

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

OpenSIUC

Research Papers

Graduate School

Spring 3-18-2022

The All-American Christ

Mark St George

markstgeorge@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/gs_rp

Recommended Citation

St George, Mark. "The All-American Christ." (Spring 2022).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Papers by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

THE ALL-AMERICAN CHRIST

by

Mark St. George

B.A., University of Missouri-St. Louis, 2007

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Science

School of Journalism in the College of Arts and Media
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
May 2022

Copyright by Mark St. George, 2022
All Rights Reserved

RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

THE ALL-AMERICAN CHRIST

by

Mark St. George

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Science

in the field of Professional Media and Media Management Studies

Approved by:

Walter Metz, Ph.D., Chair

Allen Redmon, Ph.D.

Father Joseph Brown, Ph.D.

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
March 18, 2022

AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

Mark St. George, for the Master of Science degree in Professional Media and Media & Media Management Studies, presented on March 18, 2022, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: THE ALL-AMERICAN CHRIST

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Walter Metz

My research identifies the mythogenesis of the myth-hero, the All-American Christ. This figure is realized through motion pictures by fusing together the ideological strains of Judeo-Christian vicarious redemption, Biblical American Exceptionalism, and conservative, Muscular Christianity. Using the methodologies of historical criticism and American studies, I argue that the construction of this conservative myth represents a militant manifestation of theocratic media, and is evangelized in the 1971 Christ film, *The Omega Man*, starring Charlton Heston.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research would not have been possible without the unwavering support of my Committee Members, Professor Allen Redmon, Ph.D., Professor, Father Joseph Brown, Ph.D., S.J., and the gracious guidance from my Chair and mentor, Professor Walter Metz, Ph.D. I wish to additionally convey my sincerest gratitude to Professors Mike Phillips Ph.D., William Babcock, Ph.D., Yoshua “Josh” Ryoo, Ph.D., Jan Thompson, M.G.S., Jim Wall, M.A., and William Freivogel, J.D, for guiding me through this journey.

DEDICATION

To my husband, Jordan, and my grandfather, Irvin M. “Doc” Arkin, Ph.Ds.

PREFACE

If, drunk with sight of power, we loose
Wild tongues that have not Thee in awe,
Such boastings as the Gentiles use,
Or lesser breeds without the Law—
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget—lest we forget!

For heathen heart that puts her trust
In reeking tube and iron shard,
All valiant dust that builds on dust,
And guarding, calls not Thee to guard,
For frantic boast and foolish word—
Thy mercy on Thy People, Lord!

- Rudyard Kipling, *Recessional*, 1897

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>SECTION</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
ABSTRACT.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
PREFACE.....	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	vi
SECTIONS	
SECTION 1 – The Myth of an American Jesus	1
SECTION 2 – Vicarious Redemption and Blood Atonement	12
SECTION 3 – Biblical American Exceptionalism and Muscular Christianity.....	17
SECTION 4 – From Alpha to <i>Omega Man</i> : The Sacred Robert Neville	26
SECTION 5 – Papa, Can You Hear Me?.....	52
REFERENCES	55
VITA	60

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>FIGURE</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
Figure 1 - <i>St. George Killing the Dragon</i> , Bernat Martorell, c. 1435 CE.....	35
Figure 2 - The <i>Crucifixion</i> : Martin Schongauer c. 1475 CE., with angels collecting Jesus' blood in cups. (bottom) Neville offers cowboy Dutch a vessel of his precious blood.....	37
Figure 3 - (top) Fresco by Fra Angelico, San Marco, Florence, c. 1440. (bottom) Dutch becomes the Frontier Centurion at the foot of the cross.	39
Figure 4 - A crucified Neville, fulfilling his role as National Messiah	40
Figure 5 - (top) Robert Neville, a 20 th -century, violent American Messiah. (bottom) The worshipping of the nuclear bomb in <i>Beneath the Planet of the Apes</i>	43
Figure 6 - The duality of the All-American Christ. His home is both the Holy of Holies and a Chessboard War Room.....	46
Figure 7 - An American Iron Curtain	48

SECTION 1

THE MYTH OF AN AMERICAN JESUS

To the best of my knowledge, I am the only gay, atheist television director in the history of American televangelism. The Christian broadcasting network that brought me aboard certainly had no knowledge of either of my dispositions when they hired me. Their employee handbook prohibited “cohabitation without the benefit of marriage” as well as “shaggy, unkempt hair,”; and so, it seemed that homosexuality would certainly not stand.¹ With a commitment to celibacy and sporting a part firmly gouged into my hair, I bent my morals, agreed to the Network's "Statement of Faith" concerning biblical inerrancy, and joined its production collective.

I identify as a contrarian, and so Total Christian Television (TCT) did not seem an unlikely organization in which to devote my directorial passions. Raised in a theological family, my grandfather was Professor Irvin M. Arkin Ph.Ds., Chair of the Saint Louis University Theology Department. Graduating from Hebrew and Lutheran seminaries before the age of 24, Arkin converted to Catholicism before earning two doctorates. A polyglot and philologist, he became one of the nation’s leading Catholic apologists and Christian theologians. As a Dead Sea Scroll scholar, Arkin spoke nationally at Catholic seminaries and to lay audiences, hosted Christian radio shows, sat on Catholic Ecumenical Councils, and had a private audience with Pope Paul IV in Vatican City in 1978. Growing up, it was not uncommon to hear “Papa” discuss theology and *historical criticism* at the dinner table or to catch him audibly correcting priests’

¹ TCT Ministries, Inc. Employee Handbook, (United States: Radiant Life Ministries, 2008), 20, 22.

pronunciations of Hebraic names during the reading of Jesus' Matthean genealogy at Christmas Mass.²

Watching Richard Donner's *The Omen* (1976) at perhaps far too early of an age, I found myself frightened yet intrigued by its use of Christian numerology. Gregory Peck plays Robert Thorn, the US Ambassador to Great Britain in the film. Following a series of mysterious deaths, Thorn begins to suspect that his son Damien is the source of these calamities; more troubling still, Thorn worries that Damien is not his own, but rather Satan's biological offspring. Thorn discovers affirmative evidence when, pulling back Damien's hair, he finds a Satanic marking upon his body; a birthmark in the shape of the number 666. As it is written in the apocalyptic *Book of Revelation*, "[l]et anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast; for it is the number of a man. Its number is 666."³

Sitting across from his desk in DuBourg Hall at Saint Louis University, I asked Papa about the film's use of numerology. Moving through a cloud of cigarette smoke Papa rose, attended his blackboard, and instantly undid the film's numeric mysticism through the methodology of historical criticism. He taught me that since Hebrew and Aramaic had numbers but no numerals, these ancient people turned instead to their respective alphabets. In these languages, each letter has a specific numeric value. Not only does every letter have a numerical value, but every word does as well. You need only add up the letters, a practice known as *gematria*. Papa went on to explain that one of the first and most devastating persecutors of early Christianity was the Roman Emperor Nero, the last of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. Though the

² Historical criticism is a form of biblical hermeneutics that seeks to exegete the original interpretations of Judeo-Christian texts.

³ Revelation 13:18; cf. 1 John 2.

authorship of the *Book of Revelation* is still in dispute, its dating of 95-110 CE is without much controversy in contemporary New Testament scholarship. Despite committing suicide decades before the *Book of Revelation*, there was a fear in the early Christian church that Nero would return from the dead and continue his persecutions in earnest – the myth-villain of *Nero Redivivus*. In both Greek and Hebrew, the sum of the letters his name, NERO CAESAR, is 666.⁴

Coming away from his lesson, I remember thinking how odd it was that so many, myself included, were using film to interpret scripture, the low culture of film redacting the high culture of a text that for some is holy. In the case of *The Omen*'s numerology, a deviating, unorthodox interpretation of *Revelation* dominated the collective conscious. The majority orthodox opinion, through film, was moved to something distinctively heterodox. Is it possible that cinema has the power to not only interpret scripture – for many, a text with ultimate authority – but also to mimetically alter its ontology? The supremacy of film seemed then and now so immense that its ability of persuasion verges on authority; the turning to film for scriptural exegesis as a collective *sola cinematographico* within American biblical interpretations.⁵

Being immersed in Catholic dogma throughout my youth, I was ready to experience alternative religious perspectives. In turning to TCT, I felt that Evangelical Christianity might offer a dissimilar yet equally refined theology to Papa's intellectualism. Wednesday, November 5, 2008, was my first day with the TCT Broadcasting Network. It was the day following Barack Obama's first presidential election victory. During that morning's compulsory chapel service, TV Host Myles Holmes stood up and delivered that day's 'message' to the staff. "Yesterday,"

⁴ In Latin, the sum of "Caesar Nero" is 616; this difference accounts for discrepancies in the early manuscript tradition of *Revelation*.

⁵ *Sola scriptura*, or "by scripture alone", is the belief in the ultimate authority and inerrancy of the Bible.

Holmes began, "was momentous in American History. The election of our first African American President. And it *was* a victory for the African American community..." Hearing this I smiled and looked around to see if my fellow employees were sharing my elation. They only stared unflinchingly forward. Holmes continued, the timbre of his deep voice rising with authority, "...but it was *not* a victory for the unborn, it was *not* a victory for our brave military, it was *not* a victory for Jesus or his Church." The heads around me began to nod with approval.

Despite my determination, I realized then that I was mentally unprepared for the Christianity of TCT or its brand of biblical American exceptionalism. Christian-political programs, such as *Spiritual Warfare* hosted by Rabbi Moshe Laurie and *Faith in History* hosted by unsuccessful Republican House Candidate William Federer, collide American conservatism with Evangelical Christianity to form a new singularity. The fusion of Church and State, or a *theocracy*, has led to a branch of American media that is overtly partisan and turns evangelism into political propaganda. I define this collective as the *theocratic media*, which seeks to cooperatively create an image of America as God's country, a land explicitly favored by the divine. Dismissive of his immigrant status, the theocratic media nationalizes Jesus and gives him citizenship where on American soil, his wounds bleed red, white, and blue.

The interrogation of Jesus' nationality is often answered by mass media. On March 2, 1993, a voice came over two Texas radio broadcast stations that claimed such an affirmative answer. The voice emanated from an American man who maintained that he was Jesus reincarnate. In an hour-long sermon, the man preached that the eschatological prophecies found in the *Book of Revelation* were then being fulfilled in Waco, Texas. His name was David Koresh, leader of a sect of Seventh Day Adventism, known as the Branch Davidians. Six weeks following the broadcast, and in response to the Church's acquisition and sales of illegal firearms,

the FBI and ATF led a raid against Koresh's compound. Shots were fired; a fire broke out. When the smoke had cleared, Koresh and 80 Branch Davidian members were found dead. It was a violent end for a violent American messiah.

Four years later, another American Jesus made headlines. The American Heaven's Gate cult was a curious cocktail of Christianity, New Ageism, and UFO occultism. In the spring of 1997, its leader Marshall "Do" Applewhite - who taught that his mind was the same that inhabited the body of Jesus 2 millennia ago - convinced 39 members to exit their bodies ("vehicles"). In so doing, they transferred their consciousness ("computers") to extraterrestrial ("next level") bodies awaiting them in a spacecraft that was trailing the approaching Comet Hale-Bopp. The group ingested alcohol and barbiturates and then placed plastic bags over their heads. When Applewhite exited his vehicle, another American Christ was removed from consideration. Like Koresh, Applewhite saw mass media as the means for proselytizing. In the weeks leading towards the mass suicide, the Heaven's Gate cult members produced a series of VHS "exit statements" – video suicide notes. It was the group's last foray into media exploitation, an evolutionary history of mass communications that drove its recruitment successes. Beginning with posters and flyers in the mid-1970s, Heaven's Gate would print books and make radio appearances into the late-80s. As several members were web designers, their mass communication outreach culminated with the launching of an early internet website that, in 2022, is still unchanged since the groups' "departure" in 1997.^{6 7}

⁶ *How and When "Heaven's Gate" (The Door to the Physical Kingdom Level Above Human) May Be Entered: An Anthology of Our Materials*. ed. Tela. (United States: The Telah Foundation, 1997), vii-x, Section 1: 3-5, 2:1-9, 6:1-11.

