stage, Christian critics warned that one's children were endangered. Of the movies, conservative Protestant critics warned that that all children, all families, and all America were endangered. This chapter considers how conservative Protestant rhetoric against moving pictures incorporated broader national arguments about juveniles and movies occurring at the time.

The Spectator Culture

During the second half of the nineteenth century Americans learned how to be spectators. Many began to enjoy an increase in their standard of living and a decrease in the work day which, combined with the establishment of larger urban populations, created new and varied opportunities of spectatorship. The middle class began to enjoy a broad range of theatrical entertainments from opera to vaudeville, as well as concerts and circuses. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century Americans found the pleasures of watching organized sporting events, which included horse racing, professional baseball,

and college football.³ The growing popularity of theatrics, shows, and concerts affixed in the public's mind the relationship between leisure and spectatorship. But no other form of leisure was more successful at ushering in an era of spectatorship than the movies. In 1909 a Boston survey of the number of theater seats available on a weekly basis identified 13,590 opera house seats, 111,568 first class theater seats, and 80,700 burlesque seats. By comparison, 402,428 moving picture seats awaited Bostonians each week and an additional 79,362 vaudeville seats from which patrons could view moving pictures.⁴

More so than most progressive critics, the culture of spectatorship alarmed fundamentalists who envisioned rows upon rows of inert bodies staring helplessly at a flickering screen. Frederick P. Wood in *Questionable Amusements* (1937) considered movies "the nursery of laziness."⁵ The pastor of First Covenant Church in Minneapolis, Paul S. Rees, expanded on this point when he lamented that

Americans of today are afflicted with 'spectatoritis.' They do not participate; they look on. They do not play ball; they pay a fancy price to sit comfortably and watch others play. They do not get together and sing, as their fathers did; they prefer to have their music "fed" to them through the loud speakers in their parlors. Can anyone deny that this passive-spectator element bulks large in motion picture attendance? The physical activity is nil, and the mental is not many notches higher....⁶

³ For a more extensive examination of the causes and varieties of nineteenth century leisure, see Dale A. Somers, "The Leisure Revolution: Recreation in the American City, 1820-1920," *Journal of Popular Culture* 5, no. 1 (1971). Also, Dulles, *A History of Recreation: America Learns to Play*.

⁴ Statistics from Garth Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), 37.

⁵ Frederick P. Wood, *Questionable Amusements*, Second ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1937), 28.

⁶ Rees, *Movies and the Conscientious Christian*, 13.

Conservative Protestants saw movie-going as part of a broader cultural transition toward merely observing arts and entertainment. This was in part a concern about laziness but they also tied physical laziness to mental laziness. Like Rees, Lester F. Sumrall worried that movies caused mental impairment, referring to the cinema as “a curse to higher mentality” that “philosophically benumbed the worshipers of the silver screen.”⁷

Alongside their concern that movies encouraged physical and mental slothfulness, conservative Protestants embraced the seemingly incompatible argument that movies were also overstimulating. By contemporary standards of visual media, the movies of the golden age of Hollywood might seem painfully unhurried. But for many critics of early cinema for whom stage plays or vaudeville were the point of reference worried that the hyperactive images of moving pictures warped the mind. In this vein, John Rice described the “powerful, socking, over-stimulating influence of the movies” that affected “*the physical welfare, nervous tension, mental attitude, and adaptability of the whole race.*”⁸ Fundamentalists blamed “overstimulation” for a seemingly endless variety of health concerns and social disorders. As early as 1917, one Methodist warned that “the delicate, sensitive eyes of children cannot stand the strain of gazing for hours—thrilled and excited—on the dazzling screen without having their eyes seriously impaired.”⁹ The evangelist John Carrara referenced a neurologist who equated movie-going with “shell-shock,” the World War I equivalent of post-traumatic stress disorder.¹⁰ By the 1940s, conservative Protestants had gathered a list of physical ailments caused by movie-going,

⁷ Sumrall, *Worshippers of the Silver Screen*, 61-62.

⁸ Rice, *What Is Wrong with the Movies?*, 56. (Italics in original.)

⁹ Wimberly, *The Moving Picture: A Careful Survey of a Difficult Problem*, 30.

¹⁰ John Carrara, *Enemies of Youth*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1942), 91.

that included sleeplessness, eye strain, inability to concentrate, susceptibility to colds and sore throats, high blood pressure, crime, divorce, alcoholism, insanity, heart failure, cancer, and suicide.

These arguments about the dangerous stimulation of movie-going reflected broader public concerns about modern urban life. The swelling urban populations of the early twentieth century ushered in a hitherto unseen density of commercial activity, advertising, and traffic. Newspapers carried stories of chaotic mob scenes, children who had been accidentally crushed to death, and gruesome collisions of pedestrians, horse-drawn carriages, and runaway cable cars. Added to the mix was the rise of new urban amusement parks that promised exotic thrills, social stimulation, and visual sensation.¹¹ To many social reformers at the time, concerns over the hazard of urban life combined with anxiety over this new era of ceaseless, jarring stimulation. There was a sense that life was speeding up to a dangerous new pace and social theorists, scientists, and doctors prognosticated how the rise of sensationalism affected the human body.¹² What made fundamentalists arguments on this count distinct was that they saw movies not as evidence of a dangerously accelerated pace of life—but a primary cause. “*Doubtless*,” Rice observed, “*the moving pictures have a large part in this changing tempo of American life*.”¹³

¹¹ John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978).

¹² Ben Singer, "Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism," in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 72-99.

¹³ Rice, *What Is Wrong with the Movies?* , 56. Italics in original.

Conservative Protestants held movies responsible for slowing people down and for revving them up. The apparent contradiction in these positions reflected the two worldviews that conservative Protestants drew upon in their condemnations of movies. Their arguments that movie going made for lazy bodies grew out of nineteenth century cultural concerns about spectatorship. In 1858, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., the physician and father of the Supreme Court Justice, lamented that popular entertainment of his day had made urban youth “stiff-jointed, soft-muscled, [and] paste-complexioned.”¹⁴ Conservative Protestant denunciations of the movies reiterated these worries that spectatorship was commercialized idleness. The second argument, that movies were overly stimulating, became a popular concern about modern life in the early twentieth century. Doctors, scientists, and social progressives considered overstimulation responsible for various physical and mental illnesses.

But for conservative Protestants the dangers of movie going were not only physical and mental, but moral as well. Lester Sumrall who had argued that the passivity of movie patronage left one unable to “appreciate the fundamental doctrines of deeper thought” also felt that the excessive stimulation of moving pictures disconnected one from Christian truths. Sumrall described movies as “coating” the audience in an “alum” that made it impossible to taste “soul-food and spiritual-drink from the living Fountain.”¹⁵ Arguments along these lines were a more clear iteration of what Christians had said about the stage for centuries. Christian antagonists of the stage had long insisted that living a Christian life was incompatible with patronizing the theater. For

¹⁴ Quoted in Somers, “The Leisure Revolution,” 135.

¹⁵ Sumrall, *Worshippers of the Silver Screen*, 61-63.

conservative Protestant critics of the movies, the dangers were more acute because the movies were more ubiquitous. A 1927 article in the *Moody Monthly* lamented that

Many people cannot listen to a sermon any more. The sermon may be homiletically perfect and excellent in thought and delivery, and yet as dry as dust to the man in the pew. The reason is that the man in the pew has become “movieized” and fails to grasp the message be it ever so clear.¹⁶

Conservative Protestant attitudes toward the movies swung between rage and grief.

Since the Reformation, Protestantism had emphasized the significance and power of the sermon to impact their congregants. But somehow even sermons seemed to be losing their impact now. There was a palpable sense from these conservative clergy that their cultural influence was slipping away. Scholars of fundamentalism have pointed to the Scopes Trial in 1925 and the subsequent failure to jettison liberal clergy from their denominations as the primary causes for fundamentalist separatism. But their writings about the movies reveal the extent to which conservative Protestants felt that modern cultural developments were stripping them of their ability to guiding their communities. Although the nineteenth century revivalist Dwight Moody famously saw the world as a “wrecked vessel,” it was conservative Protestants during the second quarter of the twentieth century who felt that they no longer had the power to steer America toward the moral good and, worse, that they were now in danger of even losing their congregants. From their isolated perspective, conservative Protestants watched the public flock to commercial cinema day and night, and contemplated whom to hold responsible.

¹⁶ Edward L. Jeambey, “Are the Movies Really a Menace?,” *Moody Monthly*, no. 27 (1927): 535.

Spectators Sinful or Victimized

Conservative Protestants seemed unsure to what extent the movie-going public was responsible for this troublesome state of affairs. Some felt that Hollywood's products were the natural result of human sinfulness. As one clergyman wrote, "the theatre is what it is...because of men's depraved, sinful hearts..."¹⁷ From this perspective, movies were a reflection of humankind's natural inclination toward sin. This conclusion reflected another distinguishing aspect of liberal and conservative Protestant reaction to the movies during the first half of the twentieth century. Namely, conservatives vehemently opposed the censorship boards that liberal Protestants established and supported, reasoning that Hollywood could never be completely moralized because movies reflected inherent human sinfulness. More than one fundamentalist concurred with Edward Vander Jagt in *Going with the Wind* (1940), who insisted that if movies were moralized the film industry would cease to exist.¹⁸ This position saw movies as the result of sin—not the cause.

Carried to its natural conclusion, this line of reasoning would seem to absolve Hollywood of liability for their products. If sinful movies existed to satisfy the desires of a sinful audience then who, after all, was to blame? Holding the public's inherent depravity responsible for commercial cinema might have been theologically consistent among the heirs of Calvinism, but more early-twentieth century conservative Protestants portrayed the film industry as abuser and the audience as victim. Like Lester Sumrall, most conservative Protestant writing considered audiences "innocent but injudicious

¹⁷ Washington, *Should Christians Support the Movies?*, 13.

¹⁸ Edward Vander Jagt, *Going with the Wind*, third ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1940), 3.

masses.”¹⁹ In another Zondervan text of the 1940s, Dan Gilbert in *Hell Over Hollywood* wrote that “Millions of Americans are made a little dizzy, too, as they sit on the sidelines and watch the satanic spectacle of riotous and sinful revelry which Hollywood presents.”²⁰ While some conservative Protestants pointed to movies as a sign of human sinfulness, a more common rhetorical trope was instead to cast the powerful commercial industry against a vulnerable public.

To the extent that Americans were “sitting on the sidelines” they could hardly be held accountable for the quality or content of popular cinema. But conservative Protestants were loath to admit that most Americans were not sitting on the sidelines; they were lining up at the box office. The public’s voracious appetite for movies grew decade by decade and movies became more deeply ingrained in American culture. Beginning in the 1930s two themes emerged more emphatically in conservative Protestant jeremiads against the movies. First, they began to attach greater importance to scientific and statistical data. Nineteenth century condemnation of the theatrical stage often relied on biblical passages that warned against worldly pleasures, and insisted that Christian conversion would dampen one’s desire to patronize the theater. By comparison, conservative Protestant critics of commercial movies began emphasizing the scientific validity of their claims and made fewer arguments that relied on biblical references. The second theme that began to appear more emphatically in fundamentalist arguments about movies was the negative impact of movie going on young people. Christian condemnation of the stage had noted on occasion that the theater endangered

¹⁹ Sumrall, *Worshippers of the Silver Screen*, 24.

²⁰ Dan Gilbert, *Hell over Hollywood: The Truth About the Movies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1942), 15.

young people particularly, but twentieth century fundamentalists made these arguments central.

These two themes, scientific evidence and the impact of movies on youthful audiences, became linked after the publication of several social scientific studies purported to measure the impact of movie going on young people. Collectively known as the Payne Fund Studies (PFS), they were funded and popularized by mainline Protestants hoping to encourage greater reform of movies. An examination of the Payne Fund Studies reveals some of the overlap and distinctions between conservative and liberal Protestant reactions toward the film industry.

The Payne Fund Studies

The PFS came about because of the efforts of the Congregationalist minister William H. Short. Short had hoped to bring about moral reforms in the film industry and concluded that were reform efforts to succeed, they would require authoritative scientific proof of the dangers of commercial movies. To that end he established the Motion Picture Research Council which procured the funding to produce a series of social-scientific studies known collectively as the Payne Fund Studies. In 1927, Short began soliciting interest from psychologists, sociologists and educators whom he believed shared his concerns about the film industry.²¹ The results, published between 1933 and 1935, attempted to define the parameters of the movie audience and provide quantitative evidence of the impact of movies on children. Though Short took pains to cultivate a public persona of an unbiased researcher, he was privately motivated to generate

²¹ Garth S. Jowett, Ian C. Jarvie, and Kathryn H. Fuller, *Children and the Movies: Media Influence and the Payne Fund Controversy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 60.

evidence that would invigorate a national campaign to reform the film industry. As film historian Robert Sklar put it, Short wanted “to get the goods on the movies, to nail them to the wall.”²²

The range of scholarly methods and research questions of the PFS resulted in some of the earliest social scientific scholarship on film-going practices and public impact. Ruth C. Peterson and L.L. Thurstone from the Department of Psychology at the University of Chicago distributed surveys to four thousand public school students to measure how movies influenced their perceptions of violence, race, prohibition, and other concepts. University of Chicago sociologists Herbert Blumer and Philip M. Hauser also distributed questionnaires and conducted interviews investigating the relationship between motion pictures and the criminal activities of young adults. Another study compared how well adults and children retained information from movies they had seen. Still another measured adolescents’ heart rates while watching different genres of cinema, and gauged how movies affected sleeping patterns.²³

Short’s funding of the studies and selection of scholars resulted in biased analysis by many—though not all—of the PFS writers. Because of this, several of the texts consistently affirmed the most damning evidence against the movies, even when a broader examination of the evidence made for a less definitive assessment. For example, in a study of the sleep patterns the authors concluded that children who slept motionless and did not attend movies were well rested, while they viewed movie-going children who

²² Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Social History of American Movies*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1975), 134.

²³ See Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art*, 220-32 for summaries of the research methods and conclusions of particular studies.

slept motionless in a “druglike stupor.” The same scholars drew similarly questionable conclusions from restless sleepers. They interpreted tossing in bed at night a healthy activity for non-movie goers, while excessive movement during sleep among movie-going children was “the physical manifestation of disturbing, movie-inspired dreams.”²⁴

Even though many of the PFS were slanted against commercial movies, Short was not content to let the scholarship stand on its own. As the final reports were being prepared, he pressured researchers to tweak their conclusions in order to put movies in an even worse light. He discouraged Blumer and Hauser from including data from their research that suggested that movies had any positive influence on juvenile behavior.²⁵ And when Mark A. May and Frank Shuttleworth from the Institute of Human Relations at Yale University produced their study, *The Social Conduct and Attitudes of Movie Fans*, Short threatened to withhold their work from publication when their findings did not condemn the film industry to his satisfaction.²⁶

Despite Short’s single-minded determination to produce results that skewered Hollywood, most of the authors resisted broad generalizations and attempted to offer a somewhat nuanced answer to the question of how movies impacted culture. In Blumer and Hauser’s concluding remarks to *Movies, Delinquency, and Crime* (1933), the authors noted that “The movies may help to dispose or lead persons to delinquency and crime or they may fortify conventional behavior.... Motion pictures may create attitudes favorable to crime and the criminal or unfavorable to them.” They insisted that the possible impact

²⁴ Quoted in Jowett, Jarvie, and Fuller, *Children and the Movies*, 70.

²⁵ Ibid., 79.

²⁶ Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art*, 226 ff 48.

of a film depended on the content of the film as well as “the social milieu, the attitudes and interests of the observer.”²⁷ In spite of Short’s best efforts, *Movies, Delinquency, and Crime* along with some of the other studies in the series did not emphatically prove that movies had the decisive public impact that some social reformers had hoped.

But if the studies did not collectively bludgeon the film industry to Short’s satisfaction, he had another opportunity when he contacted Henry James Forman. After funding the PFS studies, Short’s Motion Picture Research Council hired the journalist Forman to produce the single volume that summarized the studies’ findings aimed at a popular audience. The result was *Our Movie Made Children*, published by Macmillan in 1934. *Our Movie Made Children* painted in the broadest possible strokes and displayed the most sensational evidence in the scholarship in order to damn the film industry. Predictably, Forman’s jeremiad went on to become a national best seller. The author toured the country publicizing the book and newspapers and magazines reviewed it across the country.

