Mass Appeal
The Priest Movie as Cultural Icon

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With such stars as Spencer Tracy, Bing Crosby, Montgomery Clift, and Karl Malden, movie characterizations of the priest during the Hollywood studio period (1930s–1950s) offered a variety of clerical portraits. The author examines several of these figures, considering how they reflected and reinforced cultural values of the time and whether they have any relevance today.

In less than fifty years, the image of the priesthood in popular culture has gone from the sublime to the scandalous. In the 1930s and 1940s, Hollywood portrayed priests heroically saving struggling populations after national disasters, rescuing delinquent adolescents and crumbling churches, and sorrowfully accompanying their childhood friends to the electric chair. By the mid-1970s, comedian Don Novello was donning a broad-brimmed black fedora and elaborate clerical garb to play Fr. Guido Sarducci on NBC’s Saturday Night Live. In our own day, there has been a radical shift in the cultural perception of priests, undoubtedly inflected by the news of clergy abuse and an increasingly secular culture. Yet, as journalist Colleen Carroll has shown, some priestly vocations today seem to have emerged from out of the past, with seminarians habitually adorning themselves with cassocks and displaying a low tolerance for pluralism (100–101). Can today’s priests learn anything from yesterday’s—even those who were the creations of the Hollywood dream factories?

Can the priests of today learn anything from the relationship between popular culture, past and present, and their own vocation? American film culture gives us some important insights into this question. In the early days of the film industry,

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religious images—including the images of Jesus himself—were powerful forces of cultural respectability and stability. Indeed for much of the studio period in Hollywood (the 1930s through the 1950s), religious values were safeguarded by a system of self-censorship initiated by pressures from the Catholic populace.

The religious imagination in our fiction and film functions as part of a larger social web. A number of years ago, my colleagues, Richard C. Stern, Clayton Jeffords, and I tried to show (1999), that the Jesus film has both a biblical and a cultural history. Each historical period projects its representation of Christ. Recently, Robin Blaetz has published *Visions of the Maid: Joan of Arc in American Film and Culture* (2001), which demonstrates how the myth of the female warrior has come to mean different things throughout our history. And in the latest edition of *Pulpit and Pew*, published by Duke Divinity School, Joyce Smith has linked her sociological research on pastoral leadership with what Americans see and hear about their leaders in film, television, and the news media (2003).

Indeed, the cultural politics of the priest film is especially evident in the studio period in Hollywood. From the Great Depression and through the Second World War, the images of the priest in film continued to support and uphold dominant cultural values. With the mixing of popular religion, studio and industry self-censorship, and social developments, priests in film became a useful tool in American culture for a variety of reasons. For the remainder of this essay, I will briefly review the way in which priestly identity has been represented in Hollywood in sound features over the period extending from 1935 through 1955. By examining representations of priests in film culture, we might see the important contribution religious images have made in shaping American history and learn something about what we desire for today and in the future.

**The Priest, the Production Code, and the 1930s**

It is well known that the film industry has had a long history of control and controversy over its images. From the very beginning, the nickelodeons were drawing in thousands of immigrants to see what some regarded as less than wholesome fare involving sex, race, and violence. By 1916, the industry itself introduced a plan for self-censorship that became more formalized in 1922 with the Hays Office and then, in 1930, with the Motion Picture Production Code. This Code was co-authored by Jesuit Daniel Lord together with Martin Quigley, an influential publisher and Catholic layman.

Although the Association of Motion Picture Producers and the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America adopted the Code, there were difficulties in regulations. Films like *She Done Him Wrong* (1933), starring Mae West, continued to infuriate many religious groups. Due mostly to the well-organized campaign of the Catholic bishops and the Catholic Legion of Decency, which
threatened massive boycotts, the industry agreed to an amended Production Code and an Irish Catholic, Joseph Breen, became its enforcer in 1934. No film could be exhibited without the seal from the Production Code Association (PCA). Clearly, the adoption of the Code was a victory for the Legion of Decency, but even more significantly, religious discourse was now in an alliance with popular culture. In some sense, popular culture was an instrument of religious and conservative cultural values as well; people could look to cinematic images and narratives to discover and be shaped by ethical and social ideals.

