

RELIGION AND FILMS

I. THE PRESENT POSITION.

READERS of *All Glorious Within* will remember how Monsignor O'Duffy's grave apprehensions about the cinema, when he paid it a first visit of inspection in 1910, were allayed, chiefly by "yon bit where they threw pies at one another", but that he was firmly convinced that the craze would not last. It is tempting to conjecture what he would have said, if he had been told that in thirty-five years time there would be a number of BLACKFRIARS devoted to the subject of the cinema, and containing an article on Religion in the Films.

It is not impossible that in real life to-day there are priests who only think of the cinema in terms of the devil, the world and the flesh, Jews and big business. That it can be used in the interests of materialism and pandarism is obvious enough. Its early efforts to portray religion tended to be crude, superficial and inaccurate. And it is not so many years ago that a nurse in a film, attempting to justify her refusal of a doctor's proposal, was made to say: "Don't some Religious Orders insist on celibacy for their members?", that a French priest was portrayed as always carrying a large vernacular bible, from which any who doubted his *bona fides* had only to mention some obscure chapter and verse and he would quote the text correctly, and that the Sacred College was depicted as assembling for the opening of the Holy Door at St. Peter's to the strains of Ketèlbey's *In a Monastery Garden*. It is a pity too that Gounod's *Ave Maria* should still usually be regarded as the norm of Catholic music, but the pity lies in the fact that here for once the films mirror life only too well.

But the principal object of this article is to illustrate the increasing sense of responsibility and accuracy on the part of film producers and directors with regard to the presentation of religious matters. It deals mostly with the Catholic religion, partly because that is naturally more interesting to Catholic readers, partly because Catholicism does seem to predominate among religions on the screen. Apparently this predominance has not passed without protest in America, protest aptly countered, according to report, by the offering of a prize to anyone who can produce equally interesting subjects connected with any other religion.

Three comparatively recent films had an eschatological basis. *Cabin in the Sky* wittily exploited the crude anthropomorphism of negro Protestantism. But it was not without the suggestion of a rationalistic effort to discredit the reality of the spiritual world. On the other hand *Heaven can Wait* dealt with the Four Last Things in

a robustly humorous way not incompatible in practice with real faith, as in some mediaeval plays. *Between Two Worlds* was conditioned by an outlook associated with that form of materialism known as spiritualism. But its ultimate moral was unimpeachable, namely that what people do in this world matters a great deal for eternity and that suicide is to be avoided.

Comment is often made on the large number of people who go so frequently to the cinema in this country. It is surely a distinct advantage when the imaginary world, which can unfortunately come to mean more to many of them than the realities of life, contains something of the Catholicism hitherto so conspicuously absent from the outlook of the majority of them. There is a marked tendency at present to include incidental Catholic elements in films where they are appropriate, and to take as much pains to make these authentic as would be taken about details connected with any other subject. The priest is called in to take his place among other technical advisers. Thus, in *Madonna of the Seven Moons* there was a procession of the Blessed Sacrament and the administration of the Last Sacraments; in *One of our Aircraft is Missing* part of the Parish Mass in a Dutch church, all reverent and correct. The Mass scene in *Assignment in Brittany* really did suggest not only Catholicism but French Catholicism. In *Christmas Holiday* quite a long scene was introduced of Midnight Mass. Accuracy and naturalness combined suggested very strongly that those taking part were not actors but actual Sacred Ministers and acolytes.

There are some Catholics who object to such reproductions and in fact the introduction of the Last Sacraments into *Madonna of the Seven Moons* was described by at least one person as a blasphemous mockery. But such arguments as are adduced to support this view do not exhibit much cogency. Responsible Catholic opinion tends to welcome scenes of this sort. They help to counteract the preconception of so many patrons of the cinema that religion plays no part in normal life. The non-Catholic, who might not take the trouble to read or listen to an explanation of Catholic practices, has them presented to him through a congenial medium. The lapsed Catholic, who has not been inside a church for years, is obliquely reminded of his own duties.