Short and Forman’s fight against Hollywood reveals important distinctions between conservative Protestant and mainline Protestant attitudes toward commercial cinema. Short, Forman, and other progressive reformers never condemned the entire industry or every movie. Forman spoke enthusiastically about films he considered “art,” such as “Ben-Hur,” “The Ten Commandments,” and “The Hunchback of Notre Dame.”²⁸ As Forman explained, “Once in possession of the facts, the public, it is hoped, will find

²⁷ Herbert Blumer and Philip Morris Hauser, *Movies, Delinquency, and Crime* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933), 201-02.

²⁸ Henry James Forman, *Our Movie Made Children* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1934), 32.

the remedies.”²⁹ Mainline Protestants thought the remedies would lead to greater public oversight of the film industry.

By that measure the studies were a failure. Congressional proposals to regulate the studios failed to gain support and the Supreme Court dismissed congress’s attempt to produce a code of conduct for movies in 1935.³⁰ Additionally, the scholarship of the PFS themselves earned strong criticism by the academic community, as many scholarly reviews questioned the methodologies that connected movies to physical and psychological trauma. The educator Mortimer J. Adler commented that the unreliable and inconsistent methods tended “to cast some doubt upon the popular concern about the moral influence of motion pictures upon the immature.”³¹ Nevertheless, while the PFS failed to muster academic and political influences against the film industry, the studies became essential reading for Protestant clergy seeking ammunition in their fight with the film industry.

Protestants and the PFS

Liberal and conservative Protestants both incorporated aspects of the PFS and *Our Movie Made Children* in their writing about movies. In the 1930s Fred Eastman wrote regularly about motion pictures for the liberal Protestant periodical *The Christian Century*. Examining Eastman’s arguments before and after the publication of the PFS reveals that liberal Protestants welcomed the new data although it had little impact on their arguments. Prior to the publication of the PFS, Eastman identified movies as an

²⁹ Ibid., 283.

³⁰ Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies*, 156.

³¹ Quoted in Jowett, Jarvie, and Fuller, *Children and the Movies*, 116-17.

“urgent American problem.” He expressed concern that commercial cinema exposed children to violent and sexual content and he encouraged parents to take account of their children’s media choices. He also criticized the industry for failing to properly police itself and blamed Hollywood for presenting an unflattering view of the United States to audiences around the world. The solution, Eastman argued, was congressional oversight. He focused on industry practices known as “block booking” and “blind selling” which limited the control that local theatre owners had to order specific movies to exhibit in their establishments. In response, Eastman called on congress to “break the present monopolistic control which a handful of men now exercise of the movies” and urged readers to write their senator requesting that they pass a bill to “establish the industry again upon a basis of free competition in the production, distribution, and exhibition of films.”³² Indicative of liberal Protestant arguments about movies was the point that ending the monopolistic practices of Hollywood would improve the quality of movies.

In 1936, Eastman co-authored the pamphlet “Better Motion Pictures” which drew on statistics and data from the PFS as well as *Our Movie Made Children*. Yet despite these additional resources, Eastman’s arguments changed very little. He continued to criticize the practices of block-booking and blind-selling which, he argued, forced local theater owners to screen films of inferior quality and he encouraged movie patrons to make responsible choices in their viewing habits. The most significant shift from the 1930 to the 1936 editorial position was that after reading *Our Movie Made Children* Eastman seemed even more insistent that outside oversight of the motion picture industry would be the only means by which movies could be morally cleansed. In his 1936

³² Fred Eastman, *The Menace of the Movies* (Chicago: The Christian Century, c.1930), 13.

pamphlet, he wrote that “The producers will probably never give up block-booking until compelled to do so. The public will never be able to choose the pictures to be shown in its neighborhood theaters until block-booking is abolished. And there the matter rests with legislation pending.”³³ Mainline Protestants in the 1930s focused on federal oversight of Hollywood as a means to encourage more film content that did not promote prurient interests. At the same time, mainline Protestants were hardly Puritanical about film content. Eastman praised stars such as Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Douglas Fairbanks. By the mid-1930s, *The Christian Century* produced regular reviews of films, some critical while others laudatory. Eastman encouraged Christians to patronize good films and boycott bad, and viewed motion pictures as “the people’s theater.” Liberal Protestants focused most of their attention on methods by which the content of films might be “moralized” and saw the PFS as additional evidence for their contention.

While the data and arguments of the PFS had little effect on mainline Protestant arguments about the movies, the studies strongly impacted fundamentalist arguments about the film, who tapped Short’s work to make claims about the incontrovertible evil of the commercial film industry. Fundamentalist John R. Rice called the Payne Fund Study a “great investigation” and said of *Our Movie Made Children*: “We may take quotations from it as absolutely authoritative” because the study came from scholars from a “number of great universities” as well as sociologists, psychologists, scientists, and educators.³⁴ Herbert J. Miles’ *Movies and Morals* (1947) considered *Our Movie Made Children* one

³³ Eastman and Ouellette, *Better Motion Pictures*, 49.

³⁴ Rice, *What Is Wrong with the Movies?*, 35-36. John Rice, *What’s Wrong with the Movies*, 35-36.

of the “best works...concerning the moral influence of the screen on American life.”³⁵

Other conservative Protestants books published in the 1940s leaned heavily on evidence found in Forman’s book and the PFS.

The fact that Short and Forman made clear that they hoped to reform the motion picture industry seemed to be curiously overlooked by conservative Protestants. At times there seemed to be a détente between liberal and conservative Protestants as they came together to battle a mutual enemy and smooth over their differences in a manner reminiscent of their earlier efforts to block Sunday exhibitions. In 1934 the Moody Bible Institute Monthly published an editorial by William Short himself in which Short promoted *Our Movie Made Children* with the panache of an infomercial narrator:

“Parents have felt the pull of the movies on their children. Thoughtful theater-goers have observed the children’s pop-eyed absorption in the show.... What does it all mean?... The answers are being published in nine volumes” and abridged “into one extremely readable book.”³⁶ If fundamentalists noticed that Short, Forman and the PFS researchers stood on the side of progressive reform, they did not note it. Instead, they enthusiastically referenced the PFS and *Our Movie Made Children* to strengthen their arguments that “every Christian should avoid movies”³⁷ and that “the theater...defies reform.”³⁸

The PFS impacted fundamentalism in three ways: First, fundamentalists tapped the PFS to bolster the credibility of their arguments against the film industry. Perhaps

³⁵ Miles, *Movies and Morals*, preface.

³⁶ William H. Short, "The Social Influence of Motion Pictures," *Moody Bible Institute Monthly* XXXV, no. 1 (1934): 12.

³⁷ Carrara, *Enemies of Youth*, 87.

³⁸ Vander Jagt, *Going with the Wind*, 3.

recognizing that their social influence had waned in the modern era, they self-consciously referenced sociologists, psychiatrists, teachers, police, and judges who lent the appearance of impartiality. Second, the PFS provided fundamentalists with a cornucopia of statistical data and anecdotes that would appear in sermons, editorials, and books. Third, and most significantly, the focus on children in the PFS overlapped with conservative Protestant concern about the family and led to greater focus in conservative Protestant texts about the impact of movie going on young audiences.

Fundamentalist rhetoric about movies had always focused on how movies negatively influenced the audience, but the emphasis on children and the incorporation of statistical evidence noticeably increased thanks to the results of William Short's Motion Picture Research Council. For example, in 1916 *The King's Business* editorialized thusly: "There is probably no institution that is doing more in our day to corrupt the morals, both of old and young, than the Movies."³⁹ By 1939, John Carrara's *Enemies of Youth* made the same point but with the authority of a statistician:

85,000,000 people spend some time each week in the movies, 28,000,000 of whom are adolescent young people and 11,000,000 children under 15 years of age. These 85,000,000 stay in the movie theaters about two hours each time they go. These are the figures of the Motion Picture Research Council after investigating four years.⁴⁰

The shift from general descriptors of immorality to measurable, scientific claims is most noticeable in the Zondervan texts published from 1936 to 1955. The use of social scientific evidence and secular authorities even replaced some of the specifically religious arguments against movies. Instead of quoting religious leaders and biblical

³⁹ "Menace of the Movies," 389.

⁴⁰ Carrara, *Enemies of Youth*, 79.

passages to persuade their readers to abstain from movie-going, the Zondervan titles more often quoted modern voices of authority such as teachers, police officers, and academics. Several Zondervan texts made a point to remind their readers that they drew their evidence from scholarly and professional sources and not from clergy, indicating that they considered the secular authorities to be more persuasive. For example, Carrara highlighted the fact that “the figures quoted from in this chapter were taken from an investigation made by educators, research workers and scientists and not by preachers or religious leaders.”⁴¹ Thus, even as conservative Protestant clergy bemoaned the waning of their authority and national influence as religious leaders, they also acknowledged and reflected the modern transformation that prized scientific and professional authority.

The PFS and *Our Movie Made Children* directly influenced the content of the arguments that conservative Protestants made with regard to movies. One example came from a PFS study by Blumer and Hauser, two professors of sociology at the University of Chicago who attempted to ascertain the relationship between movie going and youth crime by interviewing young criminal offenders about their movie going habits. In their published results, *Movies, Delinquency, and Crime* (1933), the authors produced a list of criminal skills that young men supposedly gleaned from watching films. Among them, Blumer and Hauser asserted that watching movies taught young men: “to cut burglar alarm wires in advance during the day...to look for secret panels hiding walls safes in burglarizing houses...to elude police by turning up an alley, turning off lights, then speeding in opposite direction...to drown out gunshots by timing them to backfiring cars”

⁴¹ Ibid., 87.

and “to carry machine guns in violin cases.”⁴² Blumer and Hauser, as well as Forman when he reprinted this list, offered a somewhat nuanced interpretation of this material by reminding their readers that one could not draw a direct correlation between crimes depicted in motion pictures and the criminal activities of the audience.⁴³ However, when conservative Protestants quoted this aspect of the study, the attempted nuance evaporated. John Rice reprinted Blumer and Hauser’s list of crimes taught by movies, and described it as “a partial list of things movies...taught young boys how to do before they were criminals, leading them into a life of crime.”⁴⁴ This same supposed list of crimes later appeared in John Carrara’s *Enemies of Youth* (1939), I.E. Burkhardt’s *Menace of the Movies* (1940), U.E. Harding’s *Movie Mad America* (1942), Dan Gilbert’s *Hell Over Hollywood* (1942), and C.M. Washington’s *Should Christians Support the Movies?* (nd). It is likely that some or maybe even all of these books did not rely from Blumer and Hauser, or even Forman, but Rice’s work itself, which was the most oft-read of the fundamentalist books condemning movies. Nevertheless, the example stands as evidence of how conservative Protestants used and manipulated data to suit their purposes.

Alongside the argument that movies were teaching crime, conservative Protestant denunciations about movies also picked up Forman’s concern that movies awakened sexual passions among teenagers. They reproduced salacious quotes from *Our Movie Made Children* about young people candidly describing how movies encouraged their sexual thoughts and encounters. Many of the Zondervan texts included anecdotes of

⁴² Blumer and Hauser, *Movies, Delinquency, and Crime*, 66-68.

⁴³ See *Ibid.*, 68. and Forman, *Our Movie Made Children*, 205.

⁴⁴ Rice, *What Is Wrong with the Movies?* , 70.

young couples being worked into a sexual frenzy after watching some salacious feature. U.E. Harding's *Movie Mad America* identified nineteen "charges against the movies," fourteen of which related to sexuality. In his list of nineteen charges Harding reported that "girls have testified that after seeing an extremely passionate movie they have gone out of the theater to find a man with whom they can have illicit sexual relations, if unescorted, and if they have a young man with them, they go out with him for the same purpose." In another example that showed Harding's lack of gender bias, he wrote that "boys affirm that they have been so inflamed by a sensuous movie that they have had to leave the theater before the show was over and go to a house of prostitution." Besides leading young people to sexual encounters with strangers, Harding also mentioned teenagers who reported that movies led to romantic dalliances with one another, referring to "cases on record where youth have committed adultery in the theater under the inflaming influence of a sensual movie."⁴⁵ In this last charge, Harding managed to bring together three separate concerns: movies triggered a lack of individual restraint, the theater space provided opportunities for elicited behavior, and the content of the film was inappropriately sexual. *Movie Mad America* shows the emphasis of sexuality in some conservative Protestant jeremiads against the movies, and evinces influence of *Our Movie Made Children*, since Harding drew upon some of the testimonials reported in Forman's book.

On occasion, conservative Protestant writing about the movies reflected a tension between religious and secular authorities. In his 1938 preface to *What is Wrong with the Movies?* Rice was likely referring to *Our Movie Made Children* when he described an

⁴⁵ U.E. Harding, *Movie Mad America*, Second edition ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1942), 14.

unnamed book that acknowledged the “menace of the movies” but was “written without the Christian point of view altogether, does not acknowledge the authority of the Bible, [and] does not consider the spiritual influence of the movies....” The problem with such an approach, from Rice’s perspective, was that “the question of the movies can never be settled except on the basis of pleasing the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁴⁶ In counter-distinction to *Our Movie Made Children*, Rice promised to present to his readers “Scriptures showing again and again that the moving picture theater is condemned on every point.” Rice, in fact, did point to various biblical passages condemning adultery, crime and other sins throughout his book.⁴⁷ But at the same time, he made no effort to conceal his debt to the PFS and Forman, pointedly stating that his evidence came from “scientists and educators, among them professors in a number of great universities. They were not preachers nor religious workers. Their findings are unbiased.”⁴⁸ *What is Wrong with the Movies?* made use of statistical data reported by the PFS texts and Rice extensively quoted from *Our Movie Made Children*—sometimes for pages at a time.⁴⁹

Though Rice intended his work to reflect “the point of view of a fundamental Christian” as he stated, it was not always clear how *What is Wrong with the Movies?* differed from progressive reformers—that is, until it came to their conclusions. On that point, Rice and most other conservative Protestants emphatically opposed any efforts to reform Hollywood. Comparing movies to alcohol, Rice insisted that nothing that was

⁴⁶ Rice, *What Is Wrong with the Movies?*, iv.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 11. On biblical references in *What is Wrong with the Movies* see, for example, pages 14, 16 and 26-28, 31, 38, 40-41, 44, 84.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁹ On references to PFS studies and quotes from Forman in *What is Wrong with the Movies*, see, for example, pages 11, 18, 19, 35-40, 45-53, 57-63, 65-72, 78-83, 87-92.

“inherently evil” could be reformed. “No man sells liquor for good,” he wrote, “So the movie industry itself is evil, evil at heart, incurably evil. It will not be reformed.”⁵⁰ This led him to the conclusion that “one who loves Christ...should come out and be separate from the movie theater.”⁵¹ Despite his insistence that one should primarily rely on biblical sources when making conclusions about the movies, and despite the fact that the PFS had been intended as a tool for social reform, Rice and other conservative Protestants were as enthusiastic to have the data from the Payne Fund Studies as William Short himself.

During the interwar period, conservative Protestants distinguished themselves from mainline Protestantism by insisting that the film industry could never be reformed through political and social institutions. Yet there was one last area of concern where the Payne Fund Studies resonated with conservative Protestant arguments concerning movies: teenagers.

The Rise of the Teenager

Christian critics of the stage had always been concerned about how drama affected the audience, and explicit mention of the vulnerabilities of young people dates back at least to the Puritans. Increase Mather in 1687 wrote of the power of stage plays to corrupt and ruin anyone, but “especially of Young Persons.” Mather needed no sociological studies to persuade him that young people who “have seen a lively

⁵⁰ Rice, *What Is Wrong with the Movies?*, 111.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

Representation of Wickedness on the Stage...have learned to practice it.”⁵² Still, most Protestant arguments against the theatrical stage emphasized the pernicious affect the theater could have on anyone—young or old. For example, *The Banner*, a periodical of the Christian Reformed Church, published an editorial in 1908 against the stage that concluded with the prayerful request: “May no professing Christian of adult years, endanger anyone’s soul welfare by setting an example in theatre going that may drag dozens to ruin!” This was followed by: “May our young people already in the meshes of the pernicious playhouse habit pray to be delivered and stop attending too!”⁵³ This prayer in *The Banner* took note of adolescent audiences without making them central, and highlighted the feeling that patronizing live theater endangered Christians of all ages in equal measure.