The 1934 Production Code played a significant, although not exclusive, role in shaping film narratives and, according to Tino Balio, following the Code became a convention of film representation from at least 1934–39 (64–72). With regard to how priests and religious leaders were to be represented, the Code said that

No film or episode in film should be allowed to throw ridicule on any religious faith honestly maintained. Ministers of religion in their characters of ministers should not be used in comedy, as villains, or as unpleasant persons. The reason for this is not that there are not such ministers of religion, but because the attitude toward them tends to be an attitude toward religion in general. Religion is lowered in the minds of the audience because it lowers their respect for the ministers (quoted in Pinsky, 60).

**The Priest Movie in the 1930s: The Man Who Does Good**

Religious figures would play an important role in the newly revised PCA. In order to garner respectability for the industry, a studio like MGM was anxious not only to follow the Code, but also to find suitable narratives to please the public and the Legion of Decency. The studio turned to respectable, canonical texts, such as the classic novels of Dickens and Tolstoy, just as Paramount did a decade earlier in bringing biblical epics to the screen. But original scripts portraying religious leaders, especially priests (appealing to immigrants), seemed ideal. *San Francisco* (dir. W. S. Van Dyke, 1936) and *Boy’s Town* (Norman Taurog, 1938) were two significant films ideally suited to reinforce the values exemplified in the Code and espoused by the Legion of Decency and even New Deal America. *San Francisco* featured a priest, Fr. Tim Mullin (Spencer Tracy), as a kind, paternalistic social worker opposite an unrepentant proprietor of a beer hall, Blackie Norton (Clark Gable). Tracy functions as the moral center of the film, an angelic doppelganger to Gable’s bad boy. Norton and Mullin spar continually (we first meet them in a boxing ring) throughout the picture, mostly over religion and Norton’s quest to seduce Mary Blake (Jeanette MacDonald).
The priest as foil or “double” occurs again in *Angels with Dirty Faces* (dir. Michael Curtiz, 1938), with Pat O’Brien playing opposite James Cagney. Two boys grow up together; one becomes a priest, the other goes to the electric chair. Like Tracy, O’Brien became a stock character for playing a priest, and shows up again opposite Cagney as the heroic World War I priest, Father Duffy, in *The Fighting 69th* (dir. William Keighley, 1940) and then again in *Fighting Fr. Dunne* (dir. Ted Tetzlaff, 1948). Hinting at a good brother/bad brother mythology, the doubling of two friends suggests that moral decision making has a strong role to play in shaping character. The priest becomes the barometer for the good man who has chosen well and is rewarded for his choice by heroism.

The Code encouraged moral education and the priest in film was a consistent reminder of the duty to do good amid the trials of the Great Depression. In *San Francisco*, Father Mullin performs a pastoral and fatherly role to Mary Blake and encourages her to join an opera company rather than the lowlife, lowbrow musical theater in the Paradise. Tracy’s character’s New Deal optimism is apparent in his zeal for the common good; these actions will show themselves again in *Boy’s Town*, based on the real-life experiences of Fr. Ed Flanagan. Flanagan’s orphanage was a place in which “boys of all nationalities and faiths work side by side in harmony, under the benevolent care of a purposeful leader” (Balio, 293). The dramatic action in *Boy’s Town* centers mostly on the reformation of one tough kid, Whitey Marsh (Mickey Rooney, then on the verge of becoming the most bankable star at MGM). The priest never gives up, famously saying, “There is no such thing as a bad boy.”

Like Father Dolan in Fritz Lang’s *You Only Live Once* (1937), Father Flanagan as priest-reformer represented the institutional Church of which he was a part being absorbed into a kind of non-sectarian society. Flanagan carries on the work of saving not so much souls as diverse lives in a utopian, New Deal community; he builds not ecclesial structures but inter-denominational towns and human relationships fit for service. At the same time, Flanagan carries a lot of authority in the story and listens to his superiors, perhaps a nod to the significant place of organized religion, particularly immigrant Catholicism, in the 1930s and 1940s. Indeed, his non-sectarian constructions notwithstanding, Flanagan resembles a lot of priests in the Church’s age of brick and mortar who built schools and churches for their rapidly growing congregations. Interestingly, in the sequel, *The Men of Boy’s Town* (dir. Norman Taurog, 1941), Flanagan
is portrayed as an idealistic dreamer who knows nothing about the debt he has incurred. And the bond between Flanagan and Whitey Marsh, though paternalistic by today’s standards, suggests the loneliness at the center of the celibate priest. Marsh has become like a son to Flanagan, who has to give the boy up to a couple who wishes to adopt him. Tracy transforms his struggle into a subtle, eclipsed emotion somewhere between resignation and brooding.