⁷ www.heavensgate.com

In 21st-Century America, there is no longer a unified media scape for the religious figure, Jesus of Nazareth. Images of Jesus are dispersed throughout a vast range of American media, though the eclectic nature of these various incarnations extends beyond theological and doctrinal arguments between Christian denominations. Religious scholar Stephen Prothero argues that throughout the country's past, "...the American Jesus has been something of a chameleon. Christians have depicted him as black and white, male, and female, straight and gay, a socialist and a capitalist, a pacifist and a warrior, a Ku Klux Klansman, and a civil rights agitator."⁸ Not only are American Christians interpreting scripture, but the American media is as well. Unlike a religious observant, who may believe and yet hold her faith privately, cinema by its ostentatious nature exists publicly; it *desires* to be seen and heard. A film, by this nature, cannot do anything but evangelize its beliefs. A film's "multi-track" – or polyvocal - sermons are loudly preached from the pulpit of cineplexes.^{9 10}

In film, progressive secularization and iconoclasm strip away orthodox reverence and convention. Here, the cinematic Jesus can live an all-American, nonconformant lifestyle, including an active libido. In Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), Jesus (Willem Dafoe) is "strongly tempted...sexually" in the film's opening act when he visits a brothel—waiting behind a protracted line of johns, to speak with Mary Magdalene (Barbara Hershey). While the film's Jesus remains celibate following his meeting with Magdalene, sexual conquest and heteronormativity underscore his final temptation. While hanging upon the cross,

⁸ Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus – How the Son of God Became a National Icon*, (United States: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 8.

⁹ Robert Stam, *Film Adaptation, "Beyond Fidelity – The Dialogics of Adaptation,"* (United States: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 56.

¹⁰ Richard Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark – Portrayals of Jesus in Film*, (United States: Trinity Press International, 2003), 2.

Jesus is offered a chance to renounce his sacrificial role as the vicarious redeemer of humanity and escape his Roman capital punishment. The nails removed, he is taken down by a supernatural guide and allowed to fulfill his desires, including making love to Mary Magdalene.

The Last Temptation of Christ is an adaptation of the 1955 source novel written by Nikos Kazantzakis. In addressing the sexual nature of Jesus, Kazantzakis engaged in the form of heresy – a heterodox doctrine – similar to a movement that was heavily persecuted by the early, orthodox Church, known as *Gnosticism*. Just as the primitive Church attacked Gnostic scriptures of the third through fifth centuries, Kazantzakis' work was also made heretical in the 20th-century when it was “placed in the index of forbidden books by the Catholic Church.” The gnostic sexualizing of Jesus dates as early as the mid-second century. In Epiphanius of Salamis' polemic upon *The Greater Questions of Mary* - a nonextant gnostic and heretical text - Jesus and Mary Magdalene have sex; whereafter Jesus eats his semen, and tells Mary, “Thus we must do, that we may live.” Mary faints.¹¹

The sexualizing of Jesus through the progressive media returns Christianity to the polarizing debates over Christology – the nature of Jesus' being – that were extant though not pervasive in the Early Church. Additionally, it repurposes cinema as an instrument of iconoclasm. The American comedy *Hamlet 2* (Fleming, 2008) offers yet another example of Jesus' cinematic eroticism, pushing back against the celibacy of Jesus and even the heteronormative depictions of Scorsese's lusty lord. The lyrics to the film's musical number, *Rock me Sexy Jesus*, include not only a pivot towards the sexual fluidness of Jesus' sensuality but also an integration of action-heroism and the American fixation with violence in entertainment:

¹¹ Epiphanius of Salmis, *The Panarion – A Treatise Against Eighty Sects in Three Books*: Book 1. Part 26. Epiphanius Against the Gnostics, or Borborites. 8:1-3.

The Immaculate Conception really makes my day

But [Jesus] got lats that make me feel gay

"Turn the other cheek" is really showing class

But I really think it's sexy when he kicks Satan's ass¹²

In his introduction to *Trumpet Shall Sound*, Peter Worsley writes, “Religion is neither intrinsically conservative nor revolutionary. It can be infused with any kind of social content, notably political...”¹³ When we observe religiopolitical cinema, it is the medium of film that deserves scrutiny. As a believer, film forms its theology by interpreting holy text, though it then transmogrifies them by incorporating its ideological prejudices. Though progressive cinema has sexually liberated Jesus, it is not the only American reconstruction *du jour* as far-right, conservative partisanship has created a more salient symbol. As with television’s evangelism, this collaboration with cinema is definitionally *theocratic* in that it seeks to merge Church and the American state to manifest a nationalistic interpretation of Christian scripture. Xenophobic and militaristic, it is a crusade that redacts Christian tenants to Americanize them. Whereas the progressive cinema pushes against the chastity of Jesus, conservative and theocratic cinema pushes against Arminian – or, universal – salvation and the tenants of Christian pacifism.¹⁴ By connecting Christian violence – as sacred violence - with justified national violence, the theocratic movement finds legitimacy. As J. David Slocum argues in *Violence and American Cinema* that,

¹² *Hamlet 2*, directed by Andrew Fleming (Focus Features, 2008), 1:32:00, DVD.

¹³ Peter Worsley, *Trumpet Shall Sound - A Study of 'Cargo' Cults in Melanesia*, (United States: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968), xiii.

¹⁴ An argument persists in 21st-century apologetics whether Jesus’ salvation is Arminian – being universal – or only given to the chosen *elect* – a belief found in Calvinism and manifested in American Puritanism. See Romans 9:22.

The classical sociological distinction...between violence and coercive force relies on a standard of legitimacy that has deep social roots. The state retains a monopoly on the legitimate use of coercive force, whereas individuals who employ violence are allowed to do so only in extraordinary circumstances (self-defense, war) or they are judged, criminals.¹⁵

Returning to the cinema, in *Beyond Fidelity* and his introduction to *Film and Theory*, film theorist Robert Stam argues that film adaptation theory is best served by moving away from fidelity – that longing for a direct adaptation – and toward a “dialogism” between the film and literary texts.¹⁶ The theocratic media discourse with New Testament narratology is a contemptuous one, though only so far as it may still *appear* to be reverent to them, as not to offend conservative receivers. This may be the result of both religious and economic sensibilities. In *Stars*, Richard Dyer quotes Barry King, who argues that the “‘Hollywood studio realism’ is built around ‘the centrifuge of the hero’, and is, he claims, ‘inescapable social commentary’ – yet it must not offend the audience (or else it would not sell).”¹⁷ Theocratic media presents itself as worshipful to the Christian god, all the while supplanting Jesus for an action hero in its creation of violent American mythology.

I am grateful for my six years in the world of televangelism, for it opportunely focused my attention on those crusading American conservatives who use theocratic media to create weaponized communication symbology. I argue that the theocratic media reinforces a xenophobia fueled by American exceptionalism and justifies violence by creating a perpetual

¹⁵ Violence and the American cinema. *Introduction: Violence and American Cinema: Notes for an Investigation*. ed. J David, Slocum, *Violence and American Cinema*, (United States: Routledge Press, 2001), 2-3.

¹⁶ Robert Stam, *Film and Theory*, (United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd, 2000) 3-8, 26-34.

¹⁷ Richard Dyer, *Stars*, (United Kingdom: British Film Institute, 1979), 31.

holy war, where liberals, intellectuals, gays, and minorities become the enemies of Christ. From a defensive position, I return to what I know best, and Papa's historical criticism seems again to offer the requisite tool necessary to de-myth society. My research will contribute to the undoing of conservative myths by identifying the *mythogenesis* of the All-American Christ's cinematic myth-hero. This figure is actualized in motion pictures by fusing together the ideological strains of Judeo-Christian vicarious redemption through blood atonement, Biblical American Exceptionalism, and conservative, muscular Christianity. Using the methodologies of Christian historical criticism and American studies, I argue that these strains converge at the level of the cinema, as a facet of American theocratic media; and is observed in the 1971 Christ film, *The Omega Man*, with the film's star, Charlton Heston, becoming motion pictures' violent messiah, the All-American Christ.

For the American theocratic media, Heston's star power becomes essential for fusing political conservative and American Christian ideologies. In arguing that Heston is the embodiment of the All-American Christ, I lean upon film theorist Richard Dyer who articulated players in the Hollywood star system "in terms of their significations" through the convergence of "social and semiotic" factors. "The primary concern of any attention to Hollywood," Dyer argues, "must be with the dominant ideology of Western society." In his contributions toward championing Western ideologies through film, Heston normalizes and stabilizes religious violence. The contradictory nature of hawkish conservatism and the pacifism found in many of the *logia* of Jesus are transmogrified by this new theocratic construction, the All-American Christ.¹⁸

¹⁸ *Logia*, Greek for a collection of "preserved sayings". A single saying is called a *logion*.

The incarnation of All-American Christ spotlights a nexus where Christian and political conservative ideologies collide. Dyer argues that the "operations of the dominant ideology are...a ceaseless effort to mask or displace both its contradictions and those contradictions to it that arise from alternative and oppositional ideologies." Using Shirley Temple as an exemplar for star ontology directed towards "political solutions", Dyer demonstrates that stars may be used as partisan pawns, opening gambits upon a grander chessboard stratagem. Heston, too, becomes the tool of political machinations, masking the theocratic political power behind his image.¹⁹ When the Republican party casts its political opponents as the enemies of Christ, it justifies violence upon intellectual, liberal society by a large swath of gun-owning members of American society. It is a movement for a new Crusade to reclaim America as the new holy land and then cleanse it of infidels. Like all religions, it begins with myth.

¹⁹ Richard Dyer, *Stars*, (United Kingdom: British Film Institute, 1979), 1-3, 7-8, 29.

SECTION 2

VICARIOUS REDEMPTION AND BLOOD ATONEMENT

Myth is a difficult word to define, and further complicated still is the media's role as a mythmaker. Religious-film scholar John Lyden argues that, like *religion*, "every definition of 'myth' is a construction of the scholar's imagination and as such cannot provide total objectivity about the phenomena it seeks to delineate."²⁰ While defining myth objectively proves problematic, describing its societal function is less difficult. Storytelling lies at the heart of lore and cinema, in both the generation and perpetuation of myth. In *Regeneration through Violence*, Richard Slotkin draws attention to the importance of religion and film, as both fashion myth as a "complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors." In this, mythmaking through narratology is a shared function of religion and cinema. When the cinema adapts the narratives found in a holy text, it aligns itself with previously established, complex narratives *before* engaging in a translation that reshapes them. The new output is a cinematic myth that in society, as in the case of *The Omen's* numerology, may make obsolete older, more intellectual hermeneutics.

Like the nondemonic number 666 within *The Omen*, film becomes a vehicle in which storytelling reshapes perception. Anthropologist Misia Landau argues that myth moves beyond narratology, in which "...we have not only different versions of stories but a different version of reality which are shaped by these stories." A film's *theology* – its system of beliefs – may be represented then by the variation of myth that it evangelizes through its narratology. The myth of

²⁰ John Lyden, *Film as Religion* (United States: New York University Press, 2003), 56-57.

the All-American Christ has this same power to reshape the reality for its conservative evangelicals. My research explores the *mythogenesis* – as the beginning of myth – of this cinematic figure, The All-American Christ, who serves two of Joseph Campbell’s four functions of myth, being:

normative, or to ‘validate, support, and imprint the norms of a given, specific moral order, that, namely of the society in which the individual is to live’; and *guidance*, or ‘to guide him [the individual], stage by stage, in health, strength and harmony of spirit, through the whole foreseeable course of a useful life.’²¹

Within this conservative, theocratic ideology, the All-American Christ makes *normative* American exceptionalism while usurping Christian salvation to make sacred violence and bloodshed a *guiding* force.

