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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Antonia Bird's 1995 film "Priest" illuminates the significance of the humanity of Jesus, as does The Gospel of Luke. The controversial issues of homosexuality, the seal of confession, and the oath of celibacy are examined from a human perspective throughout "Priest." This film makes it apparent that when we apply the humanity of Jesus to these issues, there is a revelation that the Catholic Church acts in opposition to the Jesus represented in Luke. The Gospel of Luke depicts Jesus as a man with compassion for all human beings. Jesus rejects the judgments the religious authorities impose on individuals, and is himself condemned and crucified for disobeying religious doctrines. This film raises the ancient issue of society, valuing orthodoxy over compassion, and more recently, Christianity over Jesus."

Orthodoxy vs. Compassion

by

Jayme C. Wintish

Antonia Bird's 1995 film "Priest" illuminates the significance of the humanity of Jesus, as does The Gospel of Luke. The controversial issues of homosexuality, the seal of confession, and the oath of celibacy are examined from a human perspective throughout "Priest." This film makes it apparent that when we apply the humanity of Jesus to these issues, there is a revelation that the Catholic Church acts in opposition to the Jesus represented in Luke. The Gospel of Luke depicts Jesus as a man with compassion for all human beings. Jesus rejects the judgments the religious authorities impose on individuals, and is himself condemned and crucified for disobeying religious doctrines. This film raises the ancient issue of society, valuing orthodoxy over compassion, and more recently, Christianity over Jesus.

Bird's controversial film "Priest" received wonderful reviews from many critics, but was criticized by those affiliated with the Catholic Church. Peter Stack, a staff critic of the San Francisco Chronicle, calls the film "an exceptional movie" (1). This film takes place in inner city Liverpool centered on the story of Reverend Greg Pilkington, played by the British actor, Linus Roache (Stack 1). Stack describes Father Greg as "a dutiful, idealistic diocesan priest assigned to a tough parish to replace an older clergyman who has lost his marbles because of the pressures of working in grim, poor neighborhoods" (Stack 1). The character of this young priest is first exposed when he reacts with strong opposition to the discovery of Father Matthew's long-term, monogamous relationship with the parish housekeeper.

Father Matthew, played by Tom Wilkinson, is kind and welcoming to Father Greg, who has moved into his new home with Father Matthew and the parish housekeeper, Maria (Cathy Tyson). When Father Greg learns of the relationship between

Father Matthew and Maria, his obedience to the Church, above all else, is revealed. Stack describes Father Matthew as “a progressive whose approach is to bend the rules to serve the wild cards of humanity” (1). Stack explains Father Greg as “adamant that church doctrine, however severe, should be followed to the letter in service to God” (1). Bird makes an interesting choice of assigning the liberal view to the older priest and the strict, conservative view to the younger. Although, at first, this seems to contradict a typical depiction of views, according to age, this brings to our attention the human experience of living a religious life and the realities one accepts.

The relationship between Father Greg and Father Matthew throughout the film reveals a great deal about each of their identities. Father Matthew represents a belief in the humanity of Jesus, from the start of the film. Father Greg sees this approach to faith as hypocritical and regards obedience to the Church as a crucial aspect of faith. Ironically, later in the film, this understanding of humanity that Father Matthew possesses is the very reason that Father Greg’s life is saved. The majority of the parish community holds views similar to those of Father Greg; the views that end up condemning Father Greg. Views similar to those held by the community and Church authorities have obviously helped shape Father Greg’s understanding of faith.

The second time during the film that a moral conflict occurs is when Father Greg shamefully changes from his religious attire into a leather jacket and goes out to a gay bar. He spends the night with another man, and for the first time in the film, embraces his own humanity. The scene where Father Greg and Graham (Robert Carlyle) make love exhibits the human need to express love. The interactions between the two men are very

tender and sincere. This scene does not reflect a man falling into the weakness of sin, as Father Greg believes the next morning.

The next day a young girl named Lisa, of Father Greg's congregation, reveals, during confession, that her father sexually molests her consistently. Father Greg is torn between intervening to stop this girl's suffering and abiding by the Church's seal of confession. It is at this point in the film that Father Greg begins to question the rules of the Church. He is not only experiencing suffering first hand as a result of Church Doctrine, but he now feels incapable of stopping a young girl's suffering due to Church rules.

