

Finding God at the Movie House

What's the difference between going to a worship service and going to a movie?

In some respects, not much.

To begin with, the weekly religion business has reshaped its program in a more entertainment-orientated way, complete with split screens, surround sound, theater seats and the use of both “worship artists” and marketing campaigns.

On the other hand, the local cinema offers an increasing number of moves that focus on existential, moral and theological questions.

Consider “Bruce Almighty.”

It opened nationwide on May 23 and within one month had taken in almost \$200 million through ticket sales.

In the movie Morgan Freeman plays God, complete with white suit, goatee and deep baritone voice.

Jim Carrey, as Bruce Nolan, is the man in the street, looking out for himself and complaining to God that life is unfair. God also feels mistreated by this accusation and proceeds to make Bruce his associate in the almighty business—at least for a span of three weeks and over three city blocks.

Bruce, of course, is irritated at this further intrusion into his self-centered life. He responds, first, with slap-stick marvels, in keeping with the Carrey tradition of humor; and second, by structured indifference to the prayers of the people. Finally, he awakens to the complexity of divine intervention, especially as represented in the freedom-loving creature known as the human.

The almighty Bruce discovers that not even God can force the affections of another person—in this case, the estranged girlfriend of Bruce himself. There are

limits to this divinity business.

Bruce Almighty is thus the flip side of a traditional Christian doctrine—incarnation: God surrendering his powers to become merely human. Or, as Joan Osborne put it in her 1998 lyrics: “What if God Was One of Us?”

The movie raises the opposite question: what if one of us was God?

This is not the first film to take up the clerical calling and tackle the moral and theological dilemmas of our time.

A list of the most famous of these was recently published by the *Dallas Morning News*. The list included, “The Exorcist”, “Dogma”, “It’s a Wonderful Life”, “The Prince of Egypt”, “Michael”, “Oh God”, and of course “The Ten Commandments.” The list also names three of my favorites: “Inherit the Wind”, “The Sound of Music” and “Jesus Christ Superstar” (although the movie is not as good as the stage or sound track versions).

So church and cinema are somewhat alike, and this might be a good thing for both.

Religion is important even to unchurched people, perhaps too important to leave solely in the hands of ministers, many of whom lack the freedom and imagination to engage the issues in ways appropriate to our times.

In any event, about as many people watch the movies as attend church. I saw Bruce Almighty on a Sunday night, six weeks after it opened. No more than a dozen people were in the theater, making it feel very much like Sunday night at church.

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