The figure of the All-American Christ presents himself as a conservative, Western action hero who is comprised of, and in turn transmogrifies, several ideological strains. Principally, the cinema’s generation of this myth-hero is a repurposing of a religious ideology at the heart of Christian *soteriology* – its theology of salvation and redemption. It is the conception of *vicarious redemption* – the redeeming of the many by the castigation of an individual. In Judeo-Christianity, the nature of vicarious redemption is fulfilled through the death of a scapegoat. The etymology of the word *scapegoat* entered the English lexicon when William Tyndale translated the Hebrew Bible into English in 1530. Coming to the *Book of Leviticus* – in Hebrew, *Toras Kohanim*, “the Torah of the Priests” - Tyndale found the divine mandate for a National Day of Atonement. In addition to being offered blood through animal sacrifice, Yahweh dictates that a

²¹ John Lyden, *Film as Religion* (United States: New York University Press, 2003), 60-63.

single goat is selected and, with all the sins of the nation thrust upon it, annually cast out into the wilderness to die of exposure and thirst. Tyndale named this animal with rather unfortunate luck an *escapegoat*, which later shifted into the modern *scapegoat*. Though Hebraic animal sacrifice ceased with the destruction of the Second Jewish Temple in 70 CE, the Day of Atonement – *Yom Kippur* – is still celebrated in the 21st century as the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. Its religious observance orbits the idea that the death of one, through sacrifice, atones for the sins of the Nation.

Within orthodox Christianity, vicarious redemption through scapegoating is intensified by the belief that Jesus' death upon the cross was the final sacrifice for all humankind; the last scapegoat in a tradition dating to *Exodus*. Jesus becomes the final, *Kal Vachomer* Passover Lamb, the ultimate expiation for sin.²² Of all four canonical gospels, the *Gospel of John* pronounces most heavily the imagery of Christ as the last Passover Lamb. *John* reorders the sequencing of the passion narrative - including dates and times - as found in the earlier *synoptic* gospels of *Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke*; this, to create his unique *Christology* – a theology concerning the nature of Jesus. The synoptic tradition holds that Jesus was crucified at nine in the morning and died three hours later, at noon. In the *Gospel of John*, the scene is displaced. Here, Jesus is crucified at noon and dies at three in the afternoon. The day, too, is altered. In the earlier synoptic tradition, Jesus eats a Passover dinner with his disciples and is taken into custody in the early hours of the following day. In *John*, the washing of feet replaces the Last Supper,

²² *Kal Vechamer* – in Hebrew, “light and heavy”, or the argument from a minor premise to a major one. Taken from Rabbi Hillel’s *Principles of Argumentation*, which heavily influenced the theology of the *Gospel of John*. In this line of argument, whatever can be said about A can in even greater extent be said about B. For the authors of *John*, whatever is said in the Old Testament about the Passover Lamb can be said to an even greater extent about Jesus.

and Jesus is taken, put on trial, and executed on the Day of Preparation, *before* the Passover meal.

Why the alteration? Because *John* has a theological ax to grind. In Jesus' day, on the Day of Preparation, at the ninth hour (3 pm), the High Priest would wield a knife and approaching a slaughtered lamb, make an incision into its pericardial sac; out from which blood and body fluid would pour, which was then collected into a bowl. The High Priest would then lift the vessel and exclaim, "Behold the Blood of the Lamb of our Redemption."²³ At this same moment, in the *Gospel of John*, a Roman soldier pierces the side of Jesus with a spear, out from which blood and water spill forth.²⁴ By this parallelism Jesus, in *John's* Christology, is the final, divinely sanctioned scapegoat for humanity.

Though a Christian messiah, the scapegoating nature of the All-American Christ is actualized through universal, societal characteristics. In *The Scapegoat*, philosopher Rene Girard outlines the "collective effect of the scapegoat" myth.²⁵ In *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard addresses the circularity of violence and scapegoating, noting that with the latter:

...the proper function of the sacrificial process requires not only the complete separation of the sacrificed victim from those beings for whom the victim is a substitute but also a similarity between both parties... If the gap between the victim and the community is allowed to grow too wide, all similarities will be destroyed. The victim will no longer be

²³ Dr. Irvin Arkin, "The Gospel of John," (Lecture, Saint Louis University, March, 2006).

²⁴ In belaying the point, the author of *John* adds a quote from Exodus 12, which refers directly to the Passover lamb.

²⁵ Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, (United States: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 39-40.

capable of attracting the violent impulses to itself; the sacrifice will cease to serve as a “good conductor.”²⁶

Theocratic media requires such a conductor and so creates its own myth-hero through the American cinema. It is the myth of the All-American Christ. In Girard’s sense, the figure is paradoxically constructed, as he must represent society so that his death representatively atones for its collective sins. Yet, he must be shunned by that same society when becoming the requisite scapegoat. As Girard argues, this figure must be a “well-known stranger.”²⁷ Like the goat driven off into the desert to die of thirst and exposure, this motion picture myth-hero is the collective product of society. He is made individualistic by his destiny to die from an eventual ex-communication from God and country.

The theocratic cinema presents the figure of the All-American Christ because it too believes in this form of sacred violence. I argue that if a film can believe, it can preach. Its sermons evangelize an ideology that shapes not only American but world culture. Motion pictures serve in this priestly capacity, a "myth-artist", standing at a pulpit among many in a theater of converging and often discrepant religious ideologies. How this cleric of imagery interprets ideologies, harmonizes them, redacts them, reconstructs and deconstructs them – all the while injecting its prejudices – elevates cinema to evangelical status.²⁸

²⁶ Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*. (United States: The John Hopkins University Press, 1972), 39.

²⁷ Rene Girard, *The Scapegoat*, (United States: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986), 32.

²⁸ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence – The Mythology of the American Frontier – 1600-1860*, (United States: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 269.

SECTION 3

BIBLICAL AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND MUSCLAR CHRISTIANITY

In addition to Judeo-Christian beliefs concerning vicarious redemption, the myth of the All-American Christ traces its origins to the *Usonian* influencers of Americanized, Muscular Christian Exceptionalism and through the force of the printed word.²⁹ Beginning with the institutions of American Christianity, it was 17th-century Puritanism and its quest to create a Christian state that wrote ‘theocracy’ into the opening chapters of US history. When reformation of the Church of England yielded far fewer Catholic repudiations than desired, the English Puritans embraced separatism and went West. In 1620, a voyage upon the *Mayflower* to cross the Atlantic for the New World was undertaken. Though it carried the seeds of Christian theocracy to North American shores, the Puritans did not create a direct theocracy. 17th-century New England Puritans, for example, separated the offices of civil from religious authorities; however, it was still a society *of* Christians and ultimate authority was derived from on-high. In *Regeneration through Violence*, Richard Slotkin notes,

For the Puritans, political, social, and religious theory dealt with the ordering of society in terms of the problem of authority. Institutions were thought to possess the power to bind men and societies because of their derivation of intrinsic value from the ultimate authority of the divine word.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are all *religions of the book*, where the strokes of pens and the blots of ink confer meta-divine authority. In this way, the movement for an American imperial cult manufactured its own authority by turning to the printed word. Contrarily, for

²⁹ *Usonian* – or a United States American.

Americans, this dates to the pen strokes of a very anti-imperial founding father. In 1804, Thomas Jefferson began the crusade toward an Americanized Christ when he secularized the New Testament Gospels to “omit the question of [Jesus’] divinity.”³⁰ Unpublished in Jefferson’s lifetime, the *Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* - revised in 1820 - passed the narratives of Jesus through an Enlightenment refinery to reconfigure a secularized image of Jesus.³¹ It was an effort to remove the “Christ” from Jesus. For Jefferson, a secular Jesus was needed in a secular nation.³²

Continuing throughout the 1800s, the North American printed word continued to drive the movement that would lead to the eventual, cinematic creation of the All-American Christ. In *The American Adam*, R.W.B. Lewis argues for the existence of a linking theme between several 19th-century US authors that "outline...a native American mythology." Lewis maintains that the United States of the 19th century was principally dismissive of its European prehistory. America, as the New World, was recast as the New Eden. In turn, the American citizen became the New Adam; an Adam before the fall, “fresh” and “starting new.” For Lewis, America and “[e]very culture seems, as it advances toward maturity, to produce its own determining debate over the ideas that preoccupy it: salvation, the order of nature, money, power, sex, the machine, and the like.” Lewis’ analysis fits my conception of the All-American Christ, a theocratic messiah who becomes a necessary American sacrifice. Phallic-forward, he stands at the ready to use the

³⁰ Thomas Jefferson, *The Jefferson Bible – The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, (United States: Beacon Press, 1989), 9.

³¹ Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus – How the Son of God Became a National Icon*, (United States: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 8.

³² In *American Jesus*, Stephen Prothero argues that the 20th Century American biblical scholarship that emanated from the *Westar Jesus Seminar* continued Jefferson’s tradition of secularizing Jesus.

machines of war to advance the Kingdom of God; the All-American Christ, as the national scapegoat, meets death but not before taking a few of his enemies with him.

Biblical American exceptionalism, through print, became an early conductor for reconstructions of Christ as Usonian. While Lewis attends to Whitman, Hawthorne, and Melville when arguing for the American "collective affair" when biblically recasting itself, it is perhaps the 19th Century American author Joseph Smith, whose *The Book of Mormon* (1830) began in earnest the linking of biblical and American identity; the printed word here making Jesus a naturalized citizen.³³ In *Mormon America*, Richard and Joan Ostling note that "Mormonism ... provided nationalistic Americans with a very American Gospel...[one] that recorded a very sacred history of the ancient Americas."³⁴ In the penultimate *Book of Ether*, it is God's will that Americans be "free...from all other nations under heaven", under the condition that they "serve the God of the land, who is Jesus Christ..."³⁵ In this, *The Book of Mormon* infuses the Christian cause with the need for a militarized America; this has led, in part, to a 21st-century, neoconservative need for national security.

Following the violent death of the American prophet Joseph Smith, church leader Brigham Young and the Mormon governing body, the Council of Fifty, headed West. The westward journey would have likely occurred regardless of Smith's violent mob death. "During the last few months of Joseph Smith's life several destinations for Zion had been considered,"

³³ RWB Lewis, *The American Adam*, (United States: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 1-2, 4-5.

³⁴ Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America - The Power and The Promise*, (United States: Harper San Francisco, 1999), xviii, xix.

³⁵ Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. 1981. *The Book of Mormon: another testament of Jesus Christ ; The Doctrine and covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints ; The Pearl of great price*. Salt Lake City, Utah, USA: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Book of Ether, 2-12, 6-17.

eventually fixating upon the Salt Lake Valley.³⁶ More aggressively than the Puritans, the Mormons sought to Americanize Christianity through the creation of a Western religious state. They engaged in a frontier pilgrimage of American escapism that, if achieved, would necessitate the creation of theocracy. Even so, Hill and Allen, in *Mormonism and American Culture*, note that there may have been some mid-19th century ambivalence toward this emerging cult:

In 1852, Lieutenant John W Gunnison, an army engineer, published a widely read book, *The Mormons, or Latter-Day Saints*. The Mormon political community was characterized as outwardly republican but infused with and dominated by religious influence. Gunnison termed the system "Theo-democratic" and remarked that its power could most effectively be broken by leaving it alone.³⁷

Appeasement could only be of so much service, as the imperial cult of Mormonism grew increasingly more theocratic. In 1887, through the Edmunds-Tucker Act, the US government itself resorted to using the authority of the State over the Church when it put an end to several Latter-Day practices, such as Mormon sovereignty and polygamy.³⁸

By this time in American history, biblical American Exceptionalism – the myth of America the holy land – was entrenched in the American psyche. While the Mormons sought Zion in the West, they could not escape Lewis' American Edenic myth. Joseph Smith even preached that the Garden of Eden was physically once located in Jackson County, Missouri – in Smith's day, a western border state. While both American Christian and frontier movements turned West to find a New Eden, perhaps they should have gazed East. Genesis itself recalls that

³⁶ Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America - The Power and The Promise*, (United States: Harper San Francisco, 1999), 39.