The Priest Movie in the 1940s: The Man of Duty at Home

Depictions of priests during Hollywood’s “Golden Age” are often too conveniently lumped together, as by Philip Jenkins in his book on anti-Catholicism, when he refers to the representation of priests in Hollywood from the 1930s through the 1950s as “the age of Spencer Tracy” (158). While it is true that the need to accommodate Catholic pressure groups like the Legion of Decency exerted a lot of clout on film narratives, especially in the mid-1930s, there were other, equally powerful cultural forces also shaping the image of priests. There is a world of difference between what Hollywood was doing during the New Deal and its subsequent productions during World War II.

By 1941, Hollywood had a very strong alliance with the Office of War Information (OWI), so that not only war films, but also the so-called “home front” movies, and other studio pictures began to help answer the question of how a particular movie might help to win the war. Tired of the way Americans were often depicted as frivolous, rich, comic “screwballs,” numerous scripts were turned out that began to reflect hard working, disciplined, and patriotic Americans at their best.

Enter here what Thomas Schatz refers to as the new “religious cycle” during the war (230). Movies such as The Song of Bernadette (dir. Henry King, 1943), The Keys to the Kingdom (dir. John M. Stahl, 1944), and The Bells of St. Mary’s (dir. Leo McCarey, 1945) helped to negotiate a difficult period in American history characterized by the loss and estrangement of loved ones, the displacement of so many from home, and, above all else, the promotion of the virtues of obedience and duty. Religious narratives helped to reinforce cultural values necessary for the war effort and for adjusting to the struggles at home. As the historic, heroic priest, Father Duffy, inspiring courage and conversion on the battle fields of World War I in Warner Brothers’ The Fighting 69th (1940), Pat O’Brien became what David Thomson calls the studio’s “resident apologist for the social order” (555).

How else can we explain the stunning popularity of Going My Way (dir. Leo McCarey, 1944) and its equally successful sequel the following year, The Bells of St. Mary’s? Going My Way was tops at the box office for 1944, making a record
$6,500,000. The Bells of St. Mary’s was also number one the following year, making $8,000,000. Clearly, Going My Way spoke to Americans about the pain of loss and rebuilding and the hope offered by a culturally stable institution and its priesthood. When Fr. Chuck O’Malley comes to St. Dominic’s it is his painful duty to replace the old pastor, Father Fitzgibbons (Barry Fitzgerald). Eventually, the younger priest develops a scheme to train a boys’ choir to make enough money to get the church out of debt. After he succeeds in this task, the church burns down, only to be rebuilt again. As the singing priest, Paramount wisely cast Bing Crosby, then at the height of his popularity, both at home and with the troops abroad. While the famous crooner shares some priestly qualities with Tracy’s Flanagan—Irish, loves children—O’Malley has some very notable worldly qualities as well, making him a kind of wartime everyman. Unlike Flanagan, O’Malley is a good businessman, has common sense, and, most significantly, has a past—even a dating history. Indeed his song “Going My Way” expresses the road less traveled, and at one point he meets his former girlfriend, now singing at the Met in New York.

The film makes it clear that O’Malley has sacrificed a lot to be a priest, and finds a parallel between him and the husband of the young couple the priest counsels, who volunteers for the army just after marrying. O’Malley’s duty and obedience to the Church is clearly conveyed throughout the film. Like any soldier, he is assigned by the bishop to the new parish and is expected to carry out his orders. At the same time, though, O’Malley manages to use sensitivity and pastoral concern to inform his relationship with Father Fitzgibbons, even uniting him with his elderly mother from Ireland. In a way, the pastor-young associate trope echoes the same qualities often associated with the captain-sergeant relationship common enough in war films at the time. Furthermore, while the Irish immigrant appeal in this film is enormous, the film shows an interest in diversity as well. The new boys’ choir, for instance, is comprised of Italians, Germans, Irish—and even an African-American, who is given a prominent close-up during a performance. This ethnic mix is also a wartime feature, with film after film showing the “melting pot” of soldiers thrown together on the battlefield during wartime.

RKO’s The Bells of St. Mary’s literally picks up where the earlier film left off, following Father O’Malley’s footsteps to his next parish. Though the character of O’Malley is the same, the priest functions somewhat differently, largely because...
of the presence of the film’s real center, Sister Benedict (Ingrid Bergman), and the issues that were beginning to change American culture at large. The sisters run the school at the parish to which O’Malley is assigned and a stingy corporate landowner threatens to tear down the school and build a parking lot. The problem in *The Bells of St. Mary’s* is not so much displacement as it is overcrowding—by old buildings and, indeed, by women. O’Malley has to face the new parish like a soldier returning to a job market dominated by women.