There is another objection, which has intelligence and authority behind it. In films, it is maintained, the externals of Catholicism are presented out of their context and so the impression is given that the Catholic religion is a matter of sentiment and meaningless ceremonial. But surely the accurate presentation of Catholic worship has in itself an educational value, at least calculated to coun-

teract the fantastic preconceptions of so many people as to what actually goes on in a Catholic church. This applies especially to the administration of the Sacrament of Penance, as in *Madonna of the Seven Moons* and several other films. And the average Englishman, who vaguely imagines that all the Dutch are Protestants, is further educated when he learns, by seeing *One of our Aircraft is Missing*, that all the members of a Dutch family befriending British airmen are Catholics and go to Mass every Sunday.

In fact the films seem definitely to have advanced beyond the stage of regarding Catholicism as having merely emotional and glamorous value. Non-Catholics often refer to an increased regard for the religion of Catholics as the result of contact with chaplains in the fighting line. *Guadalcanal Diary* was calculated to produce the same effect. The principal part in this film was that of a Catholic chaplain. Though very popular with men of all creeds, he is no mere distributor of cigarettes and "uplift". He is first seen saying Mass in a troopship. When a man is badly hit by a sniper, he at once gives the short form of absolution. On the eve of battle, as some of the Marines write letters and others sing songs, he can be seen in the background dealing with his queue of penitents.

Another film in which the Catholic religion is appreciatively taken for granted is *The Sullivans*. They are anything but a sanctimonious family, but the sincerity and naturalness of their religion is transferred from real life (the story is a reconstruction) to the screen with complete success and absence of theatricality. The incidental religion in films with such a popular appeal as the last two mentioned must surely have an excellent effect. The ending of *Madonna of the Seven Moons* is as unusual as it is instructive, not the conventional happy ending but a happy death in the full Catholic sense. Excellent verbal instruction is also given by the child actress Margaret O'Brien in *Music for Millions*. She explains in the simplest language some important truths about prayer and the relation to it of mortification and the intercession of the saints.

Films which only exist because of Catholicism have been left to the last. There is not much to add to what is already known to most Catholics. What is most remarkable is that one popular film should have for its subject a recently canonised saint and that two more should be about the daily life of priests. The general standard of understanding and accuracy were high in all three cases. The limitations of *The Song of Bernadette* and *The Keys of the Kingdom* were due more to the authors of the basic novels than to anything in the filming. In the case of *The Keys of the Kingdom* the elements of indifferentism and un-supernatural humanitarianism

were less aggressive in the picture than in the book.

Neither of these films was really successful in the presentation of nuns. Here is a very real problem crying out to be solved. In real life members of Anglican sisterhoods can almost invariably be distinguished immediately from Catholic nuns, and not only, or principally, by their dress. If it is so difficult for women genuinely endeavouring to consecrate their lives exclusively to God to be convincing as nuns, how much more so for film actresses. Perhaps it is hardly practical to hope for a time when nuns will be asked to "vet" parts of a film, as priests are now. But that seems to be the only way to exclude from the film studio the idea that nuns are necessarily harsh women subsequently softened, or are sanctimonious simpletons.

Priests do fare better. Father O'Malley in *Going My Way* might almost have been educated at the American College in Rome, even to the angle of his hat. Strange to say, Spencer Tracy in *Boys' Town* seemed less artificial as a priest than Monsignor Flanagan himself, who appeared in the prologue; the actor was in his element in studio conditions and the priest was not. The part of Father Fitzgibbon in *Going My Way* was more like a portrait than a caricature. But the implicit impression given in that film that a priest begins a weekday by coming straight from his bedroom to the breakfast table is symbolic of just how the cinema can fail to suggest the very essence of the priesthood, which so clearly distinguishes the sacerdotal vocation alike from the "job" of the layman and the "work" of the Protestant minister.

The reaction of the public to *The Song of Bernadette* has shown that the cinema can afford not to shirk the supernatural. In *Passage to Marseille* one of the characters said that the hoisting of a national flag was "like a benediction, a sacrament". The value of religion as presented in the films lies in the extent to which it directs towards the objective reality of Christian and Catholic truth the vague, distorted idealism, which is otherwise restricted to such inadequate substitutes.

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II. SOME POSSIBILITIES.

DURING the last ten years in America, a company, formed to produce religious films chiefly of biblical subjects, has already completed ten out of a series of thirty. The producer is a minister of the American Episcopal Church, the Reverend James K. Friedrich, and he has secured the services of John T. Coyle, a Hollywood director who personally directs the production of all these films. They are made at Hollywood, and at the moment a complete replica of Jerusalem is under construction on Iverson Ranch,