FCC Commissioner takes stand against pornography

Editor's Note: FCC Commissioner Ervin S. Duggan gave the following address in October ,1991 to a Religious Alliance Against Pornography group. Readers may write Mr. Duggan at Federal Communications Commission, Washington, DC 20554.

I will be brief, because your major speaker this evening deserves most of your attention. Michael Medved has, in one eloquent and stunning speech at Hillsdale College, moved the issue of decency and humanity in the media into the mainstream of national debate. My purpose tonight is simply to salute him, to salute you—and to assure you that officials in Washington care about and support what you are doing.

Tonight I want to list, very briefly, four lessons that I believe you have to teach to the nation. The first of them has to do with that much-misunderstood word "virtue."

I think of some famous words of James Madison, who wrote: "To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people is a chimerical idea."

All through the writings and speeches of our nation's Founders we see that word again and again: "Republican Virtue"..."A People of Virtue." What did Madison and his colleagues mean by that word? In today's culture it has a faint odor of quaintness and primness: it conjures up the censorious Victorians seeking to enforce and coerce virtue; it suggests the maiden, weak but pure, struggling to defend her virtue. The very word seems obsolete, even a bit ridiculous.

Yet when we look for the root of this word we find that its Latin antecedent is the very word the ancients used for strength and power: virtus. From that same root we get the word virtuosity, for

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superior skill. Or virtuoso, for one who is capable, talented, spectacularly gifted. Our founders, who knew their Latin, were not talking about a prim and censorious moralism. They were talking about a source of strength without which this nation will weaken and fail.

The first lesson you have to teach is this one: that our nation can only recover its strength when it recovers that fuller, more robust and complete meaning of the word virtue. And that includes virtue in our media.

The second lesson that I believe you have come to teach is about the true meaning of freedom. We hear so much prattle about freedom today. Always, it seems to be about freedom without responsibility or restraint; always about freedom for the imperial, itching self to do as it pleases.

That is an inadequate concept of freedom for the moment in which we find ourselves today. As Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union look to us to learn the meaning of freedom—of civilized life under freedom—what shall we tell them? That freedom means the unfettered life of the libertine? That freedom has no meaning beyond the freedom of the self to indulge its appetites?

There is a deeper meaning of freedom that the founders understood: freedom coupled with a decent self-restraint, with self-government in the individual as well as the collective sense. They had read not only their Latin, but also their scriptures. They knew the meaning of St. Paul's great observation: "I am free to do all things, but it is not meet that I do all things." They understood that freedom without self-discipline leads only to chaos.

That is the second lesson you have to teach: that freedom cannot work without self-restraint. If we hope to serve as a workable example to others in the world, we must relearn this lesson for ourselves. Otherwise the gift we give to them will be a plant without roots, destined to die.

The third lesson is one that Michael Medved has expressed in his eloquent speech. Censorship is not the answer. Censorship and prior restraint by government are certainly not the answer. Such efforts are profoundly counterproductive. Perversely, censorship and forcible efforts to suppress enlarge the audience for the very material that offends.

As a Federal Communications Commissioner, I have been entrusted by the President, the Congress and the public with a certain limited power to regulate broadcast material that is actionably indecent or obscene. The courts have repeatedly confirmed and upheld that power. I do not shrink from using that power.

But ultimately this issue of decency and humanity in the media lies in the realm of ethics and morality. And in that realm, the law and regulation are not as powerful shapers of behavior as the family, the church, and the combined voices of individual citizens expressing their vigorous views.

The third lesson you have to teach is the lesson taught by the civil rights movement and other great movements of protest: public opinion can be changed. People can be rallied. A culture can be changed for the better.

The fourth and final message is this: what drives and motivates you is not what you are against, but what you are for. Your program is not a negative one—to stop something. It is a positive program—to promote something good: a civilization that is decent and gentle and humane. A culture that cares about what is good and true and beautiful.

Why do we deplore excessive violence in the media? Not because we hate action and adventure. Why are we concerned about the flood of explicit sexual messages in the media? Not because we are prudes who fear or hate sex.

Both forms of excess commit a common offense: they portray the human person as an object to be used—as a thing. They devalue those goods which to persons of feeling are most precious and most to be protected: life itself, and human dignity.

The fourth lesson you have to teach, my friends, is that this is not simply a battle against the things we deplore. It is a battle for the things we cherish: the lives of children and adults. Love and genuine romance. Kindness. Innocence.

I am happy to join you this evening, and to welcome you to Washington. I am happy to extend my hand to you as one who shares your concern—as does President Bush, and as do members of Congress and my colleagues on the FCC.

I reject the notion that you threaten the First Amendment rights of others. To the contrary, you are exercising your First Amendment right to speak, to publish and to be heard.

I urge you to continue—with quiet determination, with fairness toward those who disagree, with courage.

And I believe you will succeed.

Does Hollywood bash Christians?

By James D. Davis
The Dallas Morning News
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When Hollywood released its latest crop of movies in late 1991, it looked to many like open season on Christianity.

