

# Religion in Pop Culture

By Rob Rogan

Ever since I was a child, I have loved movies. I can become absolutely engrossed in a great film and they can stay with me for quite a while after I finish watching them. I am not ashamed to admit that I cried at the end of Braveheart and I jumped out of my seat cheering at the end of Hoosiers. Movies have a power to touch us and I am excited to finally get a chance to be able to tie movies into a UU sermon.

Our Sermons at Harmony are typically full of great information. We tell the founding history of UU traditions, or of the history of women in religion, or the benefits of meditation, or lessons we can take from other religions. This will not be one of those sermons.

Today I intend to use the lens of modern films to frame spiritual questions, without providing definitive answers. I will present some of my favorite Hollywood thought provoking scenes and allow the post sermon discussion as the place for answers to be delivered.

Years ago, when the Board was brainstorming tag lines for our church, we heavily considered the phrase “UU, where the questions are the answers”. I believe this sermon will embody that phrase and my hope is that it gets you thinking as much as listening.

To that end, we will move on to the first point I want to discuss from the film “Dogma”. From the start, let’s make it clear that Dogma is no Citizen Kane. It is a somewhat crude comedy from writer/director Kevin Smith, but underneath the crude jokes, there is a very real religious message.

Dogma is a satire of the Catholic Church and it withstood a great deal of controversy before and after it was released. Kevin Smith received 30 thousand pieces of hate mail including several death threats. Perhaps to head off controversy, the film’s title sequence contained a disclaimer that reads “Even God has a sense of humor – just look at the platypus”.

The movie is the story of 2 fallen angels and their attempt to find a loophole to get back into heaven. To set up the controversial takes on Catholicism, I want to play one of my favorite scenes from the movie [BUDDY CHRIST](#). (Play movie clip)

Clearly, the catholic church was mad at this. But rest assured, this movie was not negative about religion as a whole and towards the end there is a great dialogue that I think about often. In this scene an apostle is talking to our hero Bethany about God and suggests this:

**Apostle:** God's only real beef with mankind is what that gets carried out in His name. Wars, bigotry, televangelism..... the big one though, is the fractioning of all of the religions. He said mankind got it all wrong by taking a good idea and building a belief structure on it.

**Bethany:** You're saying having beliefs is a bad thing?

**Apostle:** I just think it's better to have ideas. I mean, you can *change* an idea, changing a belief is trickier. People die for it, people kill for it.

This scene takes few words to try and demonstrate a singular importance and failure organized religion; that the idea of religion is solid, but the insistence on dogmatic law is the problem. In many ways those who agree with the scene should become UU. More than any religious organization, we explore ideas over pushing Dogma. Furthermore, the popularity of this movie with my generations is one of the reasons I see such potential for growth in our religion. Kevin Smith did not use Dogma to say that all religion is bad, but rather to say that religion can be great, we just need to fix it. Don't let the dogmatic law of our forefathers block what religion can be. Allow it to grow to fit where it is needed and can do the most good.

Having said that, the UU church does have a belief system. We recite our 7 principles at the beginning of every service here and are considered the foundation of our religion. So.....

- Do you consider them dogmatic law?
- Do you agree with Kevin Smith's take on beliefs?

- Are our beliefs somehow fundamentally different than other religions? .....
- If is different, why?

No answers yet, but you've got a full 10 minutes from now to have your answer figured out.

So we can check off the comedy movie and move over to the adventure section and the controversial film "Book of Eli". In this film Denzel Washington plays a drifter in our world after a nuclear apocalypse. In many ways Book of Eli is your very conventional modern day action film. It is filled with fighting scenes and explosions, but what differentiates Book of Eli is what they are fighting over.

Our hero in this film carries the last existing copy of the Bible in his backpack and this book is deeply coveted by all parties. The movie goes at great lengths to debate the value of religion versus its drawbacks and even insinuates that religious beliefs are the motivating factor behind the nuclear war that sent this world into an apocalypse. Here is a quick scene of our bad guy and why he wants the Book so bad (this video is a little rough at the start, so please ignore the flicker and just listen to the speech).....  
[BOOK OF ELI](#). (Play movie clip)

Gary Oldman plays a great bad guy....."It's a weapon to prey on the hearts and minds of the weak and the desperate"... Now that is something I have never heard the Bible called.