In contrast, conservative Protestant rhetoric about movie-going focused almost entirely on young movie goers. They came to see movies as a problem prominently—almost exclusively—affecting the young. In comparison to the 1908 plea, an editorial about moving pictures in *The Banner* in 1915 argued that “these shows are not fit places to allow our young people to visit them, much less are they houses wherein those should be seen who profess to travel to Zion...”⁵⁴ In the transition from stage to screen, *The Banner* reversed the order of its emphasis. Now and hereafter, their primary concern about the movie audience focused on youthful patrons. Most conservative Protestant publications reflected this same shift in emphasis. For example, *The King’s Business* in

⁵² Increase Mather, *A Testimony against Several Prophan and Superstitious Customs, Now Practiced by Some in New-England* (London: 1687).

⁵³ "Theatre Going Allowable?," *The Banner* XLIII, no. 636 (1908): 725.

⁵⁴ G.W. Hylkema, "The 'Movie' Evil Growing," *The Banner* 51, no. 1006 (1916): 140.

1916 worried that movies “are attended by young men and women at the most critical period of their life.”⁵⁵ After the publication of the Payne Fund Studies, conservative Protestant condemnation of the motion picture industry focused even more emphatically on the impact of movies on young people. Of the nineteen books Zondervan published between 1936 and 1955 that addressed the problem of movies, nearly all were written directly to teenaged movie-goers or to their parents. The first Zondervan book to mention movies, William Hendriksen’s *Faith of Our Fathers* (1936), was part of a catechetical series of booklets for young adults that encouraged adolescents to avoid “the concrete American institution, a commercialized menace.”⁵⁶ The next Zondervan title, *Questionable Amusements* by Frederick P. Wood (1937), suggested strategies by which youthful readers might remain separate from “worldliness” and the appearance of evil. Another, Charles F. Weigle’s *Listen, Girls!* (1937) warned young women against sinful pursuits like smoking, alcohol, and dancing. On movies, Weigle cautioned that “Moving pictures...are not a safe guide for a standard of morals.”⁵⁷ These examples indicate the extent to which conservative Protestants saw movies as a danger primarily to the young.

Their focus on children and teenagers reveals another way in which conservative Protestants absorbed the concerns of the surrounding culture even as they argued for separation from the world. Even before the PFS, progressive reformers began turning their attention to the impact of movies on the young. Jane Addams, the progressive reformer and child advocate from Chicago, devoted a chapter to children and movies in

⁵⁵ “Menace of the Movies,” 389.

⁵⁶ William Hendriksen, *Faith of Our Fathers: A Series of Catechetical Booklets for Our Young People: Book Three* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1936), 37.

⁵⁷ Charles F. Weigle, *Listen, Girls!*, ninth ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1937), 13.

her book *The Spirit of Youth and City Streets* (1909). Addams accused “the house of dreams” of corrupting children’s moral sensibilities as well as their physical well-being.⁵⁸

Later child advocates expanded on Addams work by producing the first studies examining the relationship between violence and sexual content in films, and violent and sexual behavior in youth.

There are several reasons why some of the earliest social reform regarding movies focused on young people. Most prominently, young people had become a significant demographic of the movie audience. Young people flocked to movie theaters because films were cheap, exciting, and plentiful. Kids needed only a few pennies to cover the price of admission, which they could get working in a textile mill in Georgia or selling newspapers on a Chicago street corner. Very quickly, young people became essential to the success of the film industry. And the film industry, governed by the dictates of the commercial marketplace, made sure that this sizable demographic stayed satisfied.⁵⁹

Historians of cinema have also argued that the progressive rhetoric around children and movie patronage was a roundabout way of dealing with issues of class. Film historian Robert Sklar has argued that “Since the enemies of movies could deal only indirectly or covertly with the issue of class conflict, they made their case on the ground of protecting the young.”⁶⁰ However, Sklar’s argument highlights the narrow focus of his evidence. Like most film historians, he has not distinguished conservative Protestants from other

⁵⁸ David Nasaw, “Moving Pictures in the Early Twentieth Century,” in *Small Worlds: Children and Adolescents in America, 1850-1950*, ed. Elliot West and Paula Petrik (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 22-23.

⁵⁹ Elliott West, *Growing up in Twentieth-Century America: A History and Reference Guide* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996), 23-25.

⁶⁰ Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Social History of American Movies*, 124.

“enemies of movies.” While it is likely that social reformers wrote about young audiences as a roundabout means to addressing class concerns, conservative Protestants of this period—who were neither elitists nor social reformers—also focused much attention on movies and children. For conservative Protestants, the concern about children and the movies had less to do with class and more to do with the changing social and moral standards among adolescents and its impact on the family.

During the interwar period adolescents and young adults began to enjoy greater independence from their parents and greater influence on commercial culture. One example that reflected both social shifts regarded the rituals of dating. In the nineteenth century middle-class parents maintained strong oversight of the courtship process. Young men and women might spend an evening in the family parlor, on the porch, or at a community social. From a close proximity, parents screened potential suitors, oversaw social events, and even directed topics of conversation. Yet by the 1920s many of these cultural rituals had become upended. Young people might first meet each other at coeducational college campuses. And dating came to involve taking a drive, going to a restaurant, enjoying an amusement park, or seeing a movie. Sexual rules changed as well, as “petting” became a more common aspect of the dating experience. More so than in prior generations, children and young adults could decide for themselves where they wanted to go, when, and with whom. As parents dealt with the loss of some of their familial authority over their children, religious organizations also found it more difficult to retain young adult parishioners. In her study of youth in the 1920s, Paula S. Fass noted that “the young had transferred their allegiance from the churches, broad and narrow, to a different sort of God, as they invested a kind of religious devotion to their leisure

pursuits, to sports, dating, and song.”⁶¹ As conservative Protestants came to terms with these striking social changes, they found in movies a useful foil. In the Zondervan book *Enemies of Youth*, for example, evangelist John Carrara held movies responsible for these developments. Carrara imagined an experiment that would prove the nefarious impact of movies on the young.

Train a child carefully and prayerfully, allowing his mind and body to develop without the influence of the movie until he is eight years old and then allow him to attend one or two movies a week and note the difference in his life after two or three weeks of movie training. His methods of playing change, his conversation becomes different and his sweet personality will change. You will notice a decided roughness in his manner, speech, and attitude.⁶²

Statements like these, which might have come from a fundamentalist as easily as a progressive reformer like Jane Addler, provided both a warning and a rationale for parents trying to understand what was happening to their children as they become young adults. Placing the blame on movies offered parents an explanation for the upheavals occurring among the next generation and provided an external adversary on which to focus. But whereas progressives called for social reform of the film industry, conservative Protestants intended to keep their children out of the theater altogether. Conservatives were particularly drawn to stories of young Christians who had become seduced by the film industry. John R. Rice made this concern explicit when recounting the event that led him to write *What is Wrong with the Movies?* Rice wrote:

A troubled mother came to my study not long ago.... She earnestly besought me to pray for her daughter, sixteen years old, I believe. This daughter was won to trust in Christ in our church. With my own hands I baptized her. She was eager to

⁶¹ Paula S. Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920's* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 45.

⁶² Carrara, *Enemies of Youth*, 90.

serve the Lord, glad to study the Bible, enthusiastic about Sunday school, prayerfully interested in winning souls. But the young woman got a job in connection with a moving-picture show. She was given a pass to the theater and began to attend regularly. Little by little she lost interest in the church and her Sunday-school class. She began to keep company with an entirely different crowd. She had an excuse that her job kept her away from church. Actually on Sunday morning when she could, she did not attend. Something had gone out of her life. The movies had stolen away her interest in the Bible, her fellowship with God's people. She had lost the joy of her salvation, had left her first love, and had been led away from the spiritual blessings that were once hers....⁶³

Rice himself had six daughters and his description of this young girl's falling away was more than a salacious anecdote to stir his congregation. Stories like these exposed anxieties that many parents felt about their children. Modern cultural trends had permanently changed the relationship between parents and their children, and parents perhaps found comfort in thinking that movies had been the cause of such changes. For many conservative Protestants, commercial movies became a useful shorthand for describing so many of the cultural trends against which they protested.

On Screen

Paul S. Rees, the pastor of First covenant Church in Minneapolis, wrote a twenty-three page (undated) pamphlet for Zondervan entitled, "Movies and the Conscientious Christian." In it, Rees proposed four questions that might lead to a "genuinely Christian decision as to what we shall do about the movies." The questions were:

1. By whom are movies produced?
2. By whom are movies attended?
3. Where are movies shown?
4. By what effects are movies accompanied?

⁶³ Rice, *What Is Wrong with the Movies?*, 93-94.

None of the questions, in other words, had to do with the content of the films themselves. During much of the first half of the twentieth century, conservative Protestant condemnation of film rarely focused on the content of movies. And when they did, their descriptions were both vague and broad. For example, *Movie Mad America* denounced movies in part because “most films have within them sections that are unclean, immoral, obscene, filthy and indecent.”⁶⁴ But that seemed beside the point since many others argued that even films without any objectionable content needed to be avoided just as scrupulously. A Moody Press book from 1936 insisted that “the ‘clean pictures’ are simply bait with which the devil attracts church members into the theatre, that he may thus use them as decoys to allure others, who follow their example, toward moral ruin and hell.”⁶⁵ To those who defended clean pictures, most conservative Protestants employed the “slippery-slope” argument, such as John Rice who insisted that even Walt Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* would do great harm because it would lead children to grow comfortable with movie patronage and would quickly expose them to more depraved fare. Rice made the same argument about unimpeachable movie stars like Shirley Temple: “The best stars have done immeasurable harm in enlisting more fans, getting them started to seeing other sex-filled, love-crazy, crime and blood pictures.”⁶⁶ Even biblical epics praised by Catholics and liberal Protestants offended conservative Protestants who viewed them as a pernicious trap. For example, in *The Devil Goes A-Fishin’* (1939), Harry Vom Bruch warned:

⁶⁴ Harding, *Movie Mad America*, 13.

⁶⁵ Conant, *Is the Devil in Modern Amusements?*, 40.

⁶⁶ Rice, *What Is Wrong with the Movies?*, 13, 21.

And if the devil can't attract us with one of these sensational films, he will try an educational one; and if that will not work, an inspirational one such as "Ben Hur," "The Ten Commandments," "The King of Kings," "The Sign of the Cross," or some religious subject, and when these youngsters bite on this bait it has the same effect it had upon the lad who, after seeing his first moving-picture show, went home saying, "Gee, Mother, if you ever went to the movies once you never would want to go to prayer-meeting again."⁶⁷

Conservative Protestants also argued that biblical epics invariably contradicted some point of biblical interpretation. (So self-evident was the truth of this assertion, it required no specifics.) Rees, for example, argued that "even bible films, when commercially produced have their 'rotten spots,' either in the form of historically and religiously warped conceptions or else in the form of overemphasis and overcoloring of scenes of sin."⁶⁸ Earlier in this chapter, I described conservative Protestant references to sex and violence in commercial cinema, which would seem to indicate that they focused, at least in part, on the content of the movies. But conservative Protestants wrote only in the most broad and general terms about sensational content. And when pressed, many insisted that film content was irrelevant since even the most untainted Hollywood feature could not win their approval.

This lack of attention to film content began to change by mid century with Herbert J. Miles' *Movies and Morals*, a Zondervan text published in 1947. Miles dedicated the book to his wife, a "Christian Opera Star" which might indicate that the author may have been more concerned with differentiating moral and immoral theatrical products than most other conservative Protestants. In writing his book, Miles spent thirteen months watching 100 motion pictures in order to produce a content-analysis of

⁶⁷ Harry Vom Bruch, *The Devil Goes a-Fishin'* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1939), 11.

⁶⁸ Rees, *Movies and the Conscientious Christian*, 17.

commercial films although, by his own admission, the author was no detached statistician. On Hollywood, he wrote:

It has been the conviction of the author for many years that this industry is in evil hands and is being used to gradually paralyze and destroy the tested moral and spiritual principles that have been the foundation of our nation's liberty, democracy and Christian progress.⁶⁹

Miles went on to report his findings, which had far more detailed points regarding film content but which came to the same conclusions as other conservative Protestants who had never seen a commercial film. Most of *Movies and Morals* reported various statistics from his study, informing his readers that 69 of the pictures portrayed dancing, 83 smoking, 60 movies portrayed 199 criminal actions, and 17 pictures showed adultery. He offered similar counts for topics such as gambling, drinking, crime, divorce, and others. After counting all manner of immoral acts, Miles indicted the commercial film industry, calling movies “the organ of the devil, the idol of sinners, the sink of infamy, the stumbling block to human progress, the moral concern of civilization, the Number One Enemy of Jesus Christ.”⁷⁰ Lest any reader find that pronouncement ambiguous, he italicized his conclusion: “*Christians should avoid the movies altogether.*”⁷¹

Despite the extra effort paid to methodological precision Miles' film-viewing project led him to conclusions analogous to many other conservative evangelicals of the era. But *Movies and Morals* was more significant because of its attempt to assess film by quantifying immoral content. In this way Miles' effort reflected the social science studies of movies that appeared in the mid-1930s. Decades later when evangelicals lowered the

⁶⁹ Miles, *Movies and Morals*, 14.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁷¹ Ibid., 92.

wall that separated itself from popular cinema, vestiges of this statistical method of film assessment would reappear in other evangelical analysis of film. The conservative evangelical periodical and website entitled “Movieguide” offers critical assessments of films that are accompanied by content analysis of violence, sex, alcohol, smoking, drugs, etc. For example, of the recent film “Milk,” a biopic about the gay-rights advocate Harvey Milk, Movieguide reported “27 obscenities (mostly ‘f’ words and including some obscene slang for male private parts), four profanities and vulgar slang for homosexuals.”⁷² Though many other modern evangelical websites and periodicals have broadened the assessment techniques of Christian film reviews, Miles’ approach in 1947 combined the methodologies of a social scientist with the moral concerns of a cultural conservative to develop a distinctly evangelical technique of movie review. For my immediate purposes, his text stands out for its focus on film content. Most conservative Protestant condemnation of commercial cinema during the first half of the twentieth century made only imprecise reference to film content, drawing much of their ire on a long-standing anti-theatrical prejudice which they combined with a reaction against modern cultural trends.

Conclusion

In their condemnatory tirades against cinema, conservative Protestants applied long-standing arguments about the dangers of patronizing the stage to patrons of the movies, largely insisting that any sinful behavior that actors performed would eventually be replicated by audience members and lead to one’s moral downfall. At the same time,

⁷² <www.movieguide.org> Accessed January 17, 2009.

conservative Protestants responded to the fact that movie audiences reflected modern trends distinct from those of the stage. For example, commercial cinema captured a percentage of the public far in excess of anything that could be imagined by a theatrical production. Conservative Protestants who considered the movies more perilous than the stage had only to cite weekly attendance figures. Additionally, conservative Protestants enthusiastically embraced some of the early social scientific studies of movie-going. Their jeremiads of commercial cinema after the mid 1930s reflected an increasing concern about the dangers of movies on children and young adults.

Like the poetic device synecdoche, conservative Protestants came to view movies as a facet standing in for the whole of modernity. Their insistence on avoiding commercial cinema exposed a host of modern cultural trends they attempted to eschew.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE STARS

[W]hen the show ends and the actress exits, her image remains in your soul—her words, her gestures, her glances, her walk, her rhythm, her tone of voice, her seductive limbs—and you return home with countless wounds.

—John Chrysostom (fourth century)

‘Tis the usual practice of Stage-Players to make themselves and others merry with the Vices and Wickednesses of men. Now this is certainly Evil.

—Increase Mather (seventeenth century)

Introduction

In the first few years of the twentieth century movie studios produced a balance of films in genres that included news stories and documentaries along with comedies and dramas. But by the end of the first decade the balance tilted in favor of more narrative films. This transition had little to do with creative yearning and more to do with business sense. Filming news stories and documentary footage required traveling film crews to work in unpredictable environments and put filmmakers at the mercy of news events. On the other hand, narrative films gave studios more control over their products by standardizing the production process. They allowed film crews to work inside studios, build sets, control lighting, film the story in whatever order suited an efficient production schedule, and edit the pieces together to form a coherent plot. But more significantly for the purposes of this chapter, the shift toward mostly narrative features encouraged Hollywood to raid the theater industry for production crew, scriptwriters, and actors.

And by the 1910s the film industry also copied the familiar theater practice of attracting audiences by advertising the name of a famed performer above the marquee. As the film industry began to more closely resemble the theatrical industry, conservative Protestant attitudes toward the film industry became more radicalized.

