

# Another star turn for God

Movies often explore man's tie to Creator

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

He's never actually performed in front of a movie camera, but he's gotten a lot of cinematic exposure nonetheless.

He's God, creator of the universe, most recently portrayed by Morgan Freeman in "Bruce Almighty," one of several movies to depict the First Person of the Holy Trinity. From 1977's "Oh, God!" to 1991's "Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey," filmmakers have portrayed God in a variety of ways — including the biblical images of a burning bush and a pillar of fire in the 1950s film "The Ten Commandments."

In "Bruce Almighty," Freeman portrays a gentle but persistent God who slowly brings Jim Carrey's character, egotistical TV reporter Bruce Nolan, to the realization that he's not the center of the universe. Freeman's God does this by literally making Bruce that very center, endowing him with godlike powers. As his life, and the world, turns into one big mess because he abuses his new powers, Bruce is faced with the fact that even being omnipotent doesn't enable him to get what he really wants.

The Los Angeles-based Pauline Center for Media Studies, a ministry of the Daughters of St. Paul, routinely publishes movie reviews and interviews with filmmakers on its Web site at [www.daughtersofstpaul.com/mediastudies](http://www.daughtersofstpaul.com/mediastudies). The center's director, Sister Rose Pacatte, FSP, interviewed the film's director, Tom Shadyac, a practicing Catholic, about "Bruce Almighty."

"It's about God looking at us and our foibles and having a good laugh at the messes we get ourselves into," Shadyac said. "Like a good comedian, God wants to go deeper and unpeel the onion of meaning to how God wants to be in relationship with us."

## THE 'REEL' GOD

Jack Garner, film critic for the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* and chief film critic for Gannett News Service, is also a member of Blessed Sacrament Parish in Rochester. He said Hollywood has come a long way since the 1950s and early '60s when such "sword and sandal" movies as "The Ten Commandments" and "Ben-Hur" portrayed God and Christ in a reverent, solemn fashion. In today's environment God and his Son are portrayed in a variety of ways from one film to another, he noted. By the late 1990s,



Universal/CNS

Morgan Freeman and Jim Carrey star in a scene from the comic film "Bruce Almighty."

for example, God was sometimes being portrayed in an unorthodox fashion, as exemplified by pop singer Alanis Morissette's performance as God in the controversial movie "Dogma," Garner said.

In a reverse of the Genesis story, each filmmaker creates God in his or her own image, Garner noted, and God is a challenging — and potentially controversial — being to depict, especially given the emotions both film and religion evoke. Nonetheless, filmmakers have as much right to portray God as does anyone trying to discern the meaning of existence through art, Garner noted.

"Why shouldn't we occasionally explore him or explore issues about him in a film?" Garner asked rhetorically.

The film critic added that he opposes censorship of any films about God, no matter how controversial, but supported the ratings system so that parents can decide whether their children should view a particular film. He added that such controversial films as "The Last Temptation of Christ," which earned the wrath of some Christians for a fantasy sequence in which Jesus dreams of marriage, are nonetheless interesting speculations on how Jesus came to grips with his humanity.

"I've always said it shouldn't be your only source of information on Christ," Garner said of the movie.

## DIVINING HIS PRESENCE

Both Garner and Father Steve Lape, parochial vicar at St. Marcy's Parish in Auburn, said they prefer indirect portrayals of God to direct depictions of the divine one — or

better yet, allusions or references to his presence and care. A former commercial radio disc jockey, Father Lape has a bachelor's degree in communications from St. John Fisher College in Rochester and hosts a "Faith and Film" discussion series at his parish. Father Lape said he often shows films that allude to faith rather than deal with it directly (see sidebar.)

"I try to steer away from many religious films," he said. "I concentrate on being able to see Christ in everyday, secular situations."

On that note, Garner said one of his favorite references to Christ in all of film history came not in a "sword and sandal film," but out of the mouth of Karl Malden's priest character in the 1954 movie about union corruption, "On The Waterfront." Speaking to a crowd of dock workers and bosses after a union dissident was crushed in an alleged accident, Malden's priest notes that "Christ is always with you. Christ is in the shape-up. He's in the hatch."

Echoing the views of Father Lape, Garner added that movies focusing on such moral challenges as that faced in "On The Waterfront" show that our relationship to God is tied up in our moral actions.

Viewers should also keep in mind that what they see of God on the screen, directly portrayed or not, is simply the product of his imperfect creatures, Father Lape said.

"Nothing can ever capture God perfectly," the priest said. "However, movies are like other forms of art, like paintings, and can offer us windows to glimpse through and be emotionally moved in some way by a sense of God."

## Priest ranks favorite flicks

Due to their strong faith themes, the following secular and religious films make the "Top 5" lists of Father Steve Lape, parochial vicar at St. Mary Church, Auburn.

### SECULAR FILMS

1. "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" (1939) — Jimmy Stewart, Jean Arthur

Stewart's character is a Christ-like figure who battles corruption and graft in Washington, D.C.

2. "The Spitfire Grill" (1996) — Ellen Burstyn, Anson Elliott

Loaded with themes for discussion: forgiveness, healing, hope, resurrection and sacrifice.

3. "Groundhog Day" (1992) — Bill Murray, Andie MacDowell

A funny film that ties in the "works of the flesh" and "fruits of the spirit" in the fifth chapter of St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians.

4. "It's a Wonderful Life" (1946) — Jimmy Stewart, Donna Reed

This hits the head and heart with wonderful, hope-filled messages.

5. "Contact" (1997) — Jodie Foster, Matthew McConaughey

A proof-seeking scientist has trouble believing in God until she has an experience of her own.

### RELIGIOUS FILMS

1. "Jesus of Nazareth" (1977) — Robert Powell, Olivia Hussey

The best of the Jesus narratives on film.

2. "I Confess" (1953) — Montgomery Clift, Karl Malden

Clift is a priest who faces imprisonment and public scorn in his attempt to protect several people with respect to the seal of sacramental confession.

3. "Ben-Hur" (1959) — Charlton Heston, Hugh Griffith

This film is about finding hope through suffering.

4. "The Mission" (1986) — Robert DeNiro, Jeremy Irons

Few scenes have struck me with such spiritual impact as the scene of DeNiro's character carrying out his penance.

5. "A Man for All Seasons" (1956) — Paul Scofield, Robert Shaw

Scofield plays Thomas More, who gave his life rather than acquiesce to the demands of King Henry VIII.

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