³⁷ *Mormonism and American Culture*. ed. Marvin S. Hill and James B. Allen, (United States: Harper & Row, 1972), 4.

³⁸ Richard N. Ostling and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America - The Power and The Promise*, (United States: Harper San Francisco, 1999), 76-77.

Eden was never to be found under western skies; as Yahweh had set the Garden in the “east.”

John H. Marks, in his commentary upon the *Book of Genesis*, writes:

The location of Eden is unknown (cf. II Kings 19:12), if indeed the author considered it a geographically identifiable haven (cf. Isaiah 51:3). A derivation of the name from Babylonian *edinu*, “plain” or “steppe,” is possible, in which case the meaning might be that God miraculously created an oasis in the desert plain.^{39 40}

Eden may have been an eastern plain, but those seeking Eden in the western American plains should have been further discouraged from travel as the Garden itself was never a destination point. Adam did not, after all, travel to Eden; in Genesis 2:9, it is written that God “placed” Adam in the Garden. Those Americans who saw themselves as an image of the New Adam set out upon a journey that their biblical counterpart simply did not. American cinema, too, announces this dilemma involving America’s false turns, its misguided spiritual GPS, and its need for *gerontogeous* redemption.⁴¹

In the latter decades of the 19th-century, the Americanization of Christianity began to endow Jesus with increased testicular fortitude. Starting in the 1890s, and in responsive opposition to an emerging feminism in the United States, Stephen Prothero argues that there began a national “crisis of masculinity.”⁴² Moving forward, white Christian America would need a well-endowed savior. In *American Fascists*, journalist and Harvard Divinity School graduate Chris Hedges argues that within this conservative, religious framework:

³⁹ John H. Marks. “The Book of Genesis.” *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*. ed. Charles M. Laymon. (United States: Abingdon Press, 1982), 5.

⁴⁰ cf., “compare with.”

⁴¹ *Gerontogeous*, or “relating to the Old World,” or “the Eastern Hemisphere.”

⁴² Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus – How the Son of God Became a National Icon*, (United States: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 92.

The decline of America is described as the result of the decline of male prowess. This decline has led to weakness and moral decay. It has resulted in a bewildering human and social complexity that, often seen as feminine, is the work of Satan. By submitting to the Christian leader, and to a powerful male God who will destroy those who misbehave, followers avoid dealing with life.⁴³

As Christopher Hitchens argues, “A consistent proof that religion is man-made and anthropomorphic can also be found in the fact that it is usually ‘man’ made, in the sense of masculine, as well.”⁴⁴ Dating back to 17th-century New England, Puritan society, social problems were solved by “ultimate authority”, under a “purely patriarchal” God in a patriarchal society.⁴⁵ This alignment of masculinity and divinity would resurge in the 19th century through the overarching belief of a manly messiah as communicated through the printed word.

In 1880, a book from Great Britain crossed the Atlantic and took hold of impressionable, American male minds. It injected testosterone into Jesus and laid the foundations for the masculinity present within the cinematic All-American Christ. The book was Thomas Hughes’ *The Manliness of Christ*, which describes Jesus as not just the prototypical man but the premiere military leader. “Christ”, Hughes writes, “[is] the great Captain of liberty, as well as salvation.”⁴⁶ In *Manhood in America*, Michael Kimmel describes Hughes’ interpretation of Jesus as overtly masculine, invoking a “Muscular Christianity,” which like the Catholic Church, turns manhood into the new, ultimate priesthood. While the YMCA institution became the forerunning

⁴³ Chris Hedges, *American Fascists – The Christian Right and The War on America*, (United States: Free Press, 2006), 81

⁴⁴ Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, (United States: Twelve, 2007), 54

⁴⁵ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence – The Mythology of the American Frontier – 1600-1860*, (United States: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 43-44.

⁴⁶ Thomas Hughes Q.C., *The Manliness of Christ*, (United States: Houghton, Osgood and Company, 1880), 128.

champion of the cause in the nineteen aughts, the movement's first wave of media propaganda culminated with Bruce Barton's *The Man Nobody Knows* (1924), a book that opens with a "manifesto" for Muscular Christian doctrine.⁴⁷ Stephen Prothero summarizes Barton's alterations of Jesus' image, who becomes a quintessential stud-muffin:

...a young man glowing with physical strength and the joy of living." He had a strong handshake and a good sense of humor. His muscles, honed for years in carpenter's shop, "stood out like knots of iron," and his shoulders were as broad as his chest was deep. This "man's man" was also "a women's man" who possessed in abundance the "manly strength' that "since the world began" has been a "magnet" attracting the weaker to the stronger sex.

The Jesus of America was now and above all else, a Man. Journalist Chris Hedges defines this movement as "Muscular Christianity," characterized by a "hypermasculinity of radical Christian conservatism which crushes the independence and self-expression of women, is a way for men in the movement to compensate for the curtailing of their own independence, their object obedience to church authorities in the calls for sexual restraint." Within Muscular Christianity, the "images of Jesus often show him with thick muscles, clutching a sword. Christian men are portrayed as powerful warriors." This form of machismo and Christian violence, the link between sexual and military gratification, is highlighted by semiologist Umberto Eco's defining qualities of the *Ur-Fascist* – or Eternal Fascist, of which theocracy is one form. Among those listed is that the fascist myth-hero, "tends to play with weapons – doing

⁴⁷ Michael Kimmel. *Manhood in America*, (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1996), 177-186, 196-197.

so became an ersatz phallic exercise.”⁴⁸ In *Violence and the American Cinema*, Leo Charney argues that:

Violence, like sex, becomes a way to feel present; or more accurately, to mime presence, to manufacture a sensation of presence in the face of the impossibility of presence...Violence and sex become aspirations to attain the immediacy of that sensational moment, but the apotheosis of sensation can by definition never be reached...”⁴⁹

It is here that we may locate an intersection between conservative, theocratic cinema and progressive, iconoclastic cinema as each reconstructs an Americanized Jesus in sexualized interpretations. In this, the All-American Christ alternates his grip between his gun and his penis. However, as Charney argues, he may be frustrated by his inability to climax from gratifying his violent and sexual passions. For Hedges, “Hypermasculinity becomes a way to compensate, especially since the unspoken truth is that Christian men are required to have a personal, loving relationship with a male deity and surrender their will to a male-dominated authoritarian church.”⁵⁰

In the 20th-century, cinema tagged out the printed word as the vehicle for this conservative myth generation. The All-American Christ, a construction of American cinema, is a masculine and violent figure that alters orthodox conceptions of Jesus. Cinema’s power of redaction invokes Marshall McLuhan’s often cited decree that the “medium is the message.”

⁴⁸ Chris Hedges, *American Fascists – The Christian Right and The War on America*, (United States: Free Press, 2006), v, 78-79

⁴⁹ *Violence and the American Cinema*, Leo Charney, “The violence of a perfect moment”, ed. J David, Solcum, (United States: Routledge Press, 2001), 49.

⁵⁰ Chris Hedges, *American Fascists – The Christian Right and The War on America*, (United States: Free Press, 2006), 80

McLuhan himself was a Bible-believing Christian who attended and spoke at the National Religious Broadcasters convention in January of 1970. According to event organizer Ben Armstrong, author of *The Electric Church*, during his lecture to the assembly of religious broadcasters, McLuhan argued that “the only perfect union of the medium and the message had occurred in the person of Jesus Christ.”⁵¹

One year following McLuhan's appearance at the NRB convention, the American cinema became an intersection and repositior of these various ideological strains. Through *The Omega Man* (Sagal, 1971) theocratic cinema amalgamates Christian sacrifice, biblical American exceptionalism, and Muscular Christianity. The myth-figure becomes the apex of America's history religious factions and political conservatism, of western expansion and manhood. The film succeeds in anthropomorphizing the movement's messiah with film star Charlton Heston, creating the cinematic American myth-hero, The All-American Christ.

⁵¹ Ben Armstrong, *The Electric Church*, (United States: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979), 11-12.

SECTION 4

FROM ALPHA TO OMEGA MAN: THE DIVINE ROBERT NEVILLE

Before exploring the complex nature of the cinematic All-American Christ, it is crucial to acknowledge that this motion picture myth-hero is not a direct depiction of the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth. *Jesus films* are here understood to be those motion pictures that attempt to rearticulate archetypal narratology or imagery of Jesus as adapted from the New Testament. In sharp contrast, *The Omega Man* presents itself to be a *Christ film*, a science fiction Western that usurps the authority of Jesus through its Christological re-appropriation. Malachi Martin makes a similar distinction by describing the cinematic Jesus-figure as “any representation of Jesus himself;” while the Christ-figure “is a character who is presented as resembling Jesus in a significant way.”⁵² The word Christ comes from the Greek “*christos*”, meaning “anointed one”; and so, it is a conferrable title and not Jesus’ surname.⁵³ Motion pictures, within the Christ-film genre, position their own figures against the messianic title that Christians give to Jesus.

In *Imaging the Divine*, author Lloyd Baugh argues that the “profile of the Christ-figure in film can include a number of elements or dimensions, all of which can be recognized on the one hand in the fullness of their meaning Jesus the Christ, and on the other hand to a lesser extent in the figure of Christ represented in the film question.”⁵⁴ Gerard Loughlin differentiates the *Jesus film* from the *Christ film* by his own demarcations. “Christ-figures,” Loughlin writes, “[are] repetitions in their own circumstances of the Nazarene.” “Christ-identified-figures”, on the other hand, “[identify] with his suffering as in itself salvation; a purifying of the soul through the

⁵² Peter Malone, *Movie Christs and Antichrists*, (United States: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), 17.

⁵³ In the Greek Septuagint, *christos* replaces the Hebrew word *mesiach*, or messiah.

⁵⁴ Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine*, (United States: Sheed & Ward, 1997), 205.

spilling of blood.”⁵⁵ The All-American Christ relates exclusively to the latter, the duality of High Priest and sacrificial offering that leads to a cinematic Yom Kippur. As we will see, the All-American Christ is a transmogrified adaptation of the Christ-figure through the lenses of blood atonement, Muscular Christianity, and biblical American exceptionalism. His presence in a *Christ film* is not, by its nature, bound by that limitation of fidelity that Robert Stam calls *iconophobia* – the fear of irreverence. Like the *Book of Mormon*, it does not see its translation of ancient texts as irreverent, but rather, as the fulfillment of messianic prophecy.

In *Regeneration through Violence*, Richard Slotkin expounds upon nearly three centuries of American mythology. "A mythology", Slotkin writes, "is a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors." Applicable to cinema, Slotkins refers to myth-artists as those who use "the artifact of myth to evoke the sense of the myth and its complex of affirmation in the audience." The relationship between film and religion, though parasitic in theocratic media, orbits the need for each to sustain legends. As Slotkins writes,

The legends and stories we commonly call myth are simply the artifacts of the myth, and they retain their mythic powers only so long as they can continue to evoke in the minds of succeeding generations a vision analogous in its compelling power to that of the original mythopoeic perception.⁵⁶

Rachel Wagner addresses the role of gun violence in film and coins "cowboy apocalypses" as those movies that "[borrow] myths of the Wild West, blending them with myths

⁵⁵ Gerald Loughlin, "Bible and Film: Suffering and Special Effects," *Modern Believing* 53, vol. 2 (2012), 122.