For instance:

• In Martin Scorsese's remake of **Cape Fear**, a psychotic Pentecostalist played by Robert De Niro bellows at his enemy's wife: "Are you ready to be born again? After an hour with me, you'll be speakin' in tongues!"

• In **The Rapture**, a first film by writer Michael Tolkin that has caused a stir at many film festivals, Mimi Rogers' character wearies of her monotonous sex life. "I'm tired of feeling empty all the time," she tells her boyfriend. "A spiritual need is as real as hunger or love." But in fulfilling that need, she goes to an extreme that has shocked even jaded moviegoers.

• And in **Black Robe**, a film set in 17th-century Canada and directed by Bruce Beresford (**Driving Miss Daisy** and **Tender Mercies**), an explorer sarcastically tells a young priest: "I wish I were a Jesuit—you have answers for everything."

Critic Michael Medved, an observant Jew, complains about such movies as unfair attacks on Christians—especially evangelical Christians, who take the Bible literally.

"The only way to be taken seriously in Hollywood is to take on the bad guys," says Mr. Medved, co-host of the PBS series SNEAK PREVIEWS. "And the most visible bad guys, in Hollywood terms, are evangelicals."

So how did evangelicals become the bad guys?

"Film makers' main contact with religion is on television, watching the weirdos and crazies," he says. "It taps into Hollywood's fears that Christianity is kidnapping otherwise normal, fun-loving people."

Appropriately enough, Mr. Tolkin —whose **The Rapture** is that rare Hollywood film that deals seriously with sin, salvation and the end of the world—did, indeed, get the idea for the film from television. He is a confessed fan of the Trinity Broadcasting Network, especially of its commentator Hal Lindsey, author of the apocalyptic book *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

In these and many other films, Mr. Medved—who is writing a book tentatively titled *The Poison Factory: Hollywood's War on Traditional Values*—sees a clear pattern of bigotry. He points to Mr. Scorsese's decision to make the ex-con in **Cape Fear** into a religious fanatic. He also mentions the cultic, homicidal mindset of the woman in **The Rapture**.

"That movie went to great lengths to show Christians as people with neuroses or psychoses," he says.

Mr. Medved credits Mr. Beresford with trying to be evenhanded in portraying Indians and whites in **Black Robe**. Even in that, though, he notes that a recurring dream by the Algonquin chief turns out to prophesy his death—while "the priest's visions, which organize his life, are never shown on screen."

James Wall, editor of *The Christian Century* and an adjunct professor of religion and culture at Claremont School of Theology in Chicago, also criticizes **Black Robe**. He says the priest "had a rigid, cold faith that let him survive a lot of torment but little else." And Mr. Wall blasts **The Rapture** as "a terrible distortion of fundamentalist religion."

Not everyone takes such a harsh view, however, including some evangelical Christians. Ted Baehr, an evangelical who edits the Atlanta-based *Movieguide* magazine, rather liked **The Rapture**.

"It reflects what many people end up doing, always asking what God can do for them. But it does not violate orthodox doctrine, that one must accept Jesus Christ. And it gets the terms right."

Black Robe was one of Mr. Baehr's favorite movies.

"It was a true portrait of what happens in any Christian's life. If you go 1,500 miles into the wilderness, you will question your faith and fall short."

Mr. Baehr does lambast the new **Cape Fear** as "a mean portrait of Christians" meant to plant a "seed of doubt" in viewers.

But even that complaint is not unanimous. Mr. Wall praises **Cape Fear** as "a splendid piece of work that shows Scorsese's religious sensibility." In his view, Cady is a metaphorical avenging angel, dealing judgment to the lawyer for suppressing evidence that would have kept Cady out of jail.

All of which goes to show that bias may sometimes be in the eye of the beholder.

But why, of all people, would Christians be so accepting of criticism in movies? Mr. Medved thinks they simply feel helpless.

"They take it as a given, like the weather. They feel they can't change it. Put a yarmulke on some of these movie characters, and just imagine the outcry."

Hollywood strikes again

By Tom Flannery

Editor's Note: Tom Flannery prepared this article for ***AFA Journal.*** *Mr. Flannery is a free-lance writer whose first book,* ***1939: The Year in Movies,*** *was published by McFarland and Company last year.*

As a born-again Christian who has studied and written about the history of motion pictures, I can't help but lament how the medium which once produced a litany of beautiful and inspirational films glorifying the life of Jesus Christ—classics such as **Ben-Hur**, **King of Kings**, and **The Greatest Story Ever Told**—now offers up **The Last Temptation of Christ** (as profane and blasphemous a depiction of our Lord and Savior's life as can possibly be imagined) and expects us to accept it as art.

During its golden age, Hollywood had a long and illustrious tradition of making films that promoted Christian values—the same values that our very nation was founded upon—and portrayed Christian characters as role models for young and old alike. But that, too, has changed. We are now invariably portrayed either as extremists and fanatics who want to impose our antiquated beliefs on a hip and modern world or as individuals who are so repressed ourselves that we have to make sure no one else is having any fun whatsoever. Such characterizations are pure fabrication, of course, but it's what we've come to expect.

Three recent Hollywood releases have gone even further,