In this chapter, I examine how conservative Protestant denunciations of movie stars both drew on, and distinguished itself from, centuries of Christian rhetoric toward stage actors. Conservative Protestant rhetoric against movie stars drew on longstanding Christian prejudices against stage actors, but they did not simply reiterate prior rhetorical tropes. Rather, conservative Protestant hostility toward film actors greatly expanded upon earlier rhetoric from the theater. They saw film actors as a threat to their religious authority and blamed them for corroding the nation's morals and values. For many conservative Protestants during the first half of the twentieth century, convicting actors offered a useful route for denouncing a range of cultural revolutions at the time that included divorce, new sexual openness, modern consumer culture, and the expansion of leisure and entertainment. Conservative Protestants saw Hollywood as the embodiment of nearly everything that had gone wrong with America.

The Real Dangers of Artificial People

As I described in chapter one, the bias against the actor's profession has been one of the most persistent tropes in Christian condemnation against the stage. In 1949, Leonard Greenway, a Christian Reformed Church pastor in Grand Rapids, Michigan, reiterated these concerns in *Basic Questions about Christian Behavior*. Greenway warned his readers against various sinful amusements such as gambling, alcohol, and dancing, but he reserved special comment for movies which he considered "the most

powerful factor in American recreation.” In explaining what made the dramatic arts “basically wrong,” he wrote:

We believe that God has given every individual his own unique *creatural distinction* in life and that it is sinful for anyone *habitually* to reshape his individuality and to twist his personality for dramatic purposes. To “make love” or to display anger, sorrow, fear or elation under *artificial stimulation* is a profanation of gifts and powers which God intends shall be used only in sincerity and truth.¹

To many evangelicals and fundamentalists, the acting profession was not only unchristian, but anti-Christian because actors rejected their God-given identity. They considered actors literally unnatural and a danger to themselves. A. W. Tozer, for example, believed that acting permanently damaged one’s ability to be honest and true. He described actors as “men and women who have played false parts so long that the power to be sincere has forever gone from them. They are doomed to everlasting duplicity.”² Thus acting marooned the performer in a state of inescapable artificiality. Further, many conservative Protestants considered sincerity the foundation of morality so that losing the former resulted in losing the latter. A *Moody Monthly* editorial in 1932 insisted that acting destroyed sincerity which would in turn “destroy the ability to distinguish between sin and virtue, and...deaden the conscience.”³ This blurring of reality and simulation was not simply a theoretical concern but one that had life-threatening consequences. One clergyman told of actors who had hanged themselves

¹ Leonard Greenway, *Basic Questions About Christian Behavior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1949), 86. Italics in original.

² A[iden] W[ilson] Tozer, *The Menace of the Religious Movie* (Wisconsin Rapids: Rapids Christian Press, n.d.), 15.

³ Sivert Ness, "Dramatic Plays in the Christian Church--a Timely Warning by a Correspondent," *The Moody Bible Institute Monthly* XXXII, no. 5 (1932): 245.

after portraying Judas Iscariot, insinuating that performing the role of the infamous apostle led them to suicide.⁴

The belief that acting might lead to moral corruption had been a common refrain among some of the early church fathers. Twentieth century conservative Protestants continued this refrain, insisting that there was no difference between engaging in sinful behavior and performing sinful behavior on stage or on screen. In fact, they reiterated the point so often that it seemed to take the status of a self-evident truth. J. W. Lowber's *The Devil in Modern Society* (1906) insisted that "the actors who represent these characters must necessarily become the characters they represent."⁵ A 1936 Moody Press publication insisted that "It is a law of nature that we come to be like that which we habitually imitate."⁶ John R. Rice wrote, "after thinking evil in every picture, movie players act evil."⁷ And John Carrara repeated the point: "After meditating evil in a picture, movie actors and actresses seem to carry out these meditations in their own private lives."⁸ The prevalence of this position in conservative Protestant rhetoric about stage and film actors maintained the ancient theatrical prejudice that there was no useful distinction between performance and reality. Moreover, it assumed that acting roles typically required the actor to perform actions deemed "evil." This assertion might lead one to wonder if the formula might be reversed. In other words, if performing sin was equivalent to committing sin, than was performing righteousness the equivalent of

⁴ Masselink, *I and the Children*, 195.

⁵ Lowber, *The Devil in Modern Society*, 21.

⁶ Conant, *Is the Devil in Modern Amusements?* , 24.

⁷ Rice, *What Is Wrong with the Movies?* , 17.

⁸ Carrara, *Enemies of Youth*, 84.

authentic righteousness? In chapter one, I noted that Jonas Barish raised this point about Tertullian and Barish's observation applies equally well to twentieth century conservative Protestants. Although they often assumed that actors portrayed wicked characters, they also believed that actors morally compromised themselves no matter what the performance required. Just as conservative Protestants cared little about film plot, they cared little about film characters. Even seemingly innocuous roles, such as portraying husbands and wives, were fraught with moral dangers as William Masselink explained in *I and the Children Thou Hast Given Me* (1931).

All the liberties that belong to the close and confidential relations of marriage, parenthood, and the home, are permitted on the stage. It is taken for granted that actors and actresses have perfect moral rights to caress each other in all the accepted ways love has inspired. If a man is an actor he may hold the actress on his lap, encircle her with his arms, imprint his kisses upon her lips, to the gaze of the admiring audience...but this is not all. This actor and actress do this night after night and day after day, for months at a time.⁹

While evangelical critics of Hollywood film sometimes focused on criminal and immoral acting roles, even portraying characters in a standard domestic scene could have grave consequences. As Masselink's writing reveals, conservative Protestants felt that the stage gravely blurred otherwise clear social boundaries.

The extent to which any given acting role offended conservative Protestant is evident in their reactions to biblical epics, a popular movie genre in the 1920s and again in the 1950s. The public enthusiasm for these films resulted in classics such as *The Ten Commandments* (1923 and 1956), *Ben-Hur* (1926 and 1959) and *King of Kings* (1927 and 1961). Paul S. Rees, a pastor of First Covenant Church in Minneapolis, condemned biblical epics in *Movies and the Conscientious Christian*, published with Zondervan circa

⁹ Masselink, *I and the Children*, 199.

1950. On the actor portraying Moses, Rees howled: “So often did the actor who played the part of Moses have to leave the ‘set’ to smoke that one of the actresses twitted him with the remark, ‘I don’t believe you make a very good Moses!’”¹⁰ The discrepancy between the biblical hero and the sinful addictions of a corrupt actor unnerved Rees. Another example appeared in *The Menace of the Religious Movie*, written by A.W. Tozer around the same time. Tozer disliked all movies but had particular enmity for religious films. Directing his readers to the Gospel of Matthew 23:14-15, in which Jesus denounces the Pharisees as hypocrites, Tozer reviled actors who feigned religious practice on stage, writing that

In order to produce a religious movie someone must, for the time, disguise his individuality and simulate that of another. His actions must be judged fraudulent, and those who watch them with approval share in the fraud. To *pretend* to pray, to *simulate* godly sorrow, to *play at worship* before the camera for effect—how utterly shocking to the reverent heart!¹¹

Tozer’s critique aligned Tertullian and other early Christian attitudes toward stage actors whose antagonism could not be assuaged by the type of role the actor performed. To Tozer, actors portraying Christians exhibited an inherent contradiction. He seemed to posit that sincerity was central to Christianity, thus the profession of acting was inimical to the faith.

Compassion for the Fallen

Some conservative Protestants emphasized the point that acting was a profanation against God, while others focused on how the actor’s craft led to his or her moral dissipation. This chapter thus far has emphasized the similarities between twentieth

¹⁰ Rees, *Movies and the Conscientious Christian*, 16.

¹¹ Tozer, *The Menace of the Religious Movie*, 14. Italics in original.

century conservative Protestant and ancient Christian with regard to bias against actors, the points of congruity between stage and film actors. However, starting in the 1910s, conservative Protestant condemnation of film actors introduced a novel rhetorical trope. For the remainder of this chapter I note the contrasts between conservative Protestant condemnation of stage actors and their postures toward film actors.

One significant difference was that conservative Protestants often viewed stage actors as victims of their profession, a sentiment they did not express toward Hollywood actors. In sermons and writing in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, conservative Protestants often portrayed the stage as a dangerous lure to otherwise decent young men and women, and one that would erode their virtue and decency. They wrote of the dangers that the theater posed to young people who had become drawn to the actor's life and nearly, or ultimately, led to ruin. Their concerns over the corrupting influence of the stage led them to consider stage actors as victims, and more than one clergyman expressed sympathy and compassion for young people who had become tempted by the stage.

One voice of compassion came from the influential pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in New York City during the 1920s, John Roach Straton. Straton would not have been considered a generally benign figure. The clergyman rarely missed an opportunity to condemn sin and iniquity wherever he saw it. Of the devastating 1906 San Francisco earthquake Straton blamed "the insufferable wickedness" of its populous.¹² Even among fellow fundamentalists, Straton could be unrelentingly aggressive. During a quarrel with fellow fundamentalist J. Frank Norris, Straton offered blunt advice: "Brother Frank, why

¹² Straton, *The Menace of Immorality*, 180.

don't you stop lying? It is not good for your health and it confuses the brethren.... Stop lying and learn simply to handle the truth economically.”¹³ Not surprisingly for the forceful and brusque Straton, the Manhattan clergyman vigorously condemned the theatrical stage and movie screen in his sermons, in print, and in public debates, and implored Christians to patronize neither institution. But alongside his fiery rhetorical flourishes, Straton took pains to express sympathy for stage actors, whom he saw as victims of the theatrical institution. His fiery rhetoric about New York's theater industry did not deplete his compassion for performers. Rather, Straton wrote that

I have all sympathy for actors and actresses, as individuals. It has fallen to my lot to hear the stories of the broken hearts and wrecked lives of some of the dear children which the modern stage has destroyed, and I have gone the limit in my effort to help them, and will continue to do all in my power to minister to them...I have all pity, too, for aged and needy actors and actresses, and I would gladly do for them anything in my power.¹⁴

Straton's perspective was common among fundamentalist clergy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, who vigorously condemned “the devil's church” and catalogued a host of dangers associated with the stage but viewed actors as fatalities of a terrible industry. This compassion seemed to rise out of a concern among some conservative Protestants that their children would be drawn to the theatrical life, particularly as they went to college. In 1927 the fundamentalist periodical *The Sunday School Times* published a two-part series by an anonymous “former actor.” The unnamed author described a nurturing upbringing in a Christian home, the son of a minister who dropped out of college and moved to New York City to explore his theatrical dreams.

¹³ Quoted in C. Allyn Russell, *Voices of American Fundamentalism: Seven Biographical Studies* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 53.

¹⁴ John Roach Straton, *Fighting the Devil in Modern Babylon* (Boston: Stratford Company, 1929), 71.

However, theater quickly corrupted the author's faith. While socializing with fellow actors, he was exposed to religiously liberal ideas that poisoned his faith. Instead of maintaining his fundamentalist belief of the literal truths of the Bible, he came to accept the "intellectual attitude toward the Scriptures" which regarded the Bible "a very interesting and curious collection of Jewish literature." As he fell further into the urban theatrical world, the author ultimately "accepted the evolutionary theory in toto" and renounced Christianity altogether. But the story, sounding like nothing so much as a fundamentalist parent's standard nightmare, did not end tragically. The prodigal author finally fled the city and returned to his family's small town, where he offered his experience as council to youth considering a similar venture.¹⁵ The entire story, a morality play in its own right, portrayed the young man as victim of the theatrical establishment. It mapped the dangers of the stage while allowing opportunity for salvation.

By comparison, whereas nineteenth and twentieth century conservative Protestants expressed pity and compassion for stage actors, they had no such sympathy for film actors. Herbert Miles Jackson's *Movies and Morals* was more typical of conservative Protestant attitudes toward film stars. Jackson referred to movie stars as "Hollywood harlots" who "wallow[ed] in moral filth and squalor" and whose hearts had "become hardened through the deceitfulness of sin."¹⁶ And John Rice, in his characteristically unreserved style, described actors as "lustful, lewd, divorced, cigarette-

¹⁵ "From a Christian Home to the Stage," *The Sunday School Times* 69, no. 15 (1927): 231. "An Emotional Pagan Goes in for Experience," *The Sunday School Times* 69, no. 16 (1927): 247-48.

¹⁶ Miles, *Movies and Morals*, 90.

smoking, drinking, gambling people with wicked hearts and dissolute lives.”¹⁷ Even performers who were nationally revered for their moral purity, such as Shirley Temple and Will Rogers, could not redeem their profession in the eyes of many fundamentalists. In fact, John Rice singled out such stars for special condemnation: “The best stars have done immeasurable harm in enlisting more fans, getting them started to seeing other sex-filled, love-crazy, crime and blood pictures.”¹⁸ To Rice and others, the morally virtuous stars deserved special condemnation for attempting to bring undeserved respectability to the desolate film industry.

Celestial Menace

As this chapter has shown, conservative Protestant condemnation of film actors reflected centuries of Christian bias. But at the same time, their modern condemnations of “the movie set” introduced new concerns made manifest by cultural developments in post-World War I America. There was a substantial difference between performing on stage and performing on film. Put simply, while both stage and the screen had actors, only Hollywood had *movie stars*.

The early film studios capitalized on fan enthusiasm for movies by manufacturing celebrities. Starting in the 1910s, they packaged and sold movie stars to the public like any other commodity. The first fan magazines started in 1911, offering portraits of the personalities and lifestyles of the biggest stars. Fan clubs became a popular pastime, particularly among young girls, who would meet each week to pour over the intimate details of their favorite stars’ lives. Young people began to model themselves on movie

¹⁷ Rice, *What Is Wrong with the Movies?* , 23.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

stars, mimicking their catch phrases, hairstyles, and clothes. In her study of movie fandom, Samantha Barbas noted the extent to which movie stars inundated American culture. She wrote that by the end of 1910s,

stars were everywhere. Their faces adorned advertisements for cosmetics and clothing; their exploits filled newspapers and magazines; their names appeared regularly in everyday conversation. It was almost as if someone had forgotten to stop the film at the end of the show, as if actors had spilled off the movie screen into the realm of everyday life.¹⁹

Relevant for my present purposes, the concept of the “movie star” not only identified a profession but also a sense of public regard, charisma, and cultural influence. Perhaps for contemporary movie fans, it may seem altogether unsurprising that film actors were accorded unique cultural status. Modern celebrities endorse everything from hamburgers to presidential candidates to global humanitarian crises. But the notion of a film star as someone who could steer cultural trends was a novel concept in the beginning of the twentieth century. Barbas described it this way:

More than just performers, more than celebrities, stars by the 1920s had become educators. To millions of Americans, they provided concrete lessons in personality, style, and good grooming. They reaffirmed the value of entertainment, pleasure, and sensual freedom in an increasingly leisure-oriented, youth-oriented consumer culture. Wealthy and charismatic, successful and adored, they became the nation’s most prominent spokespeople for modernity.²⁰

Thus, conservative Protestants exaggerated only slightly when they viewed movie stars as the conductors of broader cultural developments in the early twentieth century. These cinematic role models particularly galled conservative Protestants who felt their own public authority waning during the early decades of the twentieth century. As Hollywood rose to prominence, conservative Protestants had not forgotten that only decades ago a

¹⁹ Samantha Barbas, *Movie Crazy: Fans, Stars, and the Cult of Celebrity* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 35.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

broad Protestant coalition dominated American culture by leading public debate, moral reform, and cultural tastes. But by the 1920s, according to American religion historian Sydney Ahlstrom, Protestant leaders “were made sharply aware that their ancient sway over the nation’s moral life was threatened...[as] the churches tended to lose their capacity to shape and inform American opinion.”²¹ This was the case for Protestantism broadly, but particularly true of fundamentalists during the 1930s who came to grasp the extent to which their roles as cultural authorities had diminished. The humiliating Scopes Trial in 1925 and their failed attempt to expel liberal Protestants from their churches left fundamentalism frustrated and defensive. Compounding their ire, it seemed to conservative Protestants that Hollywood seized the cultural influence that they had lost. Film stars had captured an intensity of public enthusiasm that many had previously only seen with the great revivalists like Moody and Billy Sunday. Fundamentalists lamented bitterly the influence of movie stars on popular trends as well as the public esteem in which movie stars were held.

It was not just celebrities’ popularity that so horrified conservative clergy; rather, it was that film stars were able to guide public tastes and define moral standards. In the context of the times, the Christian response was comprehensible. Dan Gilbert explained in *Hell over Hollywood* that his inspiration to write the book came when he realized that “Hollywood has a power to shape, to mold, to direct and to control the life of America which exceeds that of any dictator.”²² And further, in the view of many conservative

²¹ Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 915.