I am not going to spoil the ending, which is probably the best part of this movie, but the overarching theme does provide a great thought provoker. Historically, has religion done more harm than good or is it a force in humanity to make us better? Look at the Crusades, The Inquisitions, The Witchunts, Romans slaughtering Christians, Germans slaughtering Jews, and on and on. The death toll in the name of religion and against religion is staggering.

- Has religion merely been a scapegoat throughout history for people who would have done the terrible things anyway, or is the power of religion the cause of these atrocities?
- Do the historical benefits of religion outweigh the negatives?

- If historical atrocities committed in the name of religion make you want to reject a religion, do historical atrocities committed by the US government make you want reject America? Is it easier to forgive one or the other?

Tough questions, but you have about 7 minutes to start formulating your answers for these.

Our next stop is the 1997 film, *The Devils advocate*. Who can't love Al Pacino? In this film our Protagonist lawyer finds himself working for the Devil in a New York Law Firm. I am sure there is a joke in here about all lawyers being evil, but I will leave that for you. In any case our scene in question is one of Pacino's speeches towards the end. I really can't do any justice to set up Pacino, so I'll just let it play. [DEVILS](#). (Play movie clip)

Are the rules of religion set up in opposition of our natural instincts? Perhaps, but the more interesting question for me is whether the rules of religion were specifically developed TO curb our instincts. Whether we believe that the rules of religion were actually created by man or by god, the question remains the same.

In the natural world, instincts serve to keep creatures alive. Nature is a very cruel free-for- all and most animals are served well with the instincts to "take whatever they can when they can". These instincts were formed over hundreds of thousands of years, but our civilization formed up in the span of the last few thousand. Our instincts don't adapt so quickly and are often ill suited to living in a civilization.

While societies have laws for the minimum level of acceptable behavior, religious laws tend to set the bar much higher. The government says you can't kill your neighbor, but religion says you can't sleep with his wife either.

- So were the heavenly or man-made rules of religion created to help man adapt to civilization, or do they have a greater meaning?
- If rules were created to help man adapt to civilization, from the societal perspective, is that a bad thing, even if it's a lie?
- Are the rules of our very liberal UU church in opposition to our natural instincts, if not should they be?

Time is getting short, so you better be forming your answers quickly now.

We're on to our last film, and you may not believe this, but this film sits right alongside *Passion of the Christ* and *It's a Wonderful Life* on the list of must see films from the Vatican. You are going to think I am joking, but I am utterly serious that this is on the short list of films the Catholic Church wants you to run out and see. This is the story of two men on a desperate struggle driven by religion. That's all the intro I can give before I just show this. [MISSION FROM GOD](#). (Play movie clip)

"We're on a mission from God". This is truly one of my all time favorite films, but I had no idea the Pope liked it so much.

I don't have an incredibly deep thought here and I won't be asking any questions for this segment. but I hope to balance our skeptical minds as we head into a critical discussion of religion. I want us not to forget that religion has inspired man to do some truly great things. Perhaps more importantly religion inspires a staggering amount of everyday people to overcome the adversity in their life.

We UU's tend to turn an incredibly critical eye towards many religions, and often rightfully so, but let us not deny the truly great things it has inspired even in just our modern times

Habitat for Humanity...

the Salvation army..

Alcoholics Anonymous....

Just to name a few.

The positive effects of religion on the daily life of people around the world are very profound. So while we may not always agree with religion, please don't lose perspective for all the good they do and to discount the fact that the church can and does inspire the average person to help their fellow man.

So I hope I haven't spoiled any movies for you today, and as I wrap this up and head into discussion, I hope that all of you can find great thought provokers in the moments of your lives.

That the questions are the answers,

That the journey is the destination

And that I hope together we can keep finding the right *questions* to make this world a better place for all of us.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Do you consider our 7 principles dogmatic law? Is there one of the 7 principles you struggle with?
2. Do you agree with Kevin Smith's take on beliefs?
3. Are our beliefs somehow fundamentally different than other religions?
4. Has religion merely been a scapegoat throughout history for people who would have done the terrible things anyway, or is the power of religion the cause of these atrocities?
5. Do the historical benefits of religion outweigh the negatives?
6. If historical atrocities committed in the name of religion make you want to reject a religion, do historical atrocities committed by the US government make you want reject America? Is it easier to forgive one or the other?
7. So were the heavenly or man-made rules of religion created to help man adapt to civilization, or do they have a greater meaning?
8. If rules were created to help man adapt to civilization, from the societal perspective, is that a bad thing, even if it's a lie?
9. Are the rules of our very liberal UU church in opposition to our natural instincts, if not should they be?