Bird's film "Priest" raises pertinent issues in contemporary society that often raise controversy in the Catholic Church. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops regularly reviews films. The review of this film posted on their web page describes "Priest" as a "flawed British drama" ("Film and Broadcasting" 1). It becomes clear why this perspective is stated later in the critique of the film. The critique states that Bird's film:

. . . provides a credible picture of a lonely priest in a busy parish, though its emphasis on his struggle with his own sexuality strangely lacks any notion of sin and the ambiguous ending in an emotionally powerful scene of reconciliation leaves matters unresolved.

"Film and Broadcasting" 1

This comments on the film is latent with irony, considering the blatant importance of a human perspective the film proposes.

This review of the film by the Conference of Catholic Bishops is an obvious display of a lack of insight into the film. The comment that “its emphasis on his struggle with his own sexuality strangely lacks any notion of sin” sounds quite absurd, considering the events in the film. Father Greg attempts suicide because he believes homosexuality to be a sin. The scene at the end of the film shows Father Matthew telling the congregation that everyone is a sinner. This could be interpreted that homosexuality is a sin. The point made is that no one has a right to judge another. It is quite frightening that such an emotional film that focuses on human compassion could leave anyone concerned with something as trivial as sexuality.

It seems that this organization would not have a problem with the film if it clearly concluded homosexuality to be a sin and had an unambiguous ending. Considering that Father Matthew and Father Greg are clearly implicit Jesus characters in this film, this review leads one to question the Catholic Bishops’ view of the humanity of Jesus, as represented in the Gospel of Luke. The question of adopting compassion or man-made religious doctrine is clearly the theme of this film. This review makes it quite apparent that the Conference of Catholic Bishops embraces the latter.

After Father Greg and his lover are taken to the police station for publicly displaying affection, Father Greg’s homosexuality is public. Father Greg attempts suicide, but Father Matthew saves him. Father Greg is sent to a rural parish and is condemned by Church authorities and many of his formerly loyal parishioners. After much persuasion from Father Matthew, Father Greg returns to his church to say mass with his loyal friend.

One of the parishioners gets up and voices his disapproval of the priest's return. The parishioner accuses Father Greg of making a mockery of his faith. A second man also stands up and yells at Father Greg. The second man quotes the Bible in order to defend his opposition to Father Greg's sexuality. Father Greg responds to this irate man citing the Bible as well. These two men converse using only scripture references to defend their positions.

Interestingly, the member of the church cites only quotes from the Old Testament, while Father Greg quotes the words of Jesus. This part of the film clearly parallels the aspects of the Bible that are typically used in society to debate the issue of homosexuality. It is important to consider that Christianity is based, supposedly, on the teachings of Jesus. Throughout the New Testament, people accused Jesus of contradicting the rules of the Old Testament. Jesus always approached these accusations from a rational perspective and attempted to shed light on the most important aspects of being faithful. Clearly, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is far more concerned with having compassion for human beings than he is with obeying religious traditions.

The Gospel of Luke discusses many instances of Jesus breaking religious law due to his human compassion. One instance of this is when the religious authorities are trying to find a reason to accuse Jesus, and they witnessed him healing a man on the Sabbath (Lk 6: 7, 10). Jesus responded to them, "I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?" (Lk 6:9). It is clear in this passage that Jesus would rather stop a human being's pain than abide by the law.

One of the quotes Father Greg refers to when the parishioner verbally attacks him is found in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus said, "Do not judge, and you will not be judge"

(Lk 6:37). This lesson of Jesus applies to the film “Priest” for a few different reasons. This points out that the Catholic Church, itself, judges others and condones the judgment of others by its stance on homosexuality. Jesus’ words also bring our attention to the fact that even if this man confronting Father Greg views homosexuality as a sin, his judgment of Father Greg proves that the parishioner is the true sinner by passing judgment on another.

The Gospel of Luke continually emphasizes the most important aspect of Jesus’ teachings as those concerning compassion for all of humanity. A man asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus responded by asking what his interpretations is (Lk 10:25, 26). The man answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and, Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Lk 10:27). Jesus confirmed the man’s opinion, “‘You have answered correctly,’ Jesus replied. ‘Do this and you will live’” (Lk 10:28).

Antonia Bird’s move “Priest” explores the conflicts of obedience in regard to the rules of the Catholic Church. The situations that arise in this film bring attention to the fact that in order to obey Church Doctrine individuals must disobey the teachings of Jesus. Organized religions, such as Catholicism, most often do not encourage members to consider the fact that Jesus was not the founder of Christianity, and was not even alive to witness the beginnings of this religion. It is an important question for all that find faith in Jesus Christ to ask themselves whether Jesus would support the organized religion of Christianity established in his name.

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