⁵⁶ Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier – 1600-1860*, (United States: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 6-8.

of a post-apocalyptic future, resulting in a future vision of chaos that is resolved through gun violence in a refreshed frontier.”⁵⁷ The myth of the All-American Christ, infuses this cinematic Americanized frontier justice with religious moral certainty; and so cinema, as a mythmaker, becomes an accomplice to theocracy in its construction of a masculine messiah. Slotkin comes the closest to identifying the All-American Christ, though his description circumvents Christology and divinity. He argues:

The Western Sci-Fi Omega Man returns to the “epic of the [1960-65 period that] centers on a “hard” self-willed White male hero - often played by Charlton Heston - who stands for the highest values of civilization and progress but who is typically besieged from without by enemies (often non-Whites and/or savages), who greatly outnumber him and beset from within by the decadence, corruption and “softness” of his own society. The story often ends with the hero’s martyrdom.”⁵⁸

The Omega Man (Sagal, 1971) marks Heston's fifth nonconsecutive venture into biblical motion picture adaptations. Heston is not the only common denominator between these films, as an eclectic array of biblical American exceptionalism binds them. This trace began with Heston’s portrayal of the Old Testament Patriarch, Moses, in Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* (1956); a film whose “pre-prologue curtain address...provided a platform for [De Mille’s] staunch pro-freedom, pro-American and rabid anti-Communist beliefs during the Cold War.”⁵⁹ In *The Uncircumcised Lips of Moses*, Vincent W. Lloyds argues that at its core, *The Ten Commandments* exhibits beliefs that are,

⁵⁷ Rachel Wagner. “Souvenirs of the Apocalypse: Guns as Authenticating Props.” *CrossCurrents*, 70(3), 312. 2020. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26975092>.

⁵⁸ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, (United States: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1991), 505.

⁵⁹ *Bible and Cinema: Fifty Key Films*, ed. Adele Reinhartz, (United States: Routledge Press, 2013), 255.

...strikingly American. In addition to the instantly recognizable Hollywood conventions and American accents, Exodus is framed as a story of nation-building, a story of a people leaving oppression and moving to a new land where they would be free, where there would be justice. Exodus is the American Revolution, Moses is the Founding Father, and the Ten Commandments are the Constitution. America *is* Judeo-Christian, nation and religion are one and the same.⁶⁰

In addition to Heston and DeMille, the very American text, *The Book of Mormon*, also has an uncredited role as producer in *The Ten Commandments*. Heston's make-up design was the creation of "biblical artist" Arnold Friberg, brought into the production's collective "after [De Mille] saw a series of paintings by Friberg depicting scenes from a book of scriptures called *The Book of Mormon*."⁶¹ In *God's Law*, Alan Nadel argues that Friberg's "paintings and the look they gave *The Ten Commandments* - found their truth in the way they mediated between the sacred Word and the contemporary world, sanctifying DeMille's secularizations."

Nadel negotiates the intersection of religion and politics in cinema. He reads DeMille's *Ten Commandments* "as a product of American cold war ideology, one that highlights and localizes the focus of America's political, theological, and economic conflicts." Nadel goes on to define the relationship between Old Testament and American Cold War mythologies as a "supplement[ary]" "symbiosis" between scripture and American nationalism. Motion pictures, in this measure, leach their authority from holy texts; conversely, scripture becomes mimetically sustained in society by its cinematic adaptations. Parting slightly from Nadel, the myth of the

⁶⁰ Vincent W. Lloyd "THE UNCIRCUMCISED LIPS OF MOSES." In *In Defense of Charisma*, 29–46. Columbia University Press, 2018. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/lloy18386>. 30.

⁶¹ Michael Munn, *Charlton Heston*, (United States: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 63.

All-American Christ, as generated from a relationship between nationalism and religious zealotry, in either direction is much more cancerous than symbiotic; like a tumor, the conservative Christ myth requires a society to sustain it, though its goal is the destruction of its host. Just as DeMille's "interpretation of the contemporary [cold war] world gains veracity from its biblical source," Heston's conservative cancer is strengthened by his biblical representations.⁶² Each succeeding role enhances Heston's Judeo-Biblical credibility with the conservative community.

The theme of American biblical exceptionalism continues in Heston's filmography past *The Ten Commandments*. As the titular character in Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1958), Heston on separate occasions interacts with the character of Jesus, in which the two reciprocate the kindness of offering a thirsty man water. The film's source novel, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, was "published in 1880 by Lew Wallace, a Union General of the American Civil War whose own life was filled with adventure and accomplishments in a number of fields." The book was published during a time in America when there was a "drastic destabilization of traditional Protestant worldviews as a result of their encounter with modernization." *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* "enthralled late-nineteenth-century US readers," who were "fascinate[ed]" with the parallels between the Roman Republic and America." "No less important to a generally evangelical, Christ-centered society," Eran Shalev writes, "was the Rome that crucified Jesus."⁶³ Though *Ben-Hur* (1958) never reveals the face of the actor who portrays Christ (Claude Heater), it is perhaps less due to artistic reverence than a form of preserved censorship from Wallace himself,

⁶² Alan Nadel, "God's Law and the Wide Screen: The Ten Commandments as Cold War Epic. *PMLA* 108, no. 3 (1993). <https://doi.org/10.2307/462612>. 423, 416-17.

⁶³ Ryan Barbara and Milette Shamir, eds. *Bigger than Ben-Hur: The Book, Its Adaptations, and Their Audiences*. Syracuse University Press, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1j1nvdj>, 18, 34.

who forbade “stage appearances of Jesus Christ” during the novel’s theatrical adaptation.⁶⁴ Just as the source novel, according to Historian Howard Miller, helped “us understand the peculiar way in which Americans resolved, for a time, the tensions of secular and sacred,” Heston’s continuance of Americanizing cinematic, biblical figures may also provide answers in comprehending the ascension of the Christian Right and theocratic media.

In George Stevens’ *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1964) Heston again finds himself in the midst of cinema’s dialogue with the Bible; this time playing Jesus’ Essene cousin, John the Baptist; a role that Heston describes as keeping him “busy baptizing Jews for George in Arizona.”⁶⁵ Along with Heston, biblical American exceptionalism was ingested by the film’s production collective. This *Jesus film* was “shot entirely in America,” even though the option of filming in Palestine was available.⁶⁶ As Heston recalls in his autobiography, *In the Arena*:

Having thoroughly scouted locations in the Holy Land, George [Stevens] decided that two thousand years of wear had considerably reduced their photogenic potential. The Arizona Rockies, geologically much younger, arguably looked more like the ground Jesus walked on...when he walked there.⁶⁷

In *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, America becomes an upgraded substitution for the Holy Land; in fact, it is *more* holy because it appears more Edenic. Like Joseph Smith and the Mormon tradition, director George Stevens augments America by transporting Zion to native soil. As William R Telford writes in *Bible and Cinema*, “[f]ilmed in Arizona, California, Nevada

⁶⁴ *Bible and Cinema: Fifty Key Films*, ed. Adele Reinhartz, (United States: Routledge Press, 2013), 35.

⁶⁵ Charlton Heston, *In the Arena*, (United States: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 299.

⁶⁶ Michael Munn, *Charlton Heston*, (United States: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 115.

⁶⁷ Charlton Heston, *In the Arena*, (United States: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 298.

and Utah, the settings give the film a monumental feel. Canyonlands National Park (Moab, Utah), for example, was the location for the Sermon the Mount...⁶⁸

In theocracies, authority is the legitimacy that state and religion grant each other. In 1990, Heston went on to anthropomorphize the theocratic state when he played God the Father in John Cornell's comedy-drama, *Almost an Angel*. It is a film that thoroughly infuses the Christian God with state authority. While pushing a boy out of harm's way, the otherwise villainous criminal, Terry Dean (Paul Hogan) is hit by a car. In a transcendent experience, Dean wakes up in heaven and meets the Man-in-Charge, Yahweh (Heston), who acts as a US justice official. "Let me put it in language you'll understand," the Lord tells Dean while holding citation tickets. "You're on probation. Think of me as your probation officer." As if pulled over while approaching the white light, Dean sits in a vehicle - an ethereal hospital bed - and haggles with God over his infractions.

While Heston's cinematic, biblical adaptations are saturated with Americana in one measure or another, more than any other role, his portrayal of the Christ-figure in *The Omega Man* is the most dangerous. While many Christ films fuse alternative ideologies with Christianity, Heston's *The Omega Man* becomes a foundational text for the American theocratic media. A post-apocalyptic science fiction Western, *Omega Man* allows Heston to extend Judeo-Christian myths of blood atonement to the frontier; where, for both, "violence is central". In *Gun Nation*, Richard Slotkin argues that the "Myth of the Frontier is our oldest and most characteristic myth." Slotkin writes that:

⁶⁸ *Bible and Cinema: Fifty Key Films*, William R Telford, ed. Adele Reinhartz, (United States: Routledge Press, 2013), 122.

According to this myth-historiography, the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it have been the means of achieving a national identity, a democratic polity, an ever-expanding one economy, and a phenomenally dynamic and "progressive" civilization.⁶⁹

Postmillennial, *The Omega Man* begins with eschatological saturation. It is 1977 and humanity appears to have vanished, wiped out by an unnamed plague. Both the film and Richard Matheson's source novel, *I am Legend* (1954), set their post-apocalyptic narrative in a western, coastal city of Los Angeles; this being – finally – the end of Manifest Destiny. There are no more Western, terrestrial frontiers to conquer standing at the shores of the Pacific, nor any religious or political faction to lead the charge. Or is there?

The Omega Man opens with a crane shot of a deserted Los Angeles. The streets are devoid of people, and there is an accompanying silence due to the vanished population. Without an American people, even in the remains of a downtown metropolis, the peace of nature is restored. Perhaps the Mormon Eden was further West than projected? Like R.W.B. Lewis, Leo Marx's *Machine in the Garden* identifies America as being Edenic. Marx, too, finds a pattern in the tapestry of 19th-century American literature, this being the disruption of America's untouched lands with expanding industrialization. Marx reiterates Nathaniel Hawthorne's experience where the author's transcendent connection to nature via the cornfields of Concord, Massachusetts, was displaced by the sound of a locomotive. Hawthorne describes the scene of the train as, "[bringing] the noisy world into the midst of our slumbrous peace."⁷⁰ Though not quite the

⁶⁹ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, (United State: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992) 10-11.

⁷⁰ Leo Marx, *Machine in the Garden*, (United States: Oxford University Press, 1964), 11-13.

pastoral displacement that Leo Marx addresses, the Los Angeles of *The Omega Man* undoes its own apocalyptic tranquility with the sound of a car engine roaring in the hushed Eden.

The camera telephotos to reveal a lone, red convertible barreling down the avenues. It is driven by the film's Christ figure, Robert Neville (Charlton Heston), the last man on earth.⁷¹ Or is he? Noticing a figure in a high-rise window above, Neville slams on his breaks to open fire upon his unseen opponent. He is a divine, conservative warrior, so the violence he inflicts is automatically sacrosanct. The epaulets of Neville's safari jacket foreshadow that this American, messianic figure is also military. As with the Muscular Christian movement, the aggression of *The Omega Man* is "filled with metaphors about the use of excessive force and violence against God's enemies."⁷² Like the legitimacy of theocracies, Neville's violence is *justified* through his representation of military power, but it is made *moral* by his religious status. The images of Neville's solitary holy war invoke Christian military martyrs such as St. Demetrius and St. George, who are often depicted heroically in European Christian art from the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period.⁷³ Like Neville in his convertible, the two Christian martyrs are often portrayed doing battle without the aid of companions. Sitting upon red or white horses, they spear the enemies of God.¹ Toward the end of *The Omega Man*, Neville's own spear is used against him in an explicit deployment of Christian, redemptive parallels.

⁷¹ Vincent Price played the Robert Neville role in Ubaldo Ragona's *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), which was the first cinematic adaptation of Matheson's novel, *I Am Legend* (1954).

⁷² Chris Hedges, *American Fascists – The Christian Right and The War on America*, (United States: Free Press, 2006), 79

⁷³ Their more classic foes were Lyaeus the Turk or Emperor Maximian in the case of Demetrius or a dragon – a symbol of the Roman Empire – in the instance of St. George.