²² Dan Gilbert, *Hell Over Hollywood* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1942), 9.

evangelicals, that that influence was almost entirely detrimental. John Rice, who gleaned his knowledge of film stars from newspapers and magazines, bemoaned:

No university professor in America is as well known as any one of many movie stars. No Congressman or Senator could rival the stars of the screen. No minister of the gospel, no foreign ambassador, no great philanthropist, can compete in popularity in America with Clark Gable, Greta Garbo, Mae West, or Robert Taylor....The way they look, talk, act, walk, eat, and make love are common knowledge to millions. As far as popularity with the general public is concerned, even the President of the United States would have serious competition with the leading screen stars.²³

Many others echoed Rice's observation in the 1940s and 1950s. John Carrara in 1942 wrote that "No one in public life can compete in popularity with the movie stars, not even the President of the United States."²⁴ The same year, the Zondervan publication *Movie Mad America* groused that movie stars "have more influence upon this generation than any other group."²⁵

Conservative Protestants were irked not only because millions seemed to worship film stars, but because their celebrity status had a pronounced cultural impact. Actors' daily activities were published in newspapers and magazines across the country and movie fans emulated everything from styles of dress to catch phrases. They saw movie stars exercising influence over American culture—particularly among teenagers. Edward Vander Jagt noted in *Going with the Wind* that "movies set the standard for dress, manners, righteousness, religion, and love-making."²⁶ As Rice saw it, "The moving

²³ Rice, *What Is Wrong with the Movies?*, 8-9.

²⁴ Carrara, *Enemies of Youth*, 80.

²⁵ Harding, *Movie Mad America*, 9.

²⁶ Vander Jagt, *Going with the Wind*, 4.

picture industry is the most influential single agency in modern life in American excepting only the home and school.”

Hollywood Scandals

The hostility that conservative Protestants expressed toward Hollywood was more than a jealous rivalry. Conservative Protestant leaders focused their condemnation on what they considered the personal sins of movie stars. They denounced Hollywood stars for smoking, gambling, and drinking, for being spendthrifts and for their sexual promiscuity. The popular perception of Hollywood as a town reveling in material goods and self-indulgencies offended conservative Protestants who believed that the film industry poisoned the country with its hedonistic tendencies.

Much of this boiled over as several Hollywood scandals came to light in the early 1920s, the most infamous being the “Fatty” Arbuckle episode. During the 1921 trial, the popular comedy actor was accused of raping and murdering a 24-year-old aspiring actress during a Hollywood party. For months, newspapers reported on the story where each salacious detail captivated the public, including the fact that liquor had been served despite the fact that the eighteenth amendment prohibiting alcohol had been passed the year before, that guests had enjoyed jazz music, considered indecent, and that the victim’s underwear had been found, “torn almost to shreds.”²⁷ Although Arbuckle was eventually acquitted, the case effectively ended his career and, more relevant here, had a long-lasting impact on the public’s perception of Hollywood. One historian writing a few years after the trial reported that despite Arbuckle’s acquittal, “he and the whole motion

²⁷ Richard DeCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 126-27.

picture business shared in a conviction at the bar of public opinion under a broader indictment.”²⁸ Long after the story had been forgotten or replaced by newer scandals, the Arbuckle episode resonated with conservative Protestants. As late as 1964, a Pentecostal preacher named Gordon Lindsay pointed to the Arbuckle scandal four decades earlier as evidence of “the ugly story of the stars of the Silver Screen.”²⁹

The Arbuckle episode also revealed the extent to which the lives of movie stars became part of the national discourse. One did not need to follow fan magazines in order to uncover the latest gossip and rumors about Hollywood. The national press offered regular coverage of the goings on of the stars, particularly when scandal broke. In 1923, the fundamentalist periodical *The King’s Business* grumbled that one need only “glance through the daily paper” in order to glean “the doings of the movie colonies.”³⁰ The national attention on trials, divorces and scandal meant that Protestant clergy had a steady torrent of outrageous details to fuel their condemnations. Nearly thirty years after the Arbuckle scandal, Zondervan’s 1949 book, *Basic Questions about Christian Behavior* considered it an “*incontrovertible fact about the Hollywood movie colony...that it is a place where the prevailing ethical standards are wholly unchristian.*”³¹ Many concurred with a Moody Monthly article in 1925 that considered one of the primary reasons

²⁸ Terry Ramsaye, *A Million and One Nights: A History of the Motion Picture* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926), 808. For a full-length treatment of the Arbuckle scandal, see David A. Yallop, *The Day the Laughter Stopped: The True Story of Fatty Arbuckle* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976).

²⁹ Gordon Lindsay, *Should Christians Attend the Movies?* (Dallas: Voice of Healing Publishing Company, 1964), 3.

³⁰ “Poisoned at the Source,” *The King's Business* xiv, no. 1 (1923): 6.

³¹ Greenway, *Basic Questions About Christian Behavior*, 86. Italics in original.

Christians should avoid picture shows is because “the actors and actresses that make the pictures [do not] stand out as wholesome, lovable men and women.”³²

Divorce

Of the catalogue of complaints against Hollywood stars which included drinking, gambling, smoking, and sexual promiscuity, conservative Protestants highlighted one “moral failing” above all others: Hollywood’s record of divorce. Divorce arose frequently in conservative Protestant condemnations of Hollywood from the 1920s through the 1950s. Of the nineteen texts published from 1936 to 1955 by Zondervan about movies, eleven gesture toward the divorce rate among film stars as a primary reason for avoiding movies. One of the books, Harry Vom Bruch’s *The Devil Goes a-Fishin’* (1939), made a special effort to analyze the failings of Hollywood marriages. According to Bruch, “The average marriage in Hollywood lasts four years, eight months, fourteen days, nineteen hours, and fifty-five minutes.” Bruch explained, “This figure is based on thirty-five movie-land marriages, all of which ended in separation or divorce.”³³ (By Bruch’s calculations, then, Hollywood had a 100% divorce rate.) Many considered divorce as the most revealing flaw within the film industry.

The focus on divorce among movie stars began in earnest after Mary Pickford’s divorce from her first husband, Owen Moore, in 1920. Pickford had been the biggest star in the country during the 1910s, and her divorce from Moore was national news. But the public had barely absorbed the news when newspapers announced that Pickford had remarried another film star, Douglas Fairbanks, just twenty-five days after her divorce

³² Miller, “May Christians Attend Picture Shows?.”

³³ Vom Bruch, *The Devil Goes a-Fishin’*, 13-14.

from Moore. On their own, Fairbanks and Pickford had been exceptionally popular film stars but Pickford's divorce and remarriage caused widespread consternation among many moralists. Nevertheless, because of their popularity and the skillful managing of the news by their representatives, the public controversy over their suspiciously abrupt nuptials dissipated. In his study on film stars, historian Richard deCordova noted "how seamlessly the 'sinister' aspects of the Pickford-Fairbanks affair were recuperated in a family discourse and how completely the couple escaped the stigma of scandal."³⁴

Audiences may have overlooked the scandalous implications in the Pickford and Fairbanks marriage, but conservative Protestants did not. The evangelical Dorothy C. Haskin reported that she had been a fan of Mary Pickford as a child until Pickford's divorce and remarriage. "That was the first time," Haskin reported, "I saw the actions of the motion picture people in a Christian light."³⁵ Hollywood divorces would become common and accepted, though they remained newsworthy. When Pickford and Fairbanks divorced fifteen years later, it was again national news, even earning an above-the-fold notice on the front page of the *New York Times* on January 11, 1935: "Mary Pickford Obtains Divorce in Surprise Three Minute Hearing." By that time Pickford and Fairbanks were no longer the movie idols that they had once been. Nevertheless, fundamentalists pointed to the failed marriage of Hollywood's first celebrated couple as symbolic of the industry's rejection of the institution of marriage. John Rice, though he had never seen a picture with the two stars, was quite familiar with them. He held up their unsuccessful marriage as a paradigm of Hollywood's failings.

³⁴ DeCordova, *Picture Personalities*, 123.

³⁵ Dorothy Haskin, *Behind the Scenes in Hollywood* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1951), 66.

Even Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., and Mary Pickford could not make a permanent success of their marriage and they divorced. They were regarded as the very highest in all the movie circles in their moral integrity. The fact is that movie stars generally are not true to their marriage vows. They divorce and then re-marry and divorce again and re-marry. It is a tradition among movie makers, both men, and women, that marriage is not sacred, and it is rare indeed that a movie marriage is successful.³⁶

Conservative Protestants emphasized the issue of divorce far more regularly than more liberal Protestants. The liberal Christian periodical, *The Christian Century*, for example, called the Arbuckle case and the Pickford divorce “revolting” but the thrust of liberal Protestant concern over the movies was not about the personal lives of movie stars, but rather, censorship boards and federal oversight.³⁷ Liberal Protestants generally focused their concern about movies on film content which could be edited and censored. They considered the divorce rate in Hollywood troubling but irrelevant to their primary intention to “clean up” the movies. Conservative Protestants, on the other hand, expressed little interest in the films themselves, and mocked efforts to clean up the film industry. They pointed to failed marriages in Hollywood as evidence that the entire industry was irreparably depraved, permanently irredeemable. The fact that liberals focused more on content and conservatives focused more on the personalities behind the industry led each side to very different conclusions about Hollywood. In emphasizing the content of films themselves, liberal Protestants showed a sense of optimism and realism about the film industry. In contrast, emphasizing the inherent moral flaws of the filmmakers—something that could not be easily adjusted by snipping a few salacious

³⁶ Rice, *What Is Wrong with the Movies?* , 16.

³⁷ Eastman, *The Menace of the Movies*. For an examination of liberal Protestant reception of movies, see Moore, *Selling God*, 220-31.

minutes out of romantic comedy or action film—served conservative Protestants arguments that the film industry was hopelessly wicked.

As conservative Protestants would discover, the content of films did not always align with their rhetorical charges. For examples, they exposed the limits of their knowledge when they ventured to discuss divorce within movies. This is evident in Herbert J. Miles' *Movies and Morals*, the 1947 text that was the first Zondervan publication to analyze film content. Miles' method, described in chapter three, sampled one hundred films and then counted the number of immoral actions and behaviors. But his study came up short when he tried to condemn movies for their frequent presentation of divorce, when he found that just one out of the hundred films he surveyed portrayed a divorce. Miles begrudgingly admitted that pressure on Hollywood to clean up movies had had an impact on the topic of divorce in movies. However, the lack of substantive evidence had no impact on his conclusions. Instead he switched gears, and, despite his entire emphasis on content analysis, wrote: "Who can successfully deny that Hollywood's glorification of short courtships and quick divorces, *both on the screen and in private life*, for the past 25 years, is a large factor in explaining why the United States has the highest rate of divorce among nations?"³⁸ Despite his intention to focus solely on film content, Miles joined with the majority of conservative Protestants in arguing that the divorce among film stars corroded the American institution of marriage.

The prominent emphasis on divorce dominated in Conservative Protestants texts from the late 1920s to the mid-1950s. In 1929, the periodical *The King's Business* considered the "record of the marital experiences of its players" to be the "strongest

³⁸ Miles, *Movies and Morals*, 37. Italics added.

argument against the moving-picture industry.”³⁹ A Zondervan text from 1942 exclaimed that “divorces among the movie people are at the root of much of the nation’s epidemic of divorce.”⁴⁰ And Robert Sumner’s 1955 jeremiad, *Hollywood Cesspool*, dedicated its first chapter to Hollywood divorce. Sumner’s book, the last Zondervan title to implore the faithful to abstain from movie-going, considered Hollywood’s divorce statistics “one of the most serious sinister evils threatening America today.”⁴¹ In fact, his chapter on divorce was twice the length of his chapter on communism.

The fact that conservative Protestants focused extensively on divorce in their rhetoric about the film industry provides a useful adjustment to some of the scholarship about fundamentalism and the family. In her groundbreaking study of fundamentalist rhetoric about women in the early twentieth century, Betty A. DeBerg wrote that the issue of divorce remained prominent in the first two decades of the twentieth century. According to DeBerg, “The frequency with which the issue [divorce] was treated in the literature reached a high point after 1900 and began to decline after 1920.”⁴² DeBerg may be correct that divorce was not as prominent in fundamentalist journals after 1920, but I found that it remained a prominent topic (if not *the* prominent topic) in their criticism against Hollywood throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Scholars who have written about conservative Protestant attitudes toward women and families examined many of the same periodicals that I researched, but failed to recognize the

³⁹ Alva J. McClain, “Marriage and the Movies,” *The King’s Business* 20, no. 4 (1929): 166.

⁴⁰ Harding, *Movie Mad America*, 53.

⁴¹ Robert L. Sumner, *Hollywood Cesspool* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1955), 41.

⁴² Betty A. DeBerg, *Ungodly Women: Gender and the First Wave of American Fundamentalism*, New ed. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2000), 68.

extensive consideration of divorce in conservative Protestant writing about the American film industry.

Spreading Consumption

While conservative Protestants felt that film stars' divorces threatened the home, they also reacted to broader cultural trends. They blamed Hollywood generally—and actors particularly—for the public's newfound enthusiasm for consumer goods and services. To contextualize conservative Protestant anxiety about changes related to consumerism, it is important to appreciate how radically consumer culture altered American life in the early twentieth century. The first decades of the twentieth century saw the dramatic rise of commercial consumption, both for necessities and for luxuries. Accounting for inflation, cultural historian Gary Cross noted that from 1900 to 1929 spending on clothing increased 161 percent, housing increased 168 percent, spending on cars increased 322 percent and recreation spending increased 285 percent.⁴³ Americans became less hesitant to buy pricey items like furniture and automobiles on installment plans. What's more, Americans now considered some items necessities that they had earlier considered luxuries, such as refrigerators, automobiles, and even cigarettes. Cigarette sales doubled between 1911 and 1928 and barely dropped off during the Depression due to the increase in female smokers. Just as commercial leisure taught Americans how to be spectators, marketing and advertising taught Americans how to be consumers.

⁴³ Statistics from Gary S. Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 27, 69.

The transition to consumerism was largely due to modern advertising techniques which became an integral part of American life in the 1920s. In the nineteenth century, advertising emphasized the quality of the product being sold. By the twentieth century, advertising began to employ psychology to increase desire for brand-named products, to focus consumer tastes on new styles and trends. Billboard and magazine ads created associations between products and status, confidence, security and personal well-being. And modern salesmen and advertisers taught America to no longer regard thrift as virtuous.

This expansion of middle-class consumerism paralleled the increased prominence of Hollywood in the United States. And as with the divorce rate, conservative Protestants held Hollywood largely to blame for the nation's new consumer tendencies. It was not an altogether absurd correlation since movie stars became entwined with modern marketing and advertising. For example, from 1916 to 1921 Pompeian Skin Cream printed advertisements in the *Ladies' Home Journal* that included Mary Pickford. Lux soap also employed popular film actresses in their print ads, including Pickford, Joan Crawford, and Dorothy Lamour. And the actress Mary Fuller became the center of an advertising campaign for Coca-cola in 1915. Movie stars' names and faces were sold on everything from posters and calendars, to pillow tops and radiator caps.

It was not just that actors appeared on all manner of products but that their popularity was used to validate the rapidly expanding consumer industry. As Barbas described in *Movie Crazy*, "movie stars helped legitimate shopping as a means of self-improvement."⁴⁴ Besides using film stars to generate desire for new products, film

⁴⁴ Barbas, *Movie Crazy*, 53.

studios realized that their movies could be directly exploited to advertise clothing and other products. In the 1930s, studios began creating “tie-ups” where clothing and other items seen in movies became available in department stores. In 1939, Walt Disney alone offered over 2,000 products based on *Snow White* characters, including drinking glasses, soap, pencil sets, and clothing.⁴⁵

Additionally, stars flaunted their wealth and lifestyle in fan magazines with photos and articles about their mansions, automobiles, and wardrobes. During the 1910s when automobiles and gasoline were prohibitively expensive for most Americans, Hollywood fan magazines listed “motoring” as the most popular hobby among movie stars. Richard deCordova, in his study of early movie stars, commented: “In conspicuously displaying...success through material possessions, the star vividly demonstrated the idea that satisfaction was not to be found in work but in one’s activities away from work—in consumption and leisure.”⁴⁶

The closely entwined relationship between Hollywood, consumer culture, and leisure angered conservative Protestants. As they had done on the issue of divorce, they rarely considered the extent to which Hollywood reflected already pervasive cultural developments, instead holding the film industry responsible for cultural transformation regarding consumption, materialism, and leisure. Lester Sumrall lamented that “Hollywood’s money-mad mania has penetrated our entire economic world. She is rapidly converting our people into a horde of spendthrifts.”⁴⁷ In particular, conservative

⁴⁵ Margaret Farrand Thorp, *America at the Movies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1939), 108-19.

