

Progressive Christianity in a Post-Reagan World

Dead Man Walking, 1995

Show me some respect Mathew. Why, 'cause you're a nun? Because I'm a person.

Production Information

Sister Helen Prejean (Susan Sarandon), Mathew Poncelet (Sean Penn), Directed, produced, and written by Tim Robbins. Based on account (*Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States*, 1993) of her interaction with death row inmates. On New York Times bestseller list for 31 weeks. The movie received four Oscar nominations. Susan Sarandon won the award for Best Actress. Album produced with music inspired and written by Bruce Springsteen, Johnny Cash, Michelle Shocked. Other 1995 films—*Braveheart*, *Forrest Gump*, *Babe*.

Film History

Social conscious filmmaking of nineties: *Dances with Wolves* (1990, wins 7 Oscars), *Philadelphia* (1993)

Positive and complicated portrayal of religion. An anti-Hollywood film: no romance between nun and convict; everybody talks all the time; women don't wear makeup; a deep and hard journey. Sarandon and Penn accepting quarter of usual salary. Small amount (1.4% went to order) of initial budget.

Susan Sarandon (one of 9 children, graduated from Catholic University in DC) given book and she meets Sister Prejean in New Orleans. She brings book to attention of Tim Robbins (her partner) and asks his company to pick up rights. Robbins also comes from active Catholic family, Credited his parents Catholicism with understanding Jesus as someone who was compassionate and someone who would speak out. Someone who gave his life to something he believed in. In interviews said he had to re-learn what nuns were all about. Trying to portray her as a human being, not a saint. Sean Penn raised Catholic by mother although father was non-practicing Jew. Father black-listed director during McCarthy era. Penn, Sarandon, and Robbins continue to be critics of government.

Studios found "art house" production companies to produce small scale more complicated films. *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), Walt Disney film buys *Miramax* which releases *The English Patient* (1996) and independents like *Pulp Fiction* (1994) become more accessible. Schindler's List sweeps Academy Awards in 1993—realistic but still heroic "escape" from Holocaust. More typical is *Jurassic Park* and *Lion King* (1994) with focus on special effects.

Americans spent \$12 billion to buy or rent video tapes, compared to just \$4.9 billion on box office ticket sales. 76 percent of homes had VCRs

Social History

Bill Clinton becomes president in 1992. Exposed to social justice Catholicism as an undergraduate at Georgetown University, which complicates his southern Protestantism. Softening—not erasing--of conservative agenda. House and Senate, Republican. Typified by military policy towards homosexuality—don't ask, don't tell. Slight tax increases move towards balance budgets but fiscally conservative. No health care change. Re-working welfare system.

Oklahoma City bombing raises the questions of domestic terrorism caused by extreme right who hate federal government. Reflections on the spiral of violence.

Fall of communism in 1989 and first Iraq war 1991—end of “history” with US superiority over Soviet-built arms in Iraq. US ascendancy.

Religious History

Historical combination of society with faith. One is not separate from the other. For good and for bad—wealthy supported by priests as well as priest revolutionaries. Catholic church's “seamless garment” approach to ethics—pro life means no death penalty. Humans need to focus on human concerns and that is where the divine is experienced.

Attempts by Christian progresses to try recapture spirituality from conservative Republicans. Not a dualism between believers and non-believers as conservative Christians would have it but that anti-capital punishment, pro-thought, pro-women, pro-Jesus can come from committed Christians working within institutional church. They “mess up” simple binary created by both secular, non-religious left and the religious, Christian right.

Update from “Change of Habits”-- Severe decline in the number of women entering convent. Re-orientation of mission, from view from suburbs to view from the slums.

Catholic sisters working in peace and justice organizations. Nuns working as missionaries in Latin America severely critical of Reagan's foreign policy. Looking seriously at what society needs and deciding to follow “preferential option for the poor.” Move away from religion as sentimental response towards notion of “unconditional love” where point is to love without assumption of change. Jesus associated with the rejects of his day, the “throwaways.” Sees death penalty connected to the three deepest wounds of our society: racism, poverty, and violence. As the saying goes: "Capital punishment means them without the capital get the punishment."

In 1980, when my religious community, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Medaille, made a commitment to "stand on the side of the poor," I

assented, but only reluctantly. I resisted this recasting of the faith of my childhood, where what had counted was a personal relationship with God, inner peace, kindness to others, and heaven when this life was done. I didn't want to struggle with politics and economics. We were nuns, after all, not social workers.

But later that year I finally got it. I began to realize that my spiritual life had been too ethereal, too disconnected. To follow Jesus and to be close to Jesus meant that I needed to seek out the company of poor and struggling people.

Catholic sisters like the film, *Sister Prejean* in interview says, “for the first time we don't have a flying nun or a skatin' nun.”

Christian notion of God's grace—to ask for, and to receive, power to heal and to be free from vengeance.

Both the pope and the US Bishops uphold the state's right to kill but see US death penalty as unfair and discriminatory. She doesn't see much moral energy among Catholic leaders. George W. Bush during his six years as governor of Texas presided over 152 executions, more than any other governor in the recent history of the United States.

Traditionally Evangelicals supporting death penalty but two major changes: Association with Catholics on anti-abortion motivating rethinking. In 1998 publicized execution of Karla Faye Tucker in Texas. Convicted of pickaxing a couple to death. Became a Born-Again Christian while in prison. Attractive and articulate. Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson appeal to Gov. G. W. Bush to commute but he does not. *Christianity Today* says “death penalty has outlived its usefulness.” Decline in support: According to Gallup polls, nationwide support for the death penalty has fallen--from 80% in 1994 to 66% of Americans in 2000.

Resources

<http://salt.claretianpubs.org/issues/deathp/prejean.html>

Questions



1) How has the portrait of Catholic sisters changed since *Change of Habits*? Why do you think it changed?

2) Can movies change our stance on a social issue? Should they?

3) How is the sense of evil developed in the film and how does it differ from the other films we have watched?