Fig 1. *St. George Killing the Dragon*, Bernat Martorell, c. 1435 CE

Though a *Christ film* is unbound by cinematic allegiances to New Testament narratology, *The Omega Man*'s final act does work to adapt atonement symbols from the *Gospel of John* – and to a lesser extent the Synoptics - to annunciate the importance of the All-American Christ's sacrifice. Like Jesus, Neville is eventually captured by his enemies, the result of betrayal. Neville's lover Lisa (Rosalind Cash), after succumbing to the effects of the plague, joins the villainous Family Hoard and grants them access to Neville's home.

The *Gospel of Matthew* describes several events surrounding Jesus' death, including a scene referred to as the *tearing of the veil*. "And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom."⁷⁴ The veil itself is more accurately visualized as a curtain – actually, seven layers of drapes. It separated the Holy of Holies, God's personal living quarters, from the outer

⁷⁴ Matthew 27:51.

Holy Place in the Second Jewish Temple. The veil was not only a cosmic cubicle wall but symbolized the spiritual separation between God and mankind. In his *History of Jewish Peoples*, the Roman historian Josephus records the events surrounding the destruction of the Second Jewish Temple in 70 CE, the culmination of the Great Jewish Revolt against the Roman Empire. After a lengthy siege, the temple was ransacked, the Holy of Holies invaded, the veil ripped down and used to pack spoils.⁷⁵ *Matthew* and *Mark* were both written after the temple's destruction, and so they telescope the event to be concurrent with Jesus' death thirty years prior. Since the veil represented humanity's unworthiness to stand in the presence of Yahweh; in *John*, it is the death of Jesus that tears the veil and allows man to access God. In *Omega Man*, no one was allowed inside the holy ground of Neville's home, before Lisa's betrayal. When the Family enters, like the Romans ransacking the Jewish Second Temple, the barrier between society and God is forever removed. This event takes place before the death of Neville, as it does before the death of Jesus in the *Gospel of Luke*.⁷⁶

Fighting his way free, Neville eventually fulfills his sacred duty, when he is mortally wounded by Family leader Matthias (Anthony Zerbe), who hurls Neville's own St. Georgian spear from Neville's balcony and into the chest of the Savior below.⁷⁷ Bleeding, Neville falls into a fountain of water, spilling blood and water in his wake. Through these two liquids – blood and water - an image of Neville as the final American sacrifice, *John's* Passover Lamb, is realized to an even greater extent. Eventually Neville's trigger-happy friend, Dutch (Paul Koslo), comes to the foot of Neville's cross to receive, in angelic fulfillment, Neville's scared blood.

⁷⁵ *The Works of Flavius Josephus*. trans. A.M. William Whiston. 2 vols. United Kingdom: Bohn, 1862.

⁷⁶ This is because the *Gospel of Luke* lacks blood atonement theology.

⁷⁷ *Matthias* is the biblical name of the apostle that replaced Judas Iscariot.

This scene is observable in European art from the Middle Ages; depictions of the crucifixion often portray holy representatives, typically angels, collecting Jesus' outpouring blood into cups, invoking the communion of the Upper Room.



Fig. 2 (top) *The Crucifixion*: Martin Schongauer c. 1475 CE., with angels collecting Jesus' blood in cups. (bottom) Neville offers the cowboy Dutch a vessel of his precious blood.

Uniquely in *The Gospel of John*, while on the cross, Jesus turns to the "disciple whom he loved" – John the Apostle – and releases his mother Mary to his care, saying, "Behold your mother." Neville's own internal hemorrhaging prevents him from delivering a similar line to

Dutch beyond whispering Lisa's name and nodding to indicate her presence. Dutch takes her into his care, just as John comforted the Virgin Mother.

But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness - his testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth - that you also may believe.⁷⁸

As argued in Section 2, the “issue of blood and water” is a Johannine construction that links the image of Jesus to the Passover lamb, a final atoning sacrifice. The Roman's thrust to Jesus' side was likely insurance that his death would not occur past sundown. Though executed by the pagan Romans, Jesus' death – hammered home in the *Gospel of John* – was delivered by Pilate as a placation to the Jewish people. In Jesus' day, Jewish law forbade any trial or execution from lasting past sundown – sundown being the start of the Jewish day, not the end. For this, it is possible that the Roman centurion thrust his spear into Jesus' side, following his death, to appease the Sanhedrin. Though Jesus had died prior to the strike, the spearing was likely a symbolic mercy killing. *The Omega Man* gives Dutch a dual part to play; after exiting camera left, as John the beloved Disciple, he reemerges as a frontier centurion. Picking up the spear, he holds it laterally to the camera as to mimic this merciful blow.

⁷⁸ John 19:34-35.

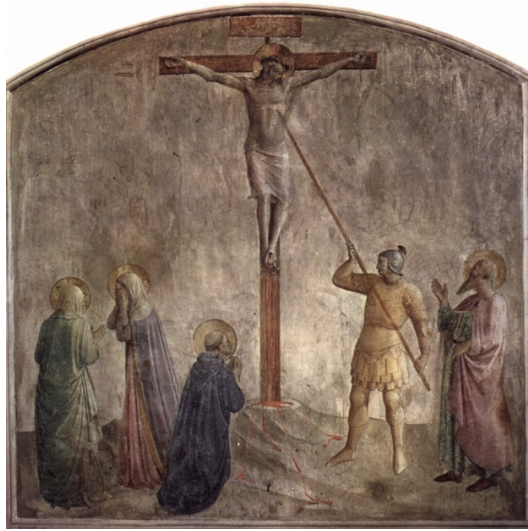


Fig 3. (top) Fresco by Fra Angelico, San Marco, Florence, c. 1440. (bottom) Dutch becomes a frontier centurion at the foot of the cross.

Like Brigham Young, who led his congregation through Western frontiers in search of Zion, in *Omega Man's* final scene, Dutch too rallies his assembly. Delivering the film's final lines, Dutch tells a group of survivors, "... let's move, kids. We got a long way to go." Their Zion is still ahead, but where will they turn? The coastal Los Angeles offers no further options for terrestrial expansion in the West. Whichever direction they choose, American colonial expansion will continue even in a world on the other side of destruction. Vicarious redemption through blood atonement being completed, Neville slips into the bloody water pooled at the bottom of the

fountain and dies, his body positioned as if crucified; arms outstretched, knees bent, head cocked downward. A bloody end for the conservative myth-hero, the All-American Christ.



Fig. 4 A crucified Neville, fulfilling his role as National Messiah

Through the vicarious redemption of blood atonement, *The Omega Man* announces itself as a Christ film, a science fiction Western where a heroic conservative messiah restores a lost society. In Matheson's source novel, most of humanity is not lost but transfigured. Both the dead and the living succumb to a form of vampirism. Reanimated, they stalk the night. The only unaffected survivor is Robert Neville, who wages a personal war against the vampire hoards. Neville roams the streets during the day, violently hunting down the vampires. And while most of the vampiric brood present themselves archetypally – such as avoiding garlic and possessing a severe allergy to sunlight – Matheson makes a move to divorce vampirism from one stereotypical characteristic; in *I Am Legend*, vampires are not the opponents of Christ's church. In the novel, Neville's former friend-turned-vampire, Ben, does not fear crosses like the other vampires due to being Jewish in his former life; however, for Ben, the Torah and Jewish symbols drive him away. As Neville explains, "...the cross hasn't the power the legend says it has." For the Freudian Matheson, spirituality is replaced with psychology.

The Omega Man dispatches with vampirism and crosses altogether, mainly because the film's Christ figure, Neville, does not die by crucifixion until the film's closing moments. Since most of the film occurs pre-crucifixion, there are no messianic symbols yet sanctified to wield against the forces of wicked vampirism. One may only speculate that the symbol of safari jackets and sunglasses, as the iconography of the sacred Neville, would later repel the remnants of Neville's opponents. Instead of vampires, *The Omega Man* presents the audience with bizarre hippies known as "the Family," a deformed hoard, marked by ocular and epidermal albinism, lesions, and hyper-photosensitivity. Their deformity turns the once multi-ethnic group into a tortured whiteness, returning the melting pot of American society to the Caucasians of Puritan society.

Their frightening appearance makes audience identification difficult, keeping them apart from Neville and turned villainous by conservative xenophobia. The Family combines 1960s counterculture extremism; the Manson Family mixed with pious Calvinistic, New England Puritanism. They are vindictive iconoclasts, who replace the Puritan renouncing of Catholic tradition with American tradition. The Family is openly theocratic, referring to their order and governmental structure as a "sacred society." When night descends, so too do they. Clad in black hoods and sunglasses, the Family burns books, looking to destroy the remnants of the previous, American civilization. They are underground liberal terrorists, a post-apocalyptic articulation of the 60s revolutionary group the Weathermen. The Family represents distorted – perhaps satanic – liberals that *The Omega Man* readily turns into enemies of civilization. As the film's Christ figure, Neville can deliver moments of conservative catharsis when dispatching the forces of otherness – deformed liberalism - with the bullets of his sacred violence. The vanquishing of this evil, by the messianic Neville, restabilizes society for conservative America.

Standing against the puritanical Family is The All-American Christ, Robert Neville, a violent and manly scapegoat whose blood will eventually redeem American society. Neville is the final American representative; though because he is the nation's requisite scapegoat, he lives apart from the Family's America, its new world order. Watching a bonfire set by the Family, Neville rhetorically asks, "At it again, I see. What'll it be tonight? The Museum of Science? Some library?" Both Neville and the Family are violent, though their violence is differentiated. Being a conservative Christ, Neville displaces prayer and uses firearms and military force as sacred violence – that waging of a just and holy war. The Family as liberal gun control advocates, contrarily, shun the use of firearms; they are liberalism gone amuck in the film's conservative lens. Despite their subjection to Neville's military arsenal, the Family stays committed to their anti-gun position. As postmodern warriors, they reject the weapons of modernity as "the old ways", the repository of "all...hatreds," and of "all...pains."

In an elevator ride leading up to his penthouse flat, Neville is overwhelmed by the memory of societal violence. Through a double exposure, *The Omega Man* outwardly visualizes the character's inner violence, as explosions overwhelm his troubled face. Like *John*, who parallels the Passover Lamb with Jesus, *The Omega Man* pairs humanity's Savior with weapons of mass destruction. In 1970, one year before *Omega Man*, Heston cameoed in the science fiction film, *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (Post). Reprising his role as the temporally displaced astronaut Taylor, Charlton Heston prophesizes his forthcoming battle with the Family when he takes on another legion of albino-liberal terrorists. Unlike the Family's revulsion of modern weaponry, the mutant inhabitants of *Apes'* Forbidden Zone worship munitions. In the subterranean remains of St. Patrick's Cathedral, the cult sings hymns to a nuclear missile. It is a cinematic adaptation of Kipling's *Recessional*, in which the religious turn towards weapons

instead of God for protection. "The heavens declare the glory of the bomb," *Apes'* liberal mutants chant, "and the firmament showeth his handiwork."