⁴⁶ DeCordova, *Picture Personalities*, 108.

⁴⁷ Sumrall, *Worshippers of the Silver Screen*, 61.

Protestants accused the film industry of encouraging the public to value luxury and leisure over more modest means and lifestyles. John Rice, directing his plea to parents, asked,

Do you suppose that when their movie heroes...are rich and ride about in imported cars and loll through the day at summer resorts and drink and dance the night away at their own sweet pleasure, that your boy or girl will be content to settle down to eight hours of hard labor a day, to wear ordinary clothes, to eat ordinary food, and be content with a steady round of moral, intelligent, quiet life? The answer is certainly, No!⁴⁸

And their ire only increased when stars promoted specific products that conservative Protestants denounced. Rice seemed nearly apoplectic when Greta Garbo, “with her most languorous smile announces that she would walk a mile for a Camel!”⁴⁹ Robert Sumner in *Hollywood Cesspool* also expressed outrage when actors promoted alcohol and cigarettes. He described a whiskey ad which included a prominent photo of Cesar Romero and asked, “What do you suppose is the reaction of our teen-age boys who have idolized Romero on the screen, when they read that?”⁵⁰

Evangelical rhetoric regarding movie stars and consumerism reflected a broader cultural shift regarding American’s relationship to work, leisure, corporations, and consumption. In the nineteenth century, evangelicals emphasized hard work, thrift, and self-denial. Nineteenth century admonitions against the stage emphasized that leisure pursuits such as the theater and card-playing stood at odds with one’s religious and civic responsibilities. This line of argument had been reflected in a sermon by the popular evangelist J. Wilbur Chapman, who encouraged his audience to give up theater, card

⁴⁸ Rice, *What Is Wrong with the Movies?* , 51.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 25.

⁵⁰ Sumner, *Hollywood Cesspool*, 84.

playing, and dance. Chapman focused little attention on the possible moral dangers of amusements, instead imploring his audience to appreciate that their faith required them to sacrifice worldly pleasure. This line of argument became less persuasive, and less prominent, in the modern century as American culture began to place more value on leisure, consumerism, and self-gratification. Evangelicals and fundamentalists recoiled as they saw movies guiding these cultural developments.

Producers and Anti-Semitism

The topic of money and the movies dominated conservative Protestant rhetoric about actors but conservatives also criticized studio executives for being motivated by greed. Although a digression from this chapter's focus on actors, it may be instructive to briefly consider the evangelical and fundamentalist critique of Hollywood's film producers at this point since it grew out of evangelical disdain for modern economic trends.

Put simply, conservative Protestants reviled "movie-makers," by which they meant studio executives and film producers. In private, Catholics and liberal Protestants also had choice words about film studio owners but in public they engaged with Hollywood's principle leaders in order to pressure them to clean up the movies.⁵¹ By contrast, evangelicals expressed open contempt. Rice felt that Hollywood was being run by "wicked, immoral, irresponsible people" who were "unfit to be the leaders, unfit to be teachers, unfit to be the examples, unfit to be entertainers or even the associates of our children and of ourselves."⁵²

⁵¹ Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies*.

⁵² Rice, *What Is Wrong with the Movies?* , 14.

Conservative Protestants found studio heads and film producers contemptible for one reason—greed. Hollywood did not aim to instruct or to inform with its movies, conservative Protestants argued. Rather, they insisted that studios’ economic interests motivated every decision regardless of the consequences. To many evangelicals, the monetary motivations of the film industry were self-condemning. Rice put it this plainly when he wrote, “Greed! *Greed!* GREED! And that itself ought to be enough to make intelligent and moral people shun the moving picture industry as a curse.”⁵³

Additionally, many evangelicals felt that Hollywood’s economic interests explained why the film industry produced such immoral products. Paul S. Rees’ *Movies and the Conscientious Christian* considered the film industry as “a *huge game of greed*...that undoubtedly accounts for the socially unwholesome and morally damaging products.”⁵⁴

The charge that Hollywood was “motivated by greed” requires an appreciation of conservative Protestant attitudes toward capitalism and wealth during this period. Historically, conservative Protestants had been ambivalent about wealth. On the one hand, they did not consider money inherently sinful. After all, they needed capital to expand the reach of the church. Moreover, most believed that once one’s economic obligations to church and family were satisfied, individuals had a right to basic comforts and luxuries. At the same time they considered wealth potentially detrimental and they often suspected affluence a sign of corruption.⁵⁵ Conservative Protestant critics of the

⁵³ Ibid., 32. Formatting in original.

⁵⁴ Rees, *Movies and the Conscientious Christian*, 14. Italics in original.

⁵⁵ Gary Scott Smith, “Evangelicals Confront Corporate Capitalism: Advertising, Consumerism, Stewardship, and Spirituality, 1880-1930,” in *More Money, More Ministry: Money and Evangelicals in Recent North American History*, ed. Larry Eskridge and Mark A. Noll (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000).

film industry pointed to numerous examples of Hollywood excess as evidence of the industry's lax morality.⁵⁶ They judged the wealthy not by their incomes but by their motivations. In other words, the question was not whether one had money but whether one coveted money.

In their denunciations of Hollywood's greed, conservative Protestants emphasized that the flaw was the industry's incessant desire for wealth. Rice considered greed "the parent sin, the foundation of all kinds of sin."⁵⁷ And according to Lester F. Sumrall, film producers craved money to such an extent that they were indifferent to the impact of their films. He wrote that

It is of no importance [to Hollywood] if our young generation becomes a mass of sex-maniacs, rotten with social disease. They would only mock if every place of worship in the land were closed, locked, and barred, or, better still, made into a picture house. What they incessantly seek for is a BOOM IN THE BOX OFFICE. They are intoxicated with "gold brew." Our first accusation against the film world is that they are MONEY MAD.⁵⁸

Such fervent emphasis on the greed of the studio owners raises questions about conservative Protestant anti-Semitism. In my analysis of periodicals, books, pamphlets and sermons, only a small portion contained explicit anti-Jewish statements. The least ambiguous was Lester Sumrall's 1942 text, *Worshippers of the Silver Screen*, which reminded his readers that the "overwhelming majority" of Hollywood's studios were run by "descendants of Jacob" whose "brethren in Europe...are being divinely purged at present owing to their complete disregard of the religion of their fathers, of God and of

⁵⁶ See, for example, Gilbert, *Hell over Hollywood*, 16-17. Miles, *Movies and Morals*, 84-86.

⁵⁷ Rice, *What Is Wrong with the Movies?*, 31.

⁵⁸ Sumrall, *Worshippers of the Silver Screen*, 17. Capitalization format in original.

their fellow-man.”⁵⁹ Taken together with his supposition that the studio owners “issue forth the abundance of their evil upon the innocent but injudicious masses,” Sumrall left his readers an impression of unscrupulous Jewish businessmen undermining the moral fabric of the nation.⁶⁰

However, such overt indictments were atypical. Conservative Protestantism has always been a broad movement that accommodates a mosaic of religious and cultural attitudes. No single leader, church, journal, or seminary could represent or speak for the whole. Thus, while Sumrall’s text represented the most demonstrable example of anti-Jewish sentiments that arose in my research, one must weigh counter-examples such as Edward Vander Jagt’s *Going with the Wind*, published with Zondervan the same year of Sumrall’s *Worshippers*. Even in his condemnation of the film industry Vander Jagt expressed grief over the “terrible persecutions of Jews and saints” in lands conquered by Russia and Germany.”⁶¹

Among the primary sources I examined, Jewish “ownership” of Hollywood was mentioned in several instances, but evangelicals were more emphatic that Hollywood was being controlled by outsiders who did not respect Christian values and, furthermore, were a threat to American moral standards. The emphasis, in other words, was not that the film industry was run by Jews, but rather, that it was run by non-Christians. The observation that movie-makers were non-Christian brought to mind notions of unwelcome outsiders threatening the moral values of insiders. Some of this could be

⁵⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 24.

⁶¹ Vander Jagt, “Going with the Wind, 26-27

interpreted as anti-Jewish, but most texts were vague, perhaps purposefully so. For example, Dan Gilbert's *Hell over Hollywood* made a point of listing Hollywood's wealthiest producers and their nations of origin. He identified many of the men, with surnames such as Warner, Rubin, Katz, Cohn, Goldwyn, and Mayer as Russian, Rumanian, Polish, and Hungarian. These eastern European names would have stood out to many Americans as identifiably Jewish, though Gilbert had been more overtly concerned with Hollywood's "communist leanings."⁶² Other texts were even more vague in describing movie-makers as un-American, or even anti-American outsiders, such as Robert Campbell's *Modern Evils* (1933). Campbell reported to his readers that "eighty per cent of the holdings of the moving picture industry is owned by a class of people who do not believe in the Lord's Day, nor accept Christianity."⁶³ This charge against Hollywood "outsiders" implied a threat to America. Miles' *Movies and Morals* maintained that "this industry is in evil hands and is being used to gradually paralyze and destroy the tested moral and spiritual principles that have been the foundation of our nation's liberty, democracy, and Christian progress."⁶⁴ It is not clear exactly how to interpret these statements. Were conservative Protestants primarily reacting to studios as Jewish, as outsiders, as communists, as all three?

My reading is that the Jewishness of studio executives was not a central concern of conservative Protestants. On the fundamentalist leader Gerald B. Winrod, historian Steven Alan Carr wrote that Winrod "feared movies, more than Jewish control over

⁶² Gilbert, *Hell over Hollywood*, 13.

⁶³ Robert C. Campbell, *Modern Evils* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1933), 54-55.

⁶⁴ Miles, *Movies and Morals*, 14.

them.”⁶⁵ I find this description apt for the majority of materials I examined from the 1910s to the 1950s. Though several made anti-Jewish insinuations, most condemned Hollywood for what they deemed immoral motivations. Moreover, evangelical anti-Jewish attitudes were often less severe than Catholic and moderate Protestant clergy during the same period.⁶⁶ A thorough consideration of conservative Protestant attitudes toward Judaism extends beyond the scope of this project, but the range of texts I examined did not present a uniform or prominent anti-Jewish bias.

Conclusion

This chapter examines the continuities and the permutations in Christian rhetoric against actors from the stage to the screen. For centuries, many Christians have condemned stage performers, decrying acting as dishonest and deceitful. Many had also long considered acting morally dangerous to the performer, contending that performing sinful acts ultimately depraved the performer. As movie stars came to saturate American culture as early as the 1910s, conservative Protestants applied these arguments even as they expanded and intensified their condemnation against actors. Where they had once argued that the dangers of acting applied primarily to the performer himself, they came to interpret film stars as a threat to all of America. Conservative Protestants identified the prevalence of divorce among movie stars as a threat to the institution of marriage and they held movie stars responsible for the rise of modern consumer habits, which seemed

⁶⁵ Steven Alan Carr, *Hollywood and Anti-Semitism: A Cultural History up to World War II*, Cambridge Studies in the History of Mass Communications (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 117.

⁶⁶ On Catholic anti-Semitism and Hollywood, see Carr, 113-115, 127-131; on conservative Protestant anti-Semitism and Hollywood, see Carr, 115-118; on moderate Protestant anti-Semitism and Hollywood, see Carr, 126-127.

like a rebuff to nineteenth century Protestant notions of frugality. Conservative Protestantism during the first half of the twentieth century found itself at variance with some of the distinguishing trends of American life. As they doubted their ability to alter the broader culture, they insisted on abstention from movies in an effort to ensure that the broader culture would not alter them.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

It isn't often that I find myself speaking favorably about a modern movie, but there is a film being released this month that I believe is among the most powerful and important ever made. I'm talking about *The Passion of the Christ*, a dramatic recounting of our Savior's final hours on earth, including His crucifixion and resurrection.

—James C. Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family
(February 2004)

Hollywood is controlled by secular Jews who hate Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular. It's not a secret, OK? And I'm not afraid to say it. That's why they hate this movie. It's about Jesus Christ, and it's about truth. It's about the messiah.

Hollywood likes anal sex. They like to see the public square without nativity scenes. I like families. I like children. They like abortions. I believe in traditional values and restraint. They believe in libertinism. We have nothing in common. But you know what? The culture war has been ongoing for a long time. Their side has lost.

—Bill Donahue, president of the Catholic League
for Civil and Religious Rights (December 2004)

Introduction

In chapter two when tracing the history of Christian antagonism toward the stage, I referenced *Popular Amusements* written in 1870 by the Methodist minister Jonathan Townley Crane. *Popular Amusements* expressed Crane's condemnation of the theatrical stage but the book hardly stopped there. Subsequent chapters denounced horse-racing, baseball, dancing, cards, chess, billiards, novel-reading, and other popular pastimes of the late-nineteenth century. On novels, Crane lamented that young people failed to educate themselves by reading history, the Bible, or science and instead engrossed themselves

with insubstantial fictions. He wrote wistfully of his desire to authorize an iron-clad rule for Methodists, which he stated in capital letters: "TOTAL ABSTINENCE FROM NOVEL-READING HENCEFORTH AND FOREVER."¹ Like patrons of the stage, Crane hoped to encourage fans of popular fiction to discard this amusement for more edifying fare. In this context, then, it is worth noting that Jonathan Crane was the father of the American novelist Stephen Crane. I have yet to determine how the Methodist clergyman felt about his son's career but it is not difficult to imagine a drama between parent and child more thrilling than *The Red Badge of Courage*.²

Other than an example of youthful rebelliousness, the story of Jonathan and Stephen Crane foreshadows in some ways the transition that occurred within conservative Protestantism during the second half of the twentieth century. What had been so adamantly expressed by the first generation did not hold the same significance for the second. In this conclusion, I provide a brief sketch of how conservative Protestant attitudes toward movies shifted over time. But prior to offering an outline of future work, I will use this conclusion to look back over this project to reiterate my arguments and explain what I hoped to accomplish in this dissertation. Then I will look deeper into this dissertation at some of the questions raised by my research that call for further scrutiny and reflection. And finally, I close by looking forward and offering a brief account of what happened during the second half of the twentieth century when conservative Protestant hostility toward commercial cinema gradually dissolved.

¹ Crane, *Popular Amusements*, 152.

² Stephen Crane's writings also prominently featured amusement parks and other entertainment venues. For scholarly consideration of Stephen Crane's interest in leisure that does not, alas, consider the author's religious upbringing, see Christopher P. Wilson, "The Pace of Youth: Stephen Crane's Rhetoric of Amusement," *The Journal of American Culture* 6, no. 2 (1983).

Looking Back

I began by asserting that historians of American religion have not adequately considered the voluminous primary materials by conservative Protestants declaring and justifying their abstention from popular cinema between 1915 and 1955. To be sure, scholars of evangelicalism and fundamentalism have made passing reference to this topic, folding conservative Protestant avoidance of movie theaters into a longer inventory of conservative cultural asceticism. For example, in his history of the Brethren in Christ, Carlton O. Wittlinger wrote that “the Brethren regarded the early motion picture as a menace and classified it with games of chance, the dance, the theater, horse-racing and ‘all other vain amusements.’”³ And sociologist Christian Smith noted of early twentieth century fundamentalism:

What separated God’s faithful remnant from the degenerate—besides doctrinal purity, of course—became simply that true Christians did not dance, smoke cigarettes, chew tobacco, drink alcohol, gamble, wear makeup, ‘bob’ their hair, attend the theater, play billiards or cards, or wear immodest clothing.⁴

While it is true that conservative Protestants of the early twentieth century decried various social trends and leisure activities including dancing and card playing, many scholars of twentieth century evangelicalism and fundamentalism have failed to note the intensity with which conservative Protestants made their case against the commercial film industry as well as the prominence of this theme in sermons, pamphlets, periodicals, books, denominational synods and manuals, and conservative Protestant colleges. This present research project began with the assumption that in order to provide a more comprehensive and multifaceted account of religion, historians must calibrate their

³ Wittlinger, *Quest for Piety and Obedience: The Story of the Brethren in Christ*, 344.