At one point, O’Malley encourages the victor of a fight on the playground, while Sister Benedict sides with the victim, whom she has taught to turn the other cheek. She confronts the priest about his attitude. O’Malley says he thinks a man should take care of himself, while Sister Benedict claims that the priest’s real fear is that “a woman’s influence” would be carried too far and turn the boys “into sissies.” For some film and cultural critics analyzing this period in American film culture, the male anxiety expressed around the problem of women’s roles in the workplace, the home—and the church—lead to the numerous cinematic portraits of the *femme fatale*, such as in *Leave Her to Heaven* (dir. John M. Stahl), which was just behind *The Bells of St. Mary’s* as the second top grossing film of 1945.

Though no *femme fatale*, Sister Benedict is a force to be reckoned with, and the contrast between nun and priest helps to surface the image of the kindly, practical priest who nevertheless manages to claim his authority in the face of a female presence in the workplace. In contrast to *Going My Way*, though, *The Bells of Saint Mary’s* shows O’Malley as one who not only wants to break the rules, but even disobeys orders when he thinks it is necessary. He wants Sister Benedict to pass a girl who failed a test because it is better to have common sense, than to “break their hearts” with an exam. And, at the end of the movie, he disobeys the doctor’s order and tells Sister that she has tuberculosis. O’Malley also accomplishes a number of pastoral care projects behind the scenes, unlike Sister Benedict’s methodical practices both in teaching and prayer. *The Bells of St. Mary’s* problematizes duty and highlights the burden of leadership. At the same time, the relationship between the priest and the sister focuses on the growing tensions between men’s and women’s authority, without romantic complications.

**The Priest Movie in the 1950s: The Man Alone at War with Evil**

The “religious cycle” that Hollywood was experiencing during the war years worked rather nicely with the interests of the PCA, the Legion of Decency (which immediately condemned any film rejected by Breen’s Office), and the OWI, but no such coherence would flourish during the post-war years, especially during the 1950s. By 1950, the industry faced a climate of growing political and
economic unrest that served as the backdrop for the release of the two most significant priest films in the early part of the decade, *I Confess* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1953) and *On the Waterfront* (dir. Elia Kazan, 1954). Both movies are clearly departures from earlier priest films, absorbing the cultural politics of their own time.

Far from narratives like *Going My Way* that encouraged a mixture of pastoral sensitivity with firm obedience, *I Confess* is the story about a priest on the edge of the Quebec society that has rejected him. Fr. Michael Logan (Montgomery Clift) hears the confession of a parish worker who has killed someone and then the priest himself is implicated. Moreover, his credibility is a little shaky, since Father Logan has a romantic past, and has perhaps even had an affair. Donald Lyons has suggested that this love interest was “technically innocent,” to satisfy the Code, yet there is enough ambiguity to keep the audience guessing (81). As Logan’s ex-girlfriend, Ann Baxter is clinging and sentimental and seems oblivious of Logan’s current clerical status, which only serves to enhance the doubts surrounding the priest.

Notably absent from the priest’s life in *I Confess* is anything having to do with children, money, or parish buildings—all the usual concerns that helped to galvanize the vital connection that the religious minister has with the institutional Church in previous films. There are no other pastoral interventions; the priest helps no one except the guilty man. He is neither the moral center of the film nor its principal agent for moving the plot forward. Utterly absorbed in his own problems, Logan seems to be as much in need of pastoral care as anyone else in the parish.

Moreover, the fragile character of the priest is reinforced by Clift’s nervous, even fragile, Method-acting style. Jittery and hesitant, Logan hardly inspires confidence either in the priesthood or in the institution of the Church. More to the point, Clift was known to be a troubled person as well. With neither an ethnic origin nor religious background to give him credibility, Clift is robbed of any aura of priestly authority in *I Confess*. Unlike Tracy’s rugged, masculine self-assurance, and Crosby’s easy wit and charm, Clift appears to be walking on a tightrope throughout the movie. Although Logan is vindicated, even heroic for keeping the seal of the confessional, the world around him is full of doubts and reproaches. He is suspect like anyone else and would not make either a suitable “double” for a wayward friend or a father figure for a troubled boy.