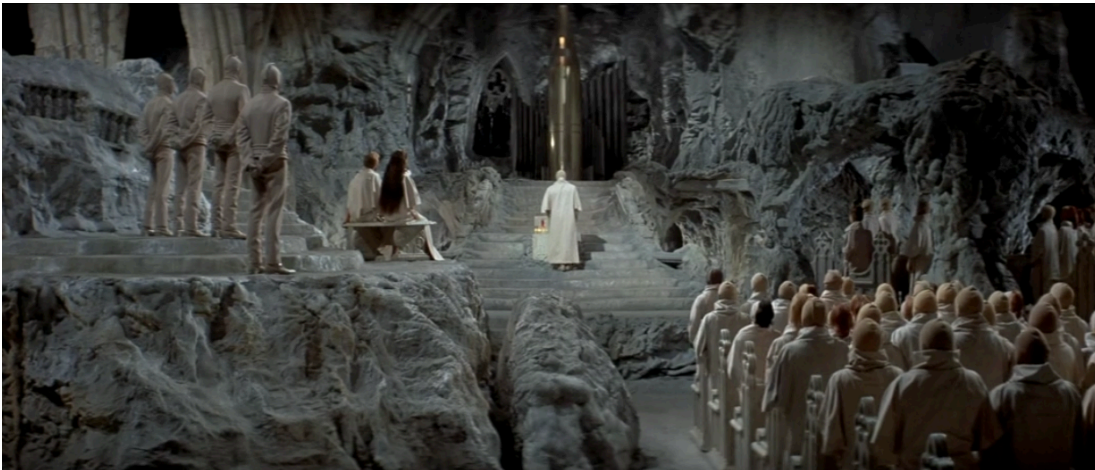


Fig. 5 (top) Robert Neville, a 20th-century, violent American Messiah. (bottom) The worshipping of the nuclear bomb in Beneath the Planet of the Apes.

Back inside Neville's penthouse elevator ride, *The Omega Man* flashes back to reveal its own apocalyptic backstory. Here, we learn that the Robert Neville with whom we are first introduced is *already* a resurrected messiah. As a US Military Scientist, Robert Neville had discovered a cure for the unnamed plague, which was already devastating populations. *En route* to share his cure, Neville's helicopter crashes. Bloody, he emerges from the wreckage and injects himself with the miracle serum. It is in this moment that Neville is transfigured into a new body,

one immune to the plague. The theme of transfiguration - the inhabiting or morphing into a divine body - is prevalent in the synoptic tradition and here finds adaptation through the theocratic Christ film, *The Omega Man*. Neville's blood, containing the only traces of the cure, becomes a source of life; the shedding of his blood and eventual death by violence becomes, for the motion picture, inevitable. Since this helicopter crash does not qualify as actual death, Neville's final sacrifice must occur later in the film.

Neville's home offers a prime example of what the film regards as his essential duality, a conservative action hero, and a messianic savior. Within his top floor suite, Neville has amassed a collection of art and historical artifacts, keeping them safe from the flames of the Family, articulating Neville's status as a preserver of society. A giant chess set dominates the center of the apartment, where the Spassky to Neville's Fisher, a bust of Julius Caesar, sits at one end of the board, adorned in an American Military Cap.⁷⁹ The chessboard extends off the table and onto the floor, which is similarly composed of light and dark, alternating rows and columns. The film gives the illusion that Neville's living space is itself an extension of the chessboard. Upon entering, Neville moves like a bishop in play, strategically advancing his position to those activities that convey his masculine, conservative status. A violent messiah, Neville's first move conveys his aggression, and so initially he attends to his gun rack. After turning to acknowledge his military peer Caesar, Neville moves diagonally, gliding into his bedroom to remove his shirt and pronounce his masculinity.

With sex appeal firmly in play, a glistening, bare-chested masculine Christian messiah makes his third chess move, this time to his entertainment area. The TV is only one of many,

⁷⁹ American Bobby Fischer defeated Boris Spassky, of the Soviet Union, during the 1972 World Chess Championships.

converted into a multi-screen wall, as an elaborate security monitoring system. While most monitors transmit back surveillance of his property, the largest screen monitors Neville himself. "Hi, Big Brother, how's your ass?" Neville asks, looking into his own digital reflection. Even with his back turned and his attention diverted toward fixing libations, the system continues monitoring Neville's moves; he is both warden and prisoner in a self-operated Foucauldian panopticon, a prison structure of pure surveillance and internalized discipline. In his description of the panopticon as a "disciplinary mechanism" in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault may have well been prophesizing the nature of Neville's own self-surveillance:

in which the [prisoner is] inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded...in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure.⁸⁰

Surrounded by guns and television screens, food and booze, and the spoils of plunder, the American nation seems lost outside but alive within Robert Neville's apartment. Inside his walls, Neville becomes a curator of the past, though it is conservative, hawkish security made possible only by gun violence.

Neville's duty of protecting civilization is not only nationalistic but holy, as *The Omega Man* argues. The 64, alternating white and black squares of Neville's life-sized gameboard, invoke not only the image of Neville as a chess piece in play but also announce his Divine status. He is God, residing in an American Holy of Holies. In Judaism, squares, and cubes, like those found on a chessboard, are symbols of Yahweh. It is for this reason, in the *Book of Revelation*,

⁸⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan, (United States: Vintage Books, 1977), 197.

you run into squares and cubes so often.⁸¹ Itself the product of symmetry of squares, the Second Jewish Temple was the holiest site for Jewish people in Jesus' day. The innermost room was a perfect square, 30X30X30, called the Holy of Holies. It was the place where, until the Babylonian invasion in 589 BCE, the Ark of the Covenant was believed to have been housed. However, in Jesus' day, the only thing in there was dust. This is because no one was allowed to clean inside. Only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies, and he could only enter one day per year - on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement - to make a blood offering for the expiation of sin for the Hebrew people.

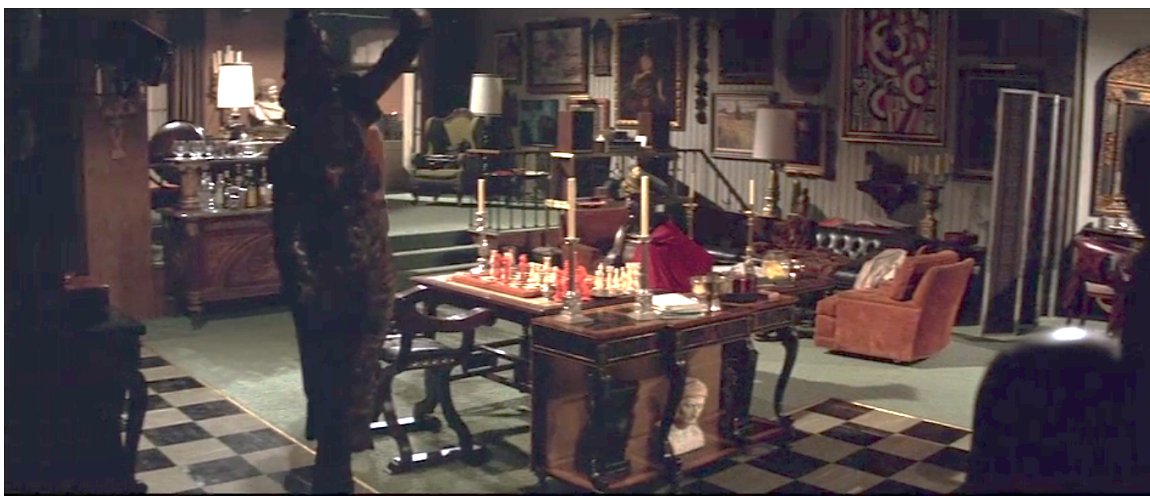


Fig. 6 The duality of the All-American Christ. His home is both the Holy of Holies and a Chessboard War Room.

The parallels of Jesus, as both God and High Priest, are likewise conveyed through *John's* passion narrative when, during the crucifixion, Roman soldiers cast lots for Jesus' tunic. Each wanted it for their own, though they realized it would be worth more whole than torn and dispersed between them. In this three-volume commentary on the *Gospel of John*, one of 20th-

⁸¹ Or even a square times a cube; if you take the square of twelve and the cube of ten, you end up with 144,000 - the number of the Lord's Elect.

century most influential Catholic exegetes, Rudolph Schnackenburg, writes that the authors of *John* use Jesus' own property, "the seamless tunic, woven from top to bottom, to depict Jesus as high priest."⁸² *The Omega Man* casts Robert Neville, as the All-American Christ, in a similar duality. Neville, like Jesus, is a figure of duality. While orthodox Christianity teaches that Jesus was fully both God and man, Neville is both a sacred offering and violent hero, both divine-figure and conservative high Priest.

Apart from dust, the Jewish people believed that within the Holy of Holies the very "presence of God" - in Hebrew, *shekhinah* - dwelled within. Robert Neville's apartment, too, serves as a sacred space for God to reside, though it bifurcates him into a member of the Christian Godhead - as the establishment's chief resident, and also the Levitical High Priest, as the only man allowed inside. In this, *The Omega Man* uses the *visualized square* to convey the symbol of the All-American Christ as a God residing among his spoils in a holy temple. The Second Jewish Temple's veil acted as the physical representation of the separation between the presence of God from Man. The First Temple of Neville is likewise segregating, though the curtain is replaced with boarded windows and barbed wire, a conservative American Iron Curtain.

⁸² Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John, Volume 3*. (Great Britain: Crossroad Publishing Company, Inc., 1975), 274.



Fig. 7 An American Iron Curtain

The themes of xenophobic otherness, scapegoating, and sacrifice within *The Omega Man* play out more deeply as the film unfolds. After being captured by the Family, Neville is put on trial. Under candlelight, the Family's grim proceeding mirrors Puritan witch trials, where the unholy denizens were cleansed from society. The leader of the Family is Matthias, who within the trial scene, invokes the presence of Increase Mather, sitting high up on the bench. Officiating over the proceedings, Matthias asks his fellow congregants to gaze upon an incapacitated Neville, seeing his normalcy as being unholy. An American scapegoat, Neville is a member of society that rejects him.

Matthias: Look at him. Does he have the marks? Do you see them?

The Family: No. No.

Matthias: You see him as we were before the punishment before we gained grace. You see there lying the last of scientists, of bankers, of businessmen, the users of the wheel.

The Family: Yes. Yes.

If Neville were merely a divine scapegoat, the movie could have concluded here, being executed by the Family; but Neville is a messiah in need of a society to save. For this purpose,

the film has Neville meet Lisa (Rosalind Cash), a survivor of the plague with only mild-yet worsening, symptoms. She helps Neville escape the clutches of the Family and leads Neville to her compound community, the society he is destined to redeem. A youthful group, they appear in the film as post-apocalyptic Mormons. Here, Neville works to create an antidote by synthesizing his blood and provide a societal cure. Like Jesus, even though his blood is precious, it must be shed to save others. *The Omega Man* itself is unambiguous as to Neville's divine status. Leaving the encampment, one of the young survivors begins to press Neville about his role as National Savior:

Little Girl: You know, some of the kids...they say the Family comes in the night when it's dark. They say they're going to come some night and take Richie's soul and tie it all up in a bag and give it to the devil. Is that really true?

Neville: No. We wouldn't let that happen. Not a chance.

Little Girl: Are you God?

[Yes, but he played Moses too.]

In 1997, life imitated art when cinema's violent messiah, the cinematic All-American Christ, Charlton Heston, became the President of the National Rifle Association (NRA). In *From My Cold, Dead Hands*, Emile Raymond writes that as President of the NRA, Heston used his "celebrity status" to become a "spokesperson for neoconservatism," urging "Americans to return to traditional moral values."⁸³ By providing the vehicle – his performance and stardom – for so many of cinema's biblical adaptations, Heston's celebrity status was, by proxy, integrated with the holiness of his biblical portrayals. Like *The Omega Man*'s Family, for Heston, the opponents

⁸³ Emile Raymond, *From My Cold, Dead Hands*, (United States: The University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 6.

of America are liberal society. In a speech made at a Free Congress Foundation Gala in 1997, Heston fanned the flames of this conservative xenophobia, in which America's white, protestant majority were propagandized with minority rights rhetoric:

The God fearing, law-abiding, Caucasian, middle-class Protestant - or even worse, evangelical Christian, Midwestern or Southern - or even worse, rural, apparently straight - or even worse, admitted heterosexuals, gun-owning - or even worse, NRA-card-carrying, average working stiff—or even worse, male working stiff - because not only don't you count, you are a down-right obstacle to social progress.⁸⁴

Portraying a breadth of biblical figures that span Egyptian captivity to the Apocalypse – Heston's portrayal of Robert Neville – a masculine, gun-toting, American messiah – allows US Second Amendment proponents to wed images of Christ with firearms; the Prince of Peace now carrying a peacemaker, to bring not only salvation but Truth, Justice, and the American Way. Heston died in 2008, five years after receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President George W. Bush. Nevertheless, the myth of the All-American Christ lives on through the artifacts of cinema and the reality shaped by myth narratology that extends past Heston. According to the Pew Research Center, “white evangelicals [in America] are more likely than members of other faith groups or the average citizen to own a gun...”⁸⁵ With Heston no longer available to anthropomorphize this movement, an understudy is likely to usurp the part. On August 6, 2020, now-former President Donald Trump spoke to conservative voters and said:

⁸⁴ Andrew Hartman, “The Culture Wars Are Dead: Long Live the Culture Wars!” *The Baffler*, no. 39 (2018): 48–55. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26477340>, 52.