⁴ Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, 9.

analysis to focus on the debates our subjects of inquiry considered crucially important. By giving greater consideration to a topic that conservative Protestants deemed primary to their community, I hoped to provide a richer picture of this dominant religious movement over the course of half of the twentieth century.

After establishing why this topic deserved greater scrutiny, I put forward my central argument that conservative Protestant aversion to cinema was fed by two streams. The first was a winding river encompassing a history of anti-theatrical prejudice that began with the writings of early church fathers, overflowed among seventeenth century Puritans and Anglicans, and poured forth through nineteenth century evangelical revivalists. Hundreds of years of Christian antagonism to the theatrical stage primed twentieth-century conservative Protestants to suspect any medium resembling the theatrical stage, which the commercial film industry certainly did. The second stream feeding the conservative Protestant bias against cinema was narrower but more tumultuous: conservative Protestants tied the commercial film industry to nearly all of the trends of cultural modernity that they reviled. They blamed movies for the declining influence of religious authority, for loosening standards of courtship and marriage, for encouraging public enthusiasm for leisure and entertainment, and for inaugurating the era of modern consumerism. My central argument has been that conservative Protestant jeremiads regarding the movies from 1915 to 1955 must be understood as a combination of ancient biases and modern cultural tensions.

In addition, I intended this work to address several topics of debate among scholars of evangelicalism and fundamentalism. For one, my work intersects with a debate among scholars of Protestant history regarding the utility of the terms

“evangelical” and “fundamentalist.” In my introductory chapter, I noted that Joel Carpenter expressed trepidation about the looseness with which scholars have used the term “fundamentalist.” Carpenter warned that

Labeling movements, sects, and traditions such as the pentecostals [sic], Mennonites, Seventh-day Adventists, Missouri Synod Lutherans, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Churches of Christ, black Baptists, Mormons, Southern Baptists, and holiness Wesleyans as fundamentalists belittles their great diversity and violates their unique identities.⁵

I am generally sympathetic to Carpenter’s concern that historians should take care to discriminate the distinctive aspects of denominations and movements. Nevertheless, in this project I hoped to prove that historians can fail to identify overlapping practices across a broad body of conservative Protestants when they narrow their analysis to focus on particular denominations. Clearly, Mennonites, Southern Baptists, Nazarenes, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Pentecostals diverge in many substantial ways. But it is not insignificant, I argue, that leaders from each of these denominations voiced similar arguments for avoiding movie theaters into the second half of the twentieth century.

Additionally, I intended this work to complicate usefully an arbitrary distinction that some historians have proposed between religious fundamentalism and cultural fundamentalism. An example of this tendency is in George Marsden’s *Fundamentalism and Culture*, a touchstone for scholars of fundamentalism since its publication in 1980. Marsden wrote that “it might be supposed that fundamentalism was *primarily* a response to social and political conditions. It was not. First of all it was what its proponents most often said it was—a response to the spread of what was perceived as false doctrine.”⁶ My

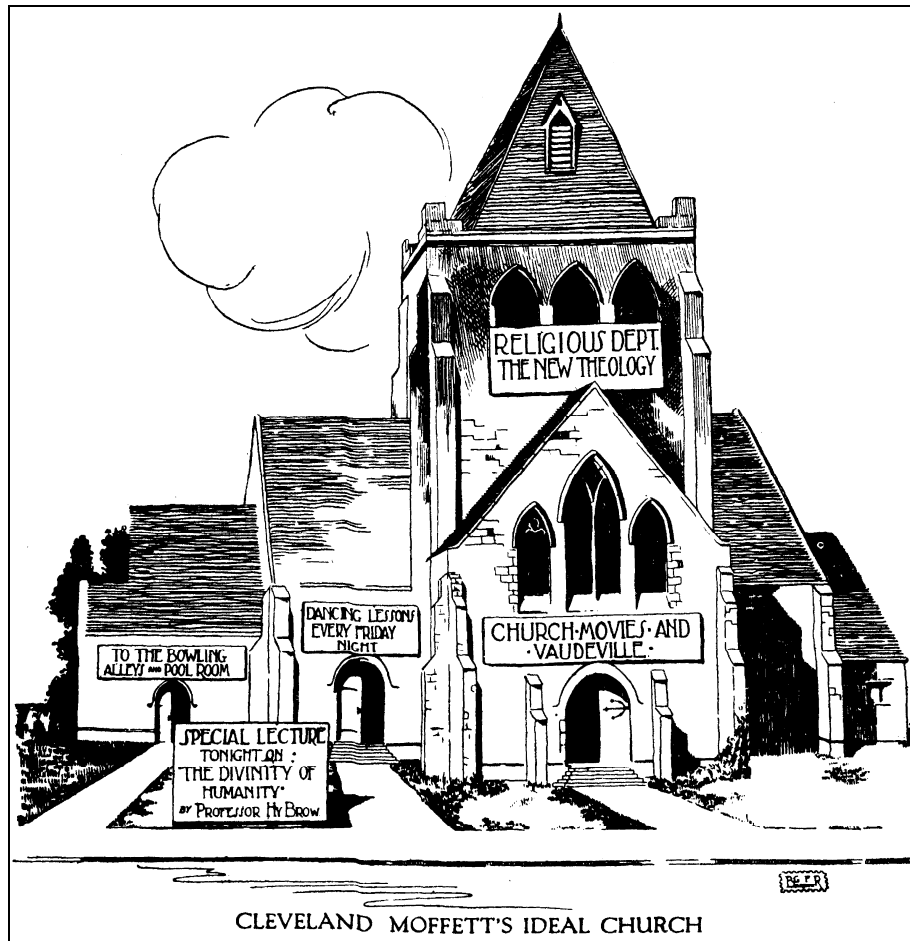
⁵ Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism*, 4.

⁶ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 159. Italics in original.

present work takes issue with Marsden's desire to set a barrier between fundamentalism as a religious movement and fundamentalism as a cultural movement. Marsden considered the fundamentalist reaction to American culture after World War I of secondary importance, insisting that "cultural dimensions...should not obscure the fact that for the fundamentalists the fundamental issues were theological."⁷ But I argue herein that scholars have failed to recognize the prominence of leisure broadly, and the movies particularly, among conservative Protestants of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The volume of material generated by a broad body of conservative Protestants from 1915 to 1955 that insisted on abstention from movie-going indicates that conservative Protestants did not divide their theological positions and their cultural positions as Marsden indicates.

In a final illustration to make this point, I refer the reader to figure 1 below, published in *The King's Business* in 1919. The illustration, "Cleveland Moffett's Ideal Church," mocked liberal Protestantism by invoking Cleveland Moffett, a liberal Protestant clergyman of the period. The top of the illustration indicates that the liberal church has become a "department" of "the new theology." But the three doorways leading inside the church advertise bowling alleys, a pool room, dancing, movies, and vaudeville. Despite the fact that Marsden aimed to bifurcate fundamentalist theology and fundamentalist reactions to modernity, this illustration indicates that fundamentalists themselves were not so insistent on drawing distinctions between theological modernism and cultural modernism.

⁷ Ibid., 159-60.



CLEVELAND MOFFETT'S IDEAL CHURCH

Illustration 1: *The King's Business*, 1919

Moreover, while the illustration originally appeared in *The King's Business* in 1919, I first came across it when Marsden himself reprinted it in *Fundamentalism and Culture*. The fact that Marsden reproduced this image but overlooked its central point reveals the extent to which many excellent historians have failed to appreciate how closely conservative Protestants blended and denounced both modern theology and modern entertainments. I argue—gesturing to this illustration from *The King's Business* and the voluminous primary material referenced in this dissertation—that fundamentalists and a broader coalition of conservative Protestants recognized no distinction between their theological battles and their cultural ones.

Lastly, I intend my work to encourage greater consideration of how religious bodies draw on their religious community and worldview to guide their relationship with modern forms of popular culture. The ample scholarship on evangelicalism and fundamentalism of the twentieth century has explored theology, politics, science, economics, race, and gender, among other topics. During the last thirty years scholars have also produced illuminating studies of evangelical media production, including print, radio, and television. But much of this scholarship has failed to appreciate the fact that religions are comprised of more media consumers than media producers. Much of the scholarship on religion and media has focused great attention on Catholic filmmakers and Mormon authors, but historians know far less about the films Catholics watch or the novels Mormons read. I would like to see more cultural approaches to the study of religion that consider how religious identity, community, and worldview impact one's consumption and interpretation of popular culture and media.

My research on conservative Protestantism and movie-going reflects a growing interest in religious studies scholarship focused on lived religion and religious practice as introduced in *Lived Religion: Toward a History of Practice*, edited by David Hall, and continued in *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630-1965* edited by Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri.⁸ But despite David Hall's claim that lived religion "goes its own way...in breaking with the distinction between high and low that seems inevitably to recur in studies of popular religion," much of the emphasis among scholars of lived religion and religious practice continues to

⁸ David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997). Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh Eric Schmidt, and Mark R. Valeri, eds., *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630-1965* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

divide religious and secular practices. By comparison, my work attempts to consider how religion is practiced in a broader cultural milieu. Put another way, the historians and ethnographers in *Lived Religion* and *Practicing Protestants* often focus on how lay individuals and communities *make* religion, emphasizing religious practices such as baptism, burial rites, missions, reading devotions and singing hymns. While inspired by these sources, my work asks how individuals and communities *use* religion to make choices about their behaviors as consumers and as interpreters of media.

Looking Deeper

In my original vision for this project, I proposed to trace the history of conservative Protestant engagement with mainstream cinema and their history of film production spanning the twentieth century. As my research developed, the topic became increasingly narrow so that I came to focus on just one aspect of the original project, the conservative Protestant abstention from commercial cinema during the first half of the century. After narrowing the topic so significantly I have found that some issues raised in this body beg for further consideration.

The most prominent issue needing greater deliberation is the gap between what conservative Protestants *wrote* about the movies and what they *did*. The quantity of primary materials demanding that Christians avoid the movies does not adequately prove that the laity complied. On the contrary, if conservative Protestants did not patronize movies, would church leaders have so often insisted on abstention? Perhaps the copious and unrelenting calls for abstention should be interpreted as evidence that those in the pews disregarded their pastors' demands, which then provoked greater consternation.

It would certainly be a mistake to conclude that all conservative Protestants abstained from movie-going and I have not located evidence proving that even a majority did. Nevertheless, it is fair to state that the research presented herein identified a posture not uncommon among many conservative Protestants during the first half of the twentieth century. Many of the Zondervan materials, for example, enjoyed sales in the tens of thousands and some were reprinted for several years. A 1951 advertisement by Zondervan reported printing over 10,000 copies of John R. Rice's *What's Wrong with the Movies?* and twice that many for Paul S. Rees' *Movies and the Conscientious Christian*.⁹ And these are just two of seventeen books Zondervan published between 1936 and 1955 that aggressively warned against movie-going. Other evidence, such as the obligation to abstain from movie-going at Christian colleges and the formal denominational policies of the Nazarenes and the Reformed Church provide reasonable evidence that many conservative Protestants across the country did avoid movie houses beginning in the 1910s and 1920s.

The fact that so much of the published material was consistently one-sided up until 1955 also indicates that there was not a large scale call to soften their stance on movies until mid-century. In my research I found only one conservative Protestant prior to the 1950s who made a direct plea to moderate the established position, and this text raises additional questions that I hope to explore in further iterations of this research project. In June 1925, the *Moody Monthly* published a letter to the editor, titled "She Defends Some of the Movies." In the letter, Sarah E. Davison countered arguments from the *Moody Monthly* that faithful Christians need avoid all commercial cinema. Davison

⁹ The Zondervan ad is on the back cover of Dorothy Haskin's *Behind the Scenes of Hollywood* (1951).

criticized those who wrote disparagingly of “non-Christians” in the film industry and countered that many “non-Christian Jews” in Hollywood were “fine honest citizens, loyal to the country and honest in their convictions of right and wrong.” Davison also defended several prominent movie stars whom she mentioned by name: Lillian Gish, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks. Though not Christian role models, she conceded, such performers made “the best, cleanest, most high educational, and wholesome pictures.” Lastly, Davison noted that the motion picture industry did produce “wholesome, clean” pictures but would not continue to do so if “the public *failed to come and see them*.”¹⁰

“She Defends Some of the Movies” reveals that some conservative Protestants desired a less radical stance toward movies than many of the leaders of the movement at the time. Davison refused to condemn the entire film industry and encouraged conservative Protestants to actively engage in the reform of commercial cinema. Christians could influence the products of Hollywood, Davison insisted, only if they became more discerning consumers. Her position echoed that of the moderate Protestant periodical *Christian Herald* and the liberal *Christian Century* but was rarely published within conservative Protestantism.

Evidently, Davison persuaded few readers of the *Moody Monthly*. In the following issue, editors published two responses to “She Defends Some of the Movies,” both affirming the more-familiar separatist stance among conservative Protestants and decrying Davison’s moral laxity. The first respondent waved away all defenses of cinema, contending that “No agency today is doing more to chill spiritual warmth in

¹⁰ Sarah E. Davison, “She Defends Some of the Movies,” *Moody Bible Institute Monthly* XXV, no. 10 (1925): 460-61.

older hearts and to make shipwreck with the young than the moving picture screen.” The second letter-writer asked facetiously, “Does Sarah E. Davidson [sic] think crime is induced or suppressed in the minds of youth by the movies, and does she know if the movie is attended by the great soul-winners of our land?”¹¹ The *Moody Monthly* continued to publish letters and editorials about commercial cinema in the 1920s and 1930s but their position toward Hollywood only grew more hostile in the following decade.

Yet Davison’s letter raises several themes useful for consideration as I further develop this project. First, her lone letter provides a suggestion of a wider range of film responses among conservative Protestants than was represented in the journals and publishing houses that I researched. Perhaps further broadening the scope of my source material might provide evidence of a debate within conservative Protestantism regarding movie-going, as opposed to a debate primarily between conservative and liberal Protestants.

In a similar vein, much of this dissertation portrayed Protestant attitudes toward movie-going as if there were only two dichotomous positions—liberal Protestants went to movies and conservatives did not. I was disinclined to identify a range of positions because of my primary intention to identify and define a unifying posture spread across conservative Protestantism. But the final result, I fear, draws too stark a contrast. In reality, Protestant reactions toward commercial cinema should be mapped on a scale, from total abstention on one side to indiscriminate devotee on the other. In between,

¹¹ E. L. Duprey and J. Ray Spiller, "More About the Movies," *Moody Bible Institute Monthly* XXV, no. 11 (1925): 503.

Protestants established for themselves a range of methods to identify what made a film acceptable viewing.

Lastly, within the debates between conservative Protestants and the continuum of possible reactions, the letter by Sarah Davison raises questions about what role gender played in conservative Protestant attitudes toward commercial cinema. It seems not incidental that the editors of the *Moody Monthly* headlined Davison's letter, "*She Defends Some of the Movies.*" Though I was not able to satisfactorily explore the role of gender and movie-going among conservative Protestants, there is reason to suspect that issues of gender were relevant to this story. For one thing, women and children comprised the majority of movie-goers in the early decades of cinema, raising the possibility that conservative Protestant women might have had a different perspective on patronizing movie theaters from the one explicated in my work. Secondly, the primary materials I examined provided glimpses into the gendered tone of conservative Protestant rhetoric. For example, in *Hell Over Hollywood* Dan Gilbert relayed his experience at President Roosevelt's 1937 inaugural address. Film stars Jean Harlow and Robert Taylor joined the crowds to hear the speech but to Gilbert's amazement, Harlow and Taylor's presence wholly overshadowed Roosevelt's speech. As Gilbert described it,

For every one person who got a stiff neck as a result of craning it for a look at the President, a hundred men developed a stiff neck from trying to catch a glimpse of Jean Harlow, and a thousand or more women threw their necks completely out of joint in a frantic endeavor to feast their eyes upon Robert Taylor.¹²

Gilbert's description of this event raised a criticism common in conservative Protestant rhetoric toward Hollywood that no one, not even Presidents, could compete with movie stars for the rapt attention of the public. But Gilbert's observation is also worth noting

¹² Gilbert, *Hell over Hollywood*, 9.

for its gendered distinctions. Men became “stiff” in glimpsing Harlow while women convulsed frantically when “feasting” on Taylor. For male and female movie fans, Gilbert’s writing calls to mind sexual frenzy, but female fans responded ten times more enthusiastically than male fans. Davison’s letter to the *Moody Monthly* and Gilbert’s description of movie fans leads me to conclude that greater attention should be paid to the gendering of conservative Protestant rhetoric.