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*displacement as it is overcrowding—by old buildings and, indeed, by women.*
Far from using priesthood to foreground moral virtue or redeeming social values, Hitchcock hints at the contamination that results from evil, even in the confessional. The secret of the guilty victimizes the priest. Hitchcock has used the dramatic setting of the sacrament of penance to articulate an agenda on just about everyone’s mind in Hollywood—the naming of names beginning in 1947 for the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)—which culminated in “mass hearings” in 1951. Blacklisted, fired, under investigation, the actors and actresses in Hollywood were literally prisoners of speech, much like Father Logan. The question of speech is the real intrigue in *I Confess*.

The issue of “talking” becomes further accelerated in *On the Waterfront*, in which a priest, Father Barry (Karl Malden), tells Terry Malloy (Marlon Brando) that his girlfriend’s brother was killed because the man was going to “name names” to the police, implicating mob boss Johnny Friendly and his cohorts. The priest then has to convince Terry “to name names” as well, and so smash the violent monopoly on the docks. Father Barry in *On the Waterfront* looks back at Father Flanagan and the social problem film of the 1930s, but without its utopian solutions. At one point, Barry descends to a loading dock where someone has been “accidentally” killed. There he asserts that the waterfront is his parish in a speech that proclaims that every time someone is killed, “it is a crucifixion.” The priest is the moral center of the film, but utterly lacks the support of the society around him and the credibility of the Church as an institution. During his speech, he is pelted with rotten food and trash but, ever the witness, he keeps talking.

Father Barry is a kind of priest we have not seen before: the independent prophet. Indeed Father Barry’s long scene and dramatic speech in the lower docks is something like the prophet Jeremiah’s descent into the well. With no institution to protect him, the prophet stands alone. Unlike Flanagan and O’Malley, who act on orders from their superiors, Barry does not build anything and, except for his clerical attire and connection with his own parish church, seems cut adrift from any ecclesial person or structure. At the same time, though, he has a chance to make converts and ethical thinkers out of “bums” like Terry Malloy, the one-time prizefighter who “could’a been a contendah.” Unlike *Boy’s Town*, where an idyllic, New Deal society was built without much change in the surrounding economic conditions, *On the Waterfront* suggests that it is possible to transform society, if only on an individual basis. Religious rhetoric is prophetic there and preaches against the culture.

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Conclusion

In the priest films of the 1930s and 1940s, secular and sacred worlds met and created an alliance; one priest built a secular town, another exemplified wartime duty while at home. But whether or not sinful structures would be changed was never a question in Boy’s Town—indeed, they were fairly ignored. Father Flanagan adopted boys but transforming the society at large was hardly the issue. The 1930s and 1940s themselves were collective in emphasis, providing unifying economic and social moments in our nation’s history, supported by an ideological alliance with mass culture. Catholic priests, with their recognizably symbolic clerical garb and coherence to the institutional Church, were natural symbols of stability. Their identity allowed them to engage in a kind of “secular catechesis.” But when national stability begins to shake, so too the images that support it. A quirky, nervous Father Logan replaces the self-assured Father Flannigan and Father O’Malley.

The 1950s find no such easy partnership between the Church and culture. Father Barry’s religious language and goading transform Terry Malloy, an occurrence that will eventually undermine the system. Significantly, most signs of the institutional Church are absent in On the Waterfront, perhaps indicating that any change that is to take place for a just society will occur through the efforts of individual, prophetic voices. The priest stands alone. And the priesthood itself redeems society not by creating utopias like Boy’s Town or buildings like St. Mary’s, but by charismatic witness amid everyday life. Father Barry preaches amid the rubble of the workplace, where he will not receive the respect—or the mass appeal—that he may have gleaned from previous generations.

The current trend of today’s new priests towards “orthodoxy,” as described by Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger (2003), is, in a certain sense, a longing for a return to cultural stability and commonality in a culture that has neither constancy nor unanimity. No such unity, or “grand narrative” lurks under the surface of postmodernity; there is no single image of the priesthood emerging from that arena to guide social mores. Yet there may be a deeper lesson here: priesthood is not about the image that popular culture envisions, but is for the sake of the people of God. As Pope John Paul II says in Pastores Dabo Vobis, “priests exist and act in order to proclaim the Gospel to the world and to build up the Church in the name and person of Christ the Head and Shepherd” (39). Priesthood exists, then, for the sake of mission; images of the priest emerge from the very center of the pastoral encounter itself, in a particular time and place. We can learn from the images of the past, but our age will have to create new images of the priesthood, coming out of the unique demands of our own day. Where they come from will largely depend on God’s people today—clergy and laity—and what we choose to create in cooperation with the Spirit moving in our midst.
References