⁸⁵ Kate Shellnutt, “Packing in the Pews: The Connection Between God and Guns,” *Christianity Today*, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/november/god-gun-control-white-evangelicals-texas-church-shooting.html>.

[President Biden is] going to do things that no one would ever think even possible, because he's following the radical left agenda. Take away your guns, destroy your Second Amendment. No religion, no anything. Hurt the Bible, hurt God. He's against God. He's against guns.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ "Trump says Biden is 'against God and he's against guns'," BBC News, August 6, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-53688217>.

SECTION 5

PAPA, CAN YOU HEAR ME?

Dr. Irvin Meinrad Arkin died in 2002, six weeks after delivering the commencement address at my Catholic high school graduation. Dressed in full regalia, the once corpulent man was now emaciated, his body wracked by stage 4 lung cancer pains. A lifelong orator, "Papa" knew that this was his final public address. During the processional and recessional, Arkin refused both wheelchair and oxygen and spoke with his typical witty yet prolific eloquence, showcasing a mastery of communication that I will only ever aspire to approach.

Though Papa was an admitted arch-conservative Christian Republican, I have since come to reinterpret his image in light of recent information. Years following Arkin's death, a family member took me aside and told me of a revelation quite outside the New Testament. I learned that Papa, very likely, shared one of my personal dispositions, a proclivity that bars us both entry into TCT's Christianity. While apathetic to my evangelistic expunction, I am deeply saddened to reflect that such a renowned, intellectual 'man of God' would be ostracized and shunned by the American evangelical community for a crime no more egregious than acting upon his nature. But this is the *nature* of religion. *It is the great veil that separates humanity, not from God, but from each other.*

In the 10th chapter of *Matthew*, after healing a paralytic and mute, Jesus privately calls his disciples together. He tells them about the nature of their mission, including the claim that the Church will bring disharmony to society. In the 34th verse, Jesus remarks to his disciples, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." The following verses reveal that Jesus' sword is more dangerous than a single blade. It is a metaphor for division itself. As Jesus goes on to say,

For I have come to set a man against his father,
 and a daughter against her mother,
 and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
 and one's foes will be members of one's household.⁸⁷

In his apologetics, CS Lewis argues that either Jesus was the “Son of God: or else a madman or something worse.” – often referred to as *Lewis’s trilemma*.⁸⁸ In any direction, symbols such as the All-American Christ should concern Americans who wish to continue to in a secular, democratic republic. The image of a conservative, American Messiah, links two of the most dangerous, shared attributes of religion and politics, this being that they are each divisive and segregating. Christianity, like political partisanship, seems destined to remove humanity from itself, forcing us to look upon others as otherness. It seems all too convenient that American Republicans have linked both through xenophobia. Once displaced, our concern for others, remote and proximate, becomes too easy to discard.

I think about Papa often and long to again hear his voice, though in death he is now "forbidden to speak or be spoken to."⁸⁹ While the number 666 no longer keeps me awake at night, the image of an All-American Christ does, and Papa is no longer here to protect me from myth. A myth-hero for American theocracy, the All-American Christ signifies a violent and conservative Christianity that categorizes intellectual, liberal America as an enemy of God. In my youth, Papa's methodology of historical criticism banished worrying thoughts from my mind

⁸⁷ Matthew 10:34-36 NRSV.

⁸⁸ CS Lewis, *God in the Docks*, (United States: Eerdmans, 2014), 100.

⁸⁹ John Adams, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson & Abigail Adams & John Adams*, ed. Lester J. Gappon, (United States: The University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 528.

by undoing troubling mythology. He, perhaps inadvertently, demonstrated to my continued satisfaction that myths' metaphysical ontology disintegrates when its formation is unpacked. It is in this that I hope my research contributes towards a greater endeavor. American nativist myths are dangerous when religions' unfalsifiable nature and hubris blanket them and there is nothing more dangerous in America today than someone who believes he is right.

REFERENCES

- Adams, John, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson & Abigail Adams & John Adams*, ed. Lester J. Gappan, United States: The University of North Carolina Press, 1959.
- Arkin, Irvin. "Hillel's First Three Principles of the Gospel of John." Lecture. Saint Louis University, March 1996.
- Armstrong, Ben. *The Electric Church*, United States: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979.
- Bible and Cinema: Fifty Key Films*. ed. Adele Reinhartz, United States: Routledge Press, 2013.
- Bigger than Ben-Hur: The Book, Its Adaptations, and Their Audiences*, eds. Barbara, Ryan and Milette Shamir, Syracuse University Press, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1j1nvdj>.
- Baugh, Lloyd. *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ Figures in Film*. United States: Sheed & Ward, 1997.
- Charney, Leo. *Violence and the American Cinema*. "The violence of a perfect moment", ed. David, J Solcum. United States: Routledge Press, 2000.
- Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. 1981. *The Book of Mormon: another testament of Jesus Christ; The Doctrine and covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; The Pearl of great price*. Salt Lake City, Utah, USA: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.
- Cornell, John, director. *Almost an Angel*. Paramount Pictures, 1990. 95 minutes.
- DeMille, Cecil B., director. *The Ten Commandments*. Paramount Pictures, 1956. 220 minutes.
- Donner, Richard, director. *The Omen*. 20th Century Fox, 1976. 111 minutes.
- Dyer, Richard. *Stars*, United States: British Film Institute, 1979.

Epiphanius of Salamis, *The Panarion: A Treatise Against Eighty Sects in Three Books*: Book 1.

Part 26. Epiphanius Against the Gnostics.

https://web.archive.org/web/20150906041916/http://www.masseiana.org/panarion_bk1.htm.

Fleming, Andrew, director. *Hamlet 2*. Focus Features, 2008. 92 minutes.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. trans. Alan Sheridan. United States: Vintage Books, 1977.

Girard, Rene. *The Scapegoat*. United States: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986.

Girard, Rene. *Violence and the Sacred*. United States: The John Hopkins University Press, 1972.

Andrew Hartman, “The Culture Wars Are Dead: Long Live the Culture Wars!” *The Baffler*, no. 39 (2018) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26477340>.

Hedges, Chris. *American Fascists: The Christian Right and The War on America*, United States: Free Press, 2006.

Heston, Charlton. *In the Arena*. United States: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

How and When “Heaven’s Gate” (The Door to the Physical Kingdom Level Above Human) May Be Entered: An Anthology of Our Materials. ed. Tela. United States: The Telah Foundation, 1997.

Hitchens, Christopher, *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, United States: Twelve, 2007.

Hughes, Thomas Q.C., *The Manliness of Christ*. United States: Houghton, Osgood and Company, 1880.

Jefferson, Thomas. *The Jefferson Bible: The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. United States: Beacon Press, 1989

- Josephus, Flavius. *The Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus, the Jewish Historian: Containing Twenty Books of the Jewish Antiquities, Seven Books of the Jewish War, Two Books in Answer to Apion, the Martyrdom of the Maccabees, and the Life of Josephus*. Boston: Samuel Walker, 1849.
- Kimmel, Michael. *Manhood in America*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Lewis, CS, *God in the Docks*, United States: Eerdmans, 2014.
- Lewis, RWB. *The American Adam*. United States: The University of Chicago Press, 1955.
- Lloyd, Vincent W. "The Uncircumcised Lips of Moses." *In Defense of Charisma*. Columbia University Press, 2018. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/lloy18386>.
- Loughlin, Gerald. "Bible and Film: Suffering and Special Effects," *Modern Believing* no. 53, vol. 2 (2012).
- Lyden, John. *Film as Religion*. United States: New York University Press, 2003.
- Malone, Peter. *Movie Christs and Antichrists*. United States: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990.
- Marks, John H. "The Book of Genesis." *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*. ed. Charles M. Laymon, United States: Abingdon Press, 1982
- Marx, Leo. *Machine in the Garden*. United States: Oxford University Press, 1964.
- McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, United States: MIT Press, 1994.
- Mormonism and American Culture*. ed. Marvin S. Hill and James B. Allen. United States: Harper & Row, 1972.
- Munn, Michael. *Charlton Heston*. United States: St. Martin's Press, 1986.
- Nadel, Alan. "God's Law and the Wide Screen: The Ten Commandments as Cold War

- Epic,” *PMLA* 108, no. 3 (1993): <https://doi.org/10.2307/462612>.
- Ostling, Richard N. and Joan K. Ostling, *Mormon America: The Power and The Promise*. United States: Harper San Francisco, 1999.
- Prothero, Stephen. *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon*. United States: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.
- Raymond, Emile, *From My Cold, Dead Hands*, United States: The University of Kentucky Press, 2006.
- Sagal, Boris, director. *The Omega Man*. Warner Bros., 1971. 98 minutes.
- Schnackenberg, Rudolph, *The Gospel according to St John, Volume 3*. Great Britain: Crossroad Publishing Company, Inc., 1975.
- Scorsese, Martin, director. *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Universal Pictures, 1988. 163 minutes.
- Shellnutt, Kate, “Packing in the Pews: The Connection Between God and Guns,” *Christianity Today*, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/november/god-gun-control-white-evangelicals-texas-church-shooting.html>.
- Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*. United States: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992.
- Slotkin, Richard. *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier – 1600-1860*. United States: Wesleyan University Press, 1973.
- Stam, Robert. *Film Adaptation*, “Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation.” United States: Rutgers University Press, 2000.
- Stam, Robert. *Film and Theory*. United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd, 2000.
- Solcum, David. *Violence and the American Cinema*. “Introduction: Violence and American Cinema: Notes for an Investigation.” United States: Routledge Press, 2001.

- Spielberg, Steven, director. *E.T. the Extraterrestrial*. Universal Pictures, 1982. 114 minutes.
- Stevens, George, director. *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. United Artists, 1965. 137 minutes.
- TCT Ministries, Inc. *Employee Handbook*, United States: Radiant Life Ministries, 2008.
- The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*. ed. Charles M. Laymon, United States: Abingdon Press, 1982.
- The Works of Flavius Josephus*. trans. A.M. William Whiston. 2 vols. United Kingdom: Bohn, 1862.
- “Trump says Biden is ‘against God and he’s against guns’,” BBC News, August 6, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-53688217>.
- Wagner, Rachel. “Souvenirs of the Apocalypse: Guns as Authenticating Props.” *CrossCurrents*, 70(3). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26975092>.
- Walsh, Richard. *Reading the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film*. United States: Trinity Press International, 2003.
- Worsley, Peter. *Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of ‘Cargo’ Cults in Melanesia*. United States: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968.
- Wyler, William, director. *Ben-Hur*. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1959. 212 minutes.

VITA

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

Mark St. George

markstgeorge@gmail.com

The University of Missouri-St. Louis
Bachelor of Art, Mass Communications, May 2007

Special Honors and Awards:

Summa Cum Laude

2007 UMSL College of Fine Arts & Communications – Leadership Award

2006 UMSL College of Fine Arts & Communications – Best Video Editor Award

2005 UMSL College of Fine Arts & Communications – Best New Production Student Award

2005 Alpha Mu Gamma French Honor Society Inductee

Research Paper Title:

The All-American Christ

Major Professor: Walter Metz