Looking Forward

I conclude by extending the narrative beyond 1955 and, like a good Hollywood blockbuster, hinting of the sequel. A thorough examination of conservative Protestant engagement with popular cinema during the second half of the century demands a thorough historical study. For my immediate purposes, this brief sketch highlights how contentious the issue of movies continued to be. The rhetoric about movies generated and widely disseminated during the first half of the century cast a long shadow on the second half of the century.

The year 1955 marked a period of transition for conservative Protestant attitudes toward commercial cinema. This was the year that Zondervan published *Hollywood Cesspool*, which, at 284 pages, was the longest text in the publisher’s library of jeremiads damning Hollywood. But *Cesspool* was also the last of its kind. That same year, Zondervan published Dorothy C. Haskin’s *Twice-Born Stars You Would Like to Know* and J. Edwin Orr’s *The Inside Story of the Hollywood Christian Group*. While *Cesspool* indicates that some mid-century conservative Protestants took this moment to retrench, the books by Haskin and Orr reveal that a number of evangelicals had begun to reconsider the mantra of absolute abstinence from movies.

Significantly, *Twice-Born Stars* was Haskin's second book with Zondervan. Haskin, a Presbyterian and graduate of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, published a book four years earlier that provided a scandalous "behind the scenes look" at Hollywood from the author's personal experience as a professional film actress for eighteen years. In that 1951 book, entitled *Behind the Scenes in Hollywood*, Haskin's portrayal of Hollywood aligned closely with the rhetoric of so many conservative Protestants during the previous three decades. *Behind the Scenes* condemned the ubiquity of divorce in Hollywood, highlighted the film industry's motivation to accumulate wealth, and offered scandalous anecdotes of drunken parties and the dangers to young women sucked "into a life of sin."¹³ In her conclusion, Haskin, like Rice and others, ridiculed censorship organizations for attempting to clean up the movies. She insists that it is not possible for potential Christian movie-goers to successfully discern between appropriate and inappropriate movies, and insisted that "*the movies have no place in a Christian's life.*"¹⁴

It is not clear, based on *Behind the Scenes in Hollywood*, what motivated Haskin to write a very different book four years later. Perhaps she realized that evangelicals of that day, like Stephen Crane, rejected the austerity of the previous generation. Perhaps she had a private epiphany. Whatever the case, Haskin returned to the topic of Hollywood in 1955 with a very different narrative. In *Twice-Born Stars You Would like to Know*, Haskin offered brief biographies of Hollywood actors she considered models of Christian living. *Twice-Born Stars* included approving narratives of, among others, Bill Carle, Dale Evans, and Roy Rodgers, "the star who rides for the lord." On Dale Evans

¹³ Haskin, *Behind the Scenes in Hollywood*, 73.

¹⁴ Ibid.

and Roy Rodgers, Haskin noted the couple's association with the Hollywood Christian Group, an organization which J. Edwin Orr would explore in greater detail.

Like Haskin's *Twice-Born Stars*, Orr's *Hollywood Christian Group*, published in 1955, provided a history of this organization of Christians living and working in Hollywood and actively witnessing to their colleagues in the film industry. In the introduction, Tim Spencer, the president of the Hollywood Christian Group, explained why he felt that missions to Hollywood should be a priority. Spenser contrasted evangelicalism in Africa with evangelism in Hollywood, explaining that

When a native in Africa is converted, God is pleased...the angels rejoice...and his family and community is influenced by his transformed life; but when persons in the entertainment industry of Hollywood are converted the entire world is influenced by their transformed lives, thereby bringing salvation to others, and honor and glory to our Lord, Jesus Christ!¹⁵

Behind the Scenes in Hollywood and *The Inside Story of the Hollywood Christian Group* indicates that a significant change took place at mid-century regarding conservative Protestant attitudes toward Hollywood. This transition had roots in a moderate evangelical movement that rejected the fundamentalist call for religious and cultural separatism. These moderate evangelicals wanted instead to have a greater public voice and, led by figures such as Billy Graham, yearned to engage with the political and cultural issues of the day. Beginning in the 1950s and accelerating in the 1960s and 1970s, the walls that an earlier generation of conservative Protestants had built between the church and the movie theater began to come down. New church doctrines and institutional changes began to reflect this newfound engagement with movies in the 1950s and 1960s.

¹⁵ J. Edwin Orr, *The inside Story of the Hollywood Christian Group* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1955).

In 1951, a Christian Reformed Church synod revisited the question about movie attendance despite their call for abstention in 1928. According to historian William Romanowski, the 1951 synod debated the issue of movie-going for an entire day and ultimately produced a contradictory statement that affirmed the early 1928 boycott but simultaneously turned the issue of movie attendance over to the discernment of individual church members. A year later the leadership of the Reformed Church formally withdrew the 1928 ban and encouraged church members to “engage in a responsible critique of the film arts.”¹⁶ However, it may have taken some church members some time to warm to the new stance. According to Romanowski, the first film to bring Christian Reformed members into the theaters in large numbers was *The Sound of Music* in 1965.

The history of Mennonite movie-going is complicated by the variety of branches within the Mennonite church. According to William M. Gering’s thesis, *Mennonite Attitudes toward Theatrical Productions*, some Mennonite conferences passed rules banning movie attendance in the 1910s and 1920s while others never took a position on commercial cinema. Yet even within this diverse body, there is evidence that the hardliner’s position began to dwindle at mid-century. Gering noted that the Goshen College, a Mennonite liberal arts school, lifted their policy forbidding students to attend movies in 1957.¹⁷

By the 1960s conservative Protestantism had split on movie-going. Some individuals even seemed split between themselves, a point demonstrated in the 1964 book *Should Christians Attend the Movies?* by the Pentecostal revivalist Gordon Lindsay.

¹⁶ Romanowski, "John Calvin Meets the Creature from the Black Lagoon: The Christian Reformed Church and the Movies 1928-1966," 60.

¹⁷ William M. Gering, "Mennonite Attitudes toward Theatrical Enterprises" (Indiana University, 1961), 72.

Lindsay's argument that "a Christian cannot go to a movie theater even to see a good film" harmonized with conservative Protestants from the first half of the century. But in his book Lindsay approvingly reprinted a column by Billy Graham that contradicted Lindsay's own argument. Graham's column "wholeheartedly" recommended certain "wholesome and inspirational films" such as "Walt Disney productions" and encouraged Christian patrons to be discerning in their movie-going habits. Lindsay overlooked the gap between his position and Graham's and continued to insist that Christians abstain from all movies, even arguing that "the alleged good in the movies is more than offset by the evil."¹⁸ One wonders what a reader of *Should Christians Attend the Movies?* would have taken away from this incongruous exercise.

Nevertheless, Graham's call for discernment among Christian movie-goers gained momentum among mid-century conservative Protestant leaders. Wheaton College, a flagship evangelical liberal arts college, debated its posture against movie-going throughout the 1950s. Students had been signing pledge cards since 1927 promising to abstain from movie-going. (Prior to 1927, the pledge card mentioned "theaters" but not movies specifically.) Although some editorials began to appear in the student newspaper in the 1950s encouraging the administration to reconsider the policy against movie-going, the ban remained in effect through the 1950s and most of the 1960s. Then, during the 1966-1967 school year, Wheaton's Standards of Conduct committee reconsidered the student pledge. As one committee member put it, "The problem of movies and theatres on the Pledge is the major issue that the committee will be facing." After producing questionnaires for students and faculty regarding the issue of movie and theater-going,

¹⁸ Lindsay, *Should Christians Attend the Movies?*, 23, 25. As a sign of its longevity, Lindsay also quoted Rice's *What is Wrong with the Movies?* which had first been published twenty-six years earlier.

and discussing the issue for months with faculty and administration, one member of the committee, Mark Noll, proposed rewriting the pledge. Noll, who would later become a prominent scholar of American evangelicalism, proposed that Wheaton's position on film state: "The College...expects the students to exercise Christian discretion and restraint in the choice of entertainment including television, radio, movies, and the theater." In the Wheaton College catalog for 1968-1969, the updated statement of the Standards of Conduct matched Noll's proposal to the word. Nearly eighty years after the invention of moving pictures, Wheaton College lifted its ban on movie-going for students and faculty.¹⁹

By the 1970s, the flagship evangelical periodical *Christianity Today* commenced publishing film reviews of popular commercial films such as "The Exorcist," "Star Wars," and "Superman." Throughout the decade reviewers wrestled with how to write a "Christian film review." Conservative Protestants found that while they considered an absolute ban on movie-going excessive and unrealistic, this new call to "exercise Christian discretion" introduced new challenges. What did it mean, after all, to watch "Star Wars" as a Christian? Happily for many conservative Protestants, some choices seemed easier than others. In 1982, evangelicals poured into movie theaters in enthusiastic support of that year's academy-award winner for best picture, "Chariots of Fire." Another evangelical periodical reported at the time that the film "attracted evangelicals to commercial theaters in unprecedented numbers."²⁰

¹⁹ "Student Development," in *R.G. 3.4.0.1 Stu. Dev.* (Chicago: Wheaton College, 1966-1968).

²⁰ Anne Henderson-Hart, "What Makes a Film Christian?," *Eternity* (1982): 19.

Still, some pockets of conservative Protestantism continued to insist on abstention from the movies. But what had been the dominating position prior to the 1960s had become a minority stance during the second half of the century. In the introduction to this dissertation, I began with a *Fundamentalist Journal* article from 1982 explaining why movie-going remained anathema among some fundamentalist families. That same year an article in the Church of the Nazarene periodical *Herald of Holiness* reminded readers that their denomination continued to maintain a ban on movie-going. However, the author conceded, “Some have rationalized that the *Manual* prohibition should not be taken literally, but only as a guideline.”²¹ By the 1980s only a small minority of conservative Protestants continued to carry the torch of abstention from movies.

What accounted for this shift in position throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s? Several developments help explain the reconsideration of movies. One answer has to do with the story of Jonathan and Stephen Crane which introduced this chapter. Simply put, the evangelicals of the 1950s and 1960s were not the same people that demanded absolute abstention in the 1930s and 1940s. This is part of the answer but it is incomplete since, as this dissertation made clear, conservative Protestant prejudice against theatrics passed along generations of Christians for centuries. A more sweeping explanation of change has to do with the reorientation of mid-twentieth century conservative Protestantism, led by moderate evangelicals like Billy Graham. As conservative Protestants aimed to become more engaged with politics and culture, it was no surprise that they would ultimately become more engaged with film. Just as conservative Protestants of the 1940s abstained from movies as a means to withdraw from cultural

²¹ J. Weldon McClung Jr., “Nazarenes and the Movies: A Question of Ethics,” *Herald of Holiness* 75, no. 15 (1986): 15.

developments that they rejected, evangelicals of the 1960s and 1970s reengaged in cultural politics, and so reengaged with commercial cinema. As I argued in earlier chapters, conservative Protestants have consistently viewed the movies as a stand-in for cultural modernity. Their rhetoric toward movies is a microcosm of the broader relationship between conservative Protestants and secular cultural developments.

By the 1980s, few of the conservative Protestants arguments examined in this dissertation remained in evidence. In 1980, the Christian Right came out in strong support of the presidential candidacy of Ronald Reagan without much concern about the politician's former career. And on Hollywood, the conservative Protestant vituperation against commercial cinema from 1915 to 1955 had become reborn in the idioms of the culture wars. In fact, the book *Hollywood vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values*, published in 1992, offers a useful measuring stick to determine how much conservative Protestant hostility toward Hollywood had and had not changed. Zondervan and its parent company, Harper Collins co-published *Hollywood vs. America*.²² (The fact that Zondervan had by this point become a division within a publishing behemoth already provides one clue as to the relationship between conservative Protestantism and secular popular media.) The author, Michael Medved, argued that the commercial media industry represented by Hollywood moguls had actively sought to erode the morals and values of middle-class America. Medved offered statistics and anecdotal evidence to argue that the modern entertainment industry eschewed corporate interest in profits by not offering more family films and instead single-mindedly foisted a politically liberal ideology on the public. "Tens of millions of

²² Michael Medved, *Hollywood Vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values*, 1st ed. (New York, NY; Grand Rapids, Mich.: HarperCollins; Zondervan, 1992).

Americans,” Medved wrote, “now see the entertainment industry as an all-powerful enemy, an alien force that assaults our most cherished values and corrupts our children.”²³ Medved was evidently unaware that many Americans had *always* seen the entertainment industry as an all-powerful enemy.

Many cultural and film critics found *Hollywood vs. America* an exercise in incoherence, poorly argued and factually flimsy. The film reviewer for the *New Republic* described Medved’s work as “bizarre” and “preposterous,” and concluded that *Hollywood vs. America* was “the stupidest book about popular culture that I have read to the end.”²⁴ That observation was hardly unique. *The Washington Post* called Medved “nutty” and the book “an unmitigated slog” whereas *The New York Times* considered Medved “shrill and sanctimonious” and found the book’s arguments incoherent.²⁵

But like Henry Foreman’s *Our Movie-Made Children*, published almost sixty years earlier, conservative Protestants enthusiastically embraced Medved’s thesis and supporting evidence. *Christianity Today*, for example, described the book as “eloquent” and “crucial” and called on Christians to “stand behind Medved.”²⁶ *Hollywood vs. America* also earned endorsements by others on the right side of the culture wars. William F. Buckley Jr. wrote that “Michael Medved has vital things to say about the

²³ Ibid., 3.

²⁴ David Denby, “I Lost It at the Movies,” *New Republic* 207, no. 19 (1992).

²⁵ Michael Covino, “Hollywood and Gomorrah,” *The Washington Post*, November 2 1992. Walter Goodman, “Where Are All the Happy Endings?,” *The New York Times* 1992. Along these lines, see Bob Strauss, “One-Sided Analysis Gets Thumbs Down,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, October 21, 1992.

²⁶ Doug LeBlanc, “Hollywood Vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values,” *Christianity Today* 36, no. 14 (1992).

suppurations of modern Hollywood.”²⁷ And *U.S. Catholic* described the “impressive array of evidence” in *Hollywood vs. America* and “earnestly” recommended it.²⁸

Few people, if anyone, recognized that *Hollywood vs. America* marked Zondervan’s return to its publishing roots. But the only overlap between John R. Rice and Michael Medved was their method of making aesthetic assessments by way of statistical datum. In his critique of Martin Scorsese’s violent gangster film “Goodfellas,” Medved’s principle critique derived from the fact that audiences “heard a major obscenity ... once every 32.2 seconds.”²⁹ In chapter four, I traced the roots of this statistical content-analysis approach of film review, which reflected the influence of the Payne Fund Studies and Henry Foreman’s *Our Movie Made Children* of the 1930s.

This similarity aside, Medved’s jeremiad reveals how little remained of conservative Protestant rhetoric toward cinema by the 1990s. To begin, the outspoken critics of commercial cinema could no longer be described as conservative Protestants. Medved himself is Jewish, and his support came from both Protestants and Catholics cultural conservatives. A second way that *Hollywood vs. America* revealed how far the rhetorical landscape had changed was that despite Medved’s insistence that Hollywood films were morally poisonous and socially destructive, Medved never contemplated abstention from the movies. Instead, Medved’s solution, to the extent that he had one, was to call for more corporate responsibility. In ways large and small, the conservative

²⁷ William F. Buckley Jr., “The Unchecked Virus in Hollywood,” *The Washington Times*, February 7, 1993.

²⁸ Gerald M. Costello, “Seen Any Good Movies Lately?,” *U.S. Catholic* 58, no. 6 (1993). For another sympathetic critique, see Matthew Gilbert, “Is the Family Crumbling? Michael Medved Says Hollywood’s Not Helping,” *The Boston Globe* November 12, 1992.

²⁹ Medved, *Hollywood Vs. America: Popular Culture and the War on Traditional Values*, 179.

Protestant jeremiad that had been so prominent in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s seemed all but over by the 1990s.

A full accounting of the evangelical attitude toward cinema, which I intend to pursue in the future, would have to take into account the influence of television, the history of evangelical filmmaking, the development of Christian film reviews, and the rhetoric of the culture wars. For the purposes of this dissertation, I offer this sketch of conservative Protestant reconsideration of commercial cinema during the second half of the twentieth century to provide a sense of how slowly evangelical attitudes thawed in the 1960s and 1970s and then how abruptly the rhetoric tropes of old disappeared by the